

# Third time lucky

Bob Jones

Pilot, RAAF, flying Kittyhawks of 3 Squadron from a forward airfield at Msus, Western Desert



Official Air Force photo of Bob Jones climbing out of his Kittyhawk after a successful sortie in which he shot down two Me 109s.

With the second push moving forward successfully in the Western Desert early in January 1942, No. 3 Squadron, RAAF, flying Kittyhawks, moved to a base at Msus, south of Benghazi in Libya. On 11 January from this base the Squadron flew as escort for six Blenheims on a bombing raid of

an ammunition dump west of El Agheila. Six of us were acting as top cover coming into the target from the Bay of Sirti when we were attacked by a force of Me 109s and Fiats. The usual dog fight developed and it wasn't long before I was fighting three 109s, one of which I shot down.

During this fight we dropped from 16,000 feet to 1,000 and I received a cannon shell through the port wing. I was down to about 100 feet when I finally avoided one aircraft, but another 109 put a cannon shell through my starboard wing and damaged the aileron. Being too low to bale out, I sideslipped into the dunes along the beach and got away with it, putting the manoeuvre down to experience gained as a flying instructor, prior to posting to the Middle East in August 1941. As the Germans were known to strafe survivors, I got out fast and hid in the sand dune bushes.

The two 109s climbed away. Then I saw a Kittyhawk coming into the beach with wheels and flaps down. He had obviously seen me being shot down and was coming in to pick me up, as had been done successfully twice previously on the Squadron. When I saw the two 109s coming back to attack him, I ran onto the beach to wave him off, pointing to the 109s, but he was at a disadvantage and was shot down near the front lines.

The two 109s came back and were joined by a Ju 88, obviously returning to their base. After they had gone I returned to my aircraft and retrieved my water bottle and food tablets. On hearing trucks in the distance I left the crash site and tried to get as far away as possible in case troops came looking for me. After about a mile I sat down to assess my predicament. I was close to the coast and decided it would be best to travel by night. It would be too easy to spot me in daylight.

I was pleased to rest as I had a headache and sore neck, a result of the crash. About an hour after dark, and feeling much better, I got under way using a bright star to keep me on track. I could hear and sometimes see the lights of traffic moving along a road. I kept up a steady pace without too many problems, apart from the occasional stumble in the dark. As dawn broke I stopped and settled down under some small shrubs in the coastal dunes.

At daylight I had a good look around before getting some sleep. Sleep was spasmodic as I was on the lookout most of the time. As darkness fell I got under way again, using the same star to guide me. Again, I made

good progress and could hear movement along the road as I travelled closer to the front lines, as evidenced by occasional gun flashes and the odd Very light in the sky. As on the previous night, I crossed tracks leading down to the beach, all of which had to be traversed with care.

Just before dawn, I suddenly slipped down a steep bank, ending up, to my horror, under a truck. I had stumbled on an army dispersal area. I could hear some slight movement and the occasional snore coming from the truck. As soon as I had recovered from my fright I carefully climbed back into the shrubs. On looking around I could see other trucks and some tents from which dim lights and the occasional torch flash emanated.

With dawn approaching I had to hide myself fairly quickly in the bushes, but when it was light enough to see, found I was practically surrounded by a Company of troops; worse still, the area I was holed up in was used by them as latrines. I was dodging from shrub to shrub to avoid them, but by about 11 a.m. I was spotted by two soldiers and bailed up. They took my revolver, water bottle and watch and handed me over to an officer at the control centre. It was most elaborate. I soon learnt why: it was General Bastico's HQ, he being the Commander of all Italian forces in the Middle East.

I was treated with respect and handed over to two officers who spoke English, albeit with an American accent. I gave them my name, rank and number and told them that was all they were going to get. I had to empty my pockets and put everything on the table. This I did, and everything was returned after inspection. To my utter amazement, I was told it was lunch time, and no doubt I was hungry. I proceeded to the mess with them and was amazed to find General Bastico there. I sat down at a table with several officers, all of whom spoke 'American' English. It was obvious that I was to be cross-examined.

All I spoke about was living in the desert and some Australian history. I had the best meal I'd had for a very long time and, as it turned out, the last I would have for the next eighteen months or so. After the meal I was handed over to the Military Police, who told me 'the war was over' for me. I would be sent to a POW camp in Italy via Tripoli. From then on, all courtesy went by the board and a bit of rough handling started.

I was taken to a military truck and not too gently hoisted into it. I sat in it for about an hour while various bits of equipment were loaded. I noticed that part of the canvas covering was loose and that military personnel were on the thin side in the truck's vicinity. I decided to try to get away and, when I thought the time was right, slid down the side of the truck and strolled off towards open country with some bushes for cover. Needless to say I did not get very far—about 80 yards—when there was an outburst of yells. A quick glance was all I needed to put my hands up. I really thought I was going to be shot. Four men surrounded me, and with thumps from their rifle butts I was unceremoniously hoisted back into the truck. They fixed the side of the truck and put a guard in with me. Several more troops got in about half an hour later and we moved off.

From the guards I learnt that we were in the El Agheila area, so I must have covered some 40 to 50 miles from where I was shot down. After several hours' travel we arrived at Sirti, where I was handed over to the Military Police, searched again, then put into a room containing a number of twin bunks. I gathered I was here for the rest of the night so settled into a bunk and was soon sound asleep.

I was awakened next morning by two military policemen and taken to a large, barbed wire area containing over 1,000 captured English soldiers on their way to POW camps in Italy. In the late afternoon all the army troops were loaded onto trucks, and for some unknown reason I was put in a truck on my own with three guards for company. We travelled well into the night until about 3 a.m. when we pulled into a civilian gaol in Tripoli. I was shown into the CO's office and cross-examined. He spoke English, but all he got was name, rank and number. Two guards then took me along a passage to a cell, opened the door and shoved me inside.

There was a fellow in the only bed, and to my amazement who should look up but Sgt A.C. (Tiny) Cameron DFM, who was with me on my last 'op' and was shot down as well. The guards ordered him out of the only bed as I was an officer. He was given a palliasse and told to sleep on the floor. I protested but was over-ruled. Tiny did the right thing and told me to hop into the bed. Needless to say, when the door was locked, Tiny and I caught up with each other's experiences following the 109s' attack. He got a cannon shell in the wing which caught fire so he had to bale out. He landed among German troops and was later flown to Tripoli in a Ju 52.

After a bit of sleep we were roused by the guards and taken to a dining room for breakfast, such as it was. There were 10 other prisoners, all British Army types, in the room. After returning to our cell, Tiny told me he had started to saw through the iron bars to the window, using the hacksaw blade hidden in our flying boots. I got mine out and while one kept watch the other continued with the cutting. It took two days, and when completed we decided to go out that night about an hour before the changing of the guard.

Just before midnight, Tiny snapped the bars off and out we went. After helping each other over the high outer wall of the prison, we set out into the Sahara Desert, heading east. Three days later we met a group of Bedouins heading for the Siwa Oasis. We were pleased to hear this and hoped to be able to contact the Long Range Desert Group. We doubled up on their camels and rode throughout the day and half the night.

It was pitch black when we entered what I thought was a small village. We dismounted and went into a house occupied by three Arabs. We were given a hot drink, then, after about twenty minutes, in walked another Arab along with three 'Iti' troops. The place was Misurata, and thus ended our escape bid. We were taken back to Tripoli the next day and not too well received. It appears that there was a great uproar when our escape was discovered.

The following day we were all shipped off to Italy. On arrival at Naples we were transferred to trucks and taken to the transit camp at Capua, Campo PG 66, a camp with a number of compounds separated by barbed wire fences. Officers, NCOs and other ranks were all in separate compounds. I was separated from Tiny and didn't catch up with him again until he arrived at Brighton, UK, after his release from Germany at the end of the war.

There were about 150 officers in this camp—British, South Africans, New Zealanders and four Australians (all from 3 Squadron). Sleeping quarters were wooden huts with 35 beds on either side. I was in this camp for six weeks. We were allowed one hot shower each week but no extra clothing. Food was very limited. We were always hungry.

It was about the end of March when we were moved to a permanent POW camp. The transfer was by passenger train in compartments reserved for

POWs. This camp was at Padula in the south of Italy. From the train we were marched three kilometres to Campo PG 35, a former monastery, which had a very large quadrangle, approximately 180 by 130 yards. Senior officers had rooms off the cloisters and the rest of us in the huge corridors above the cloisters. Our beds were only six feet apart, with toilets and wash basins at the end of the corridor.

Our arrival brought camp strength up to 380 officers. Meals were still poor and as yet no Red Cross parcels. Cards were supplied every fortnight for us to write home, heavily censored of course! After two months the SBO (Senior British Officer) announced that he had been advised that all Australian officers were to be transferred to an Australian camp north-east of Rome at Sulmona, near the Adriatic coast, and to be ready to move out.

The next day names were called out except mine. They were marched off to the station. Then I went to see the SBO and asked why I had not been sent. He made enquiries and told me I would be going the following day with a platoon of Italian soldiers being sent to another camp. Having already escaped twice I was regarded as 'dangerous'.

Next day, to the amusement of all, I was marched off with an officer, an NCO and ten troops. We had to change trains twice and I was the cause of much comment on the stations. However, when advised that I was Australian, the grins ceased. The Australian involvement in the Middle East, where many of their troops had been captured, made me into a dangerous enemy—how amusing!

On arrival at Sulmona (Campo PG 78) I was amazed to be welcomed by a number of army friends of mine from Perth. They had been captured in Crete and early actions near Tobruk in the desert. All round we were a happy mob in this camp. At this time there were about 60 officers, later rising to 90 with the arrival of some British officers.

This camp, dating back to World War I, was used as a POW camp for Austrians, then between wars as an army barracks and now reverted back to a POW camp. Our compound was about 100 yards long by 25 yards wide, consisting of five long, low cement brick buildings, an Italian stone mess with a kitchen, and hot shower room close to the gate. We were allowed one hot shower a week.

Between the top and bottom buildings was a twenty-five yard square, used for parades for roll calls and for playing basket ball. We were in this camp for fourteen months, during which time two tunnels were dug. The first was nearly successful. We broke through a little short of the planned exit, on the edge of a gravel path. Although reasonably concealed it rained that night, and next day a donkey, being led along the path, put its foot through into the tunnel. Of course, all hell broke loose. We were paraded while the hunt went on to find the entrance, which they failed to find. The Commandant then sent a soldier down the tunnel from the exit and he finally came out after pushing up four tiles under one of the beds.

For some unknown reason no action was taken. All they did was to fill in as much of the tunnel as possible from both ends. Six months' tunnelling went by the board. Another tunnel was started at the other end of the compound, but we were transferred to another camp before completion. We had dug under the main wall and reached the first of the two barbed wire fences surrounding the camp and had only another thirty feet to go.

At both Padula and Sulmona we were able to get extra sets of clothing, and mail and parcels from home. Red Cross parcels only came in spasms, however, the excuse being that our bombers had destroyed the train or the station, or the lines were frozen so that the trains could not get through.

Basic food rations at all camps was a small rye bread roll, macaroni (12 or 13 pieces), a small serve of green vegetables and a piece of hard cheese—two meals a day. This was supplemented by Red Cross parcels whenever they came through. Roll calls were made at any time, day or night, whether snowing or not. At the end of July 1943 we were suddenly told to be ready to move to another camp the following day. We packed up as much as we could carry and next morning were marched to the station. The SBO advised us that we would be going to Campo PG 19 at Bologna. On arrival we found over 600 officers of all nationalities already there, some recently captured, all from different POW camps around Italy.

We were housed in open dormitories in six large wings with a good wash room at the end of each. The surrounds were the usual high brick wall with two high barbed wire fences. The move to this new camp was because of Montgomery's advances in the Middle East and the Allied landings in Sicily.

Over the next few weeks, American Flying Fortresses bombed northern Italy including several raids on Bologna. Some bombs fell near the camp, but obviously the Allies knew of its existence. We were there only a few weeks when, at about 3 a.m., an Italian orderly officer ran into the dormitory, shouting 'The Germans are here'. Within a few minutes, German troops stormed in, yelling 'Raus!' We were herded between two barbed wire fences near the station administration block. It was an extremely efficient round up. The Germans had manned machine gun posts at key points around the camp. The German officer in command was a 22-year-old second lieutenant. Eleven officers made a break-out. We heard shots fired. Ten were recaptured and one killed. The Germans took complete control of the camp. The Italians were just bundled off.

We were returned to our dormitories and life was back to normal, but under complete German control. Prior to this takeover, we had learnt that there were 20,000 Germans in the Bologna district. Two days later we were advised to be ready to move out in one hour. We were loaded into open lorries and driven to a rail siding at Modena, where we were given a Red Cross parcel, loaded into boxcars at thirty per wagon and told we were going to Germany.

Between every four boxcars was a flat top with Germans armed with machine guns. The boxcar I was in was one of three made of wood, the rest being of steel. On the journey towards the Brenta Pass, a few of us decided to try to escape. One officer, with the aid of an army boot and a knife, cut a recess in the board near the door handle, leaving it paper thin and easily knocked out when the time was opportune.

Of the thirty inmates of our truck, only twelve were interested in escaping. We drew lots for when the time came to go. I drew number three. About 3 a.m. on the second night after leaving Modena, the train slowed on an incline towards the Brenner Pass. Now was the time to go! The cut away was knocked out and the door opened. The first two jumped and then I went. I hit the ground OK and rolled in towards the rails, hoping that the Germans on the flat tops would be looking the other way. As the train moved up the incline I crawled across the line and down into a cornfield. I heard machine gun fire and assumed that it was directed at escapees and thought I'd better put as much distance as possible between me and the rail line before dawn broke.

I lay in a cornfield for the day, during which I heard and saw German reconnaissance aircraft patrolling the railway line. I also heard dogs barking and this worried me as I had no doubt they were tracker dogs looking for us. Later, when crawling through fields and before crossing one of the small paths between, I raised my head to see that no one was coming. About fifty yards away I spotted another head doing the same. It was Sandy Mair who had jumped out of the same truck; were we glad to see each other!

After a quick chat we continued our crawling until we came to a vineyard where we saw another escapee, Freddie Eggleston, also another one from our truck. He had some Red Cross food so we had a bite to eat from his kit. The three of us then continued to put as much distance between us and the rail line as possible. That night we reckoned we were about three miles from the line and managed to get some sleep in a cornfield.

At dawn we got the fright of our lives—a deafening noise which Sandy, an AIF Officer, said was tanks on the move. The noise receded as the tanks moved away along a road close to the railway line. We continued in a westerly direction, now walking, until we came to another vineyard where we were seen by a couple of peasants. They were friendly, and fortunately Freddie, who was an academic and spoke several languages including Italian and German, asked them if we could change our clothes.

They agreed to go and get some for us and returned in about an hour with some civilian clothes, which we changed into and left ours with them. I had a light shirt and black trousers. We kept our boots. The peasants were very pleasant and said we had better head for Switzerland, just over the mountains. We were directed to the River Adige which we would have to cross.

At this stage, being in civilian clothes, we were walking along a road leading to a bridge when we met a lady and two children. The lady spoke to us in Italian, 'You are English, aren't you?' Freddie replied, 'Si'. She then said there were German guards at each end of the bridge—'take my hand and we'll go over together.' She took Freddie's hand and Sandy and I took the hands of the two children and over the bridge we went.

After about 200 yards, at the edge of a small village on the edge of the mountains, Freddie thanked her and she and the children moved off. That

brave woman chose to become involved and to risk her own life as well as her children's to help us. Bravery I'll never forget.

We were walking through this village and as we crossed the street we were horrified to see a company of Germans being assembled. They looked at us but we just continued on as if we were residents of the place. We got as far as the track up the mountain before looking back, only to see one of the Germans looking at us. As soon as we were out of sight, up that mountain we went as fast as we could go. The greater the distance from that village the better.

After a long, hard climb up a narrow mountain track we reached the top and saw not far below another small village. With night approaching we decided to 'vet' the furthest place out from the village, make ourselves known and seek shelter for the night. The owner was most friendly and told us we could sleep in the barn. We made ourselves as comfortable as possible and had the soundest sleep for quite a while.

In the morning our host gave us some breakfast and showed us a mountain track, assuring us it was the best way to Switzerland. He said we were north of Merano in the Dolomites, near the Austrian border. We continued our climb, crossing the Brenta Pass, some 9,000 feet high. At about midday we caught up with five other escapees from another of the wooden trucks. We walked on together and climbed through the Gruppo di Brenta to above 12,000 feet. Though hard going it was beautiful to look at. Towards the evening we came across a chalet, empty except for a caretaker. He gave us all shelter for the night but had no food to feed us. In the morning he directed us to the track for Switzerland.

We had had a discussion the previous evening and had decided to split up into smaller groups. Big groups would be more likely to attract the attention of any Germans who may have been in the area. Sandy, Freddie and I continued on and soon lost sight of the others. When moving up to another mountain track, the wisdom of our decision to split up proved to be correct. A half-track army truck drove up and passed us. In the back were several German troops and an army officer. They stared at us but didn't stop—thank goodness!

We got on to the track smartly and hastily continued our climb. For the rest of the day we did nothing but climb up and down those difficult

mountain tracks. The few peasants we met were friendly and directed us towards Switzerland. As dusk approached we saw several houses down in a valley and made contact with the most isolated. Again, the occupants were friendly, gave us food and a place to sleep in a barn.

In the morning, after a light breakfast, we were directed to the next section of our mountain track. That afternoon we met a lady walking along the track in the same direction we were taking. She said she'd sung opera at Covent Garden, London. She took us to a safe house on the outskirts of another village, Fontaria Briona, where we were fed and bedded down. Next morning, after a drink of ersatz coffee, we continued along the track that became steeper and steeper. With winter approaching we were also getting very concerned about the weather. Dressed as we were we would not be able to cope with travelling in snowy conditions on such an extremely steep track.

About midday, near Refugia Mandrone, we came across a large area covered with barbed wire. A woman and her daughter were collecting some of it. She told us it was part of the World War I frontier area, and they were collecting some to sell. She gave us a slice of pudding which, being very hungry, we much appreciated. She said she had not seen any Germans in the area.

We said farewell and continued on our climb, crossing Maro Caro which was some 13,000 feet high. We reached the pass around mid-afternoon, to be confronted with a glacier which we had to cross. We had been told about this and also warned about crevasses. Fortunately, with the good weather we had been having, they were not concealed by soft snow. Nevertheless, we had to pick our way across very carefully. Half way over I started to slide down towards one but, thanks to the steel on my army boots, was able to dig in, then was pulled to safety by Sandy.

The width of the glacier would have been about half a mile and it took us two hours to get across. After a half hour rest we found the track again and pressed on. Around late afternoon we came over another steep mountain and saw below a busy road with lorries full of Germans, heading to what we later learnt was Passo Tonale. With dusk almost upon us we had to get down and find shelter for the night and, most important, to do so without being spotted by the Germans.

As we reached the bush cover, we saw someone running towards us. Freddie went out to meet him, a fourteen-year-old boy who said his father had seen us come over the pass, guessed who we were and said we were welcome to spend the night in his barn. We thanked him and accepted. After dark, one by one, we crossed the road to the barn, full of warm hay, where who should we meet but three other escapees from the same train. They were two AIF officers and a Canadian flight lieutenant—Bob Donnan, Don MacDonald and Gordon Renau. They had come up from the south on a track close to the road that the Germans were using. It had taken a long time, as they had had to keep out of sight of the German vehicles using the road.

Our host, a farmer, brought some badly needed food. He told us that the town some distance up the road was full of Germans, but in the morning his son would lead us through a forest track which by-passed the town and then set us on the right track for Switzerland. We would have to leave before daylight. We slept well, and just before dawn the boy arrived. We learnt that it was Saturday 18 September. After about two hours among the trees and crossing a couple of creeks, the boy stopped on the edge of a mountain track and said that was the way to go. He obviously enjoyed what to him was a great adventure and, more to the point, we had by-passed the town full of Germans. We thanked him and pressed on.

We continued our up and down climbing, by-passing villages. At dusk we would pick the house furthest from the village and identify ourselves. We found all the occupants very friendly and helpful on every occasion. They certainly hated the Germans and Italian Fascists—most fortunately for us! We pressed on. Our track would take us to Livigno. About midday we saw a man smoking outside a small log cabin. He guessed who we were and invited us in. His name was Cesare, and when he told his wife we were escapees she burst into tears and told us their son was a POW of the Russians.

They gave us a good meal, after which Cesare took us up and over an 11,000 foot mountain and pointed out the track to the village of Livigno, telling us there was a dairy there where we would be able to refresh ourselves. We went over another pass that afternoon and looked down on Livigno. There were several people on the pass as we came over. We introduced ourselves but they thought we were disguised Germans. Luck

was with us yet again. A young man came over the pass and joined the group. He had been in the Italian army, and, after a discussion with Freddie, told the others that we were what we said—British escapees. So after more chatter the first group was satisfied and left. The young man, Foroni, said that the mountains we were looking at were part of the Swiss border, but would be difficult to cross as the track went through a dangerous area. We were also very concerned as the weather was changing rapidly and becoming very cold. I was particularly worried as I was wearing only a cotton shirt and pants.

Foroni said he knew two guides who frequently went over this track and who, on payment, would take us across. We had no money, but Don Macdonald said 'What about our watches?' After a brief discussion it was agreed that Foroni would sell them in the village, and as soon as it was dark, we were to go to a log cabin he pointed out. From there he would take us to meet the guides who lived on the other side of the village.

Off Foroni went. We just had to trust him but were concerned that he might turn us in. When darkness fell, we made our way warily to the cabin down in the valley which turned out to be an old storage hut. It had started to rain and was very cold. Two and a half hours later Foroni returned. He had sold our watches for 6,000 lira, which he said would be enough to pay the guides.

Close on midnight he took us around the village to the guides' cabin and introduced us to the two men. He then said he would go, so we thanked him for all he had done for us. His efforts were certainly appreciated. The guides were pleasant fellows. They told us they were smugglers and from time to time would climb the mountains into Switzerland, buy goods and bring them back to sell on the black market at a great profit. They asked us for our story. I think they wanted to find out if we were genuine. It also helped to fill in the time, as the weather had deteriorated greatly. It was cold, blowing and raining heavily. They gave me a cornsack to cover my cotton gear, from which I cut head and arm holes and that was what I wore for our last climb, we hoped to freedom.

We got under way at about 3 a.m., the two smugglers leading. This proved to be our worst climb, traversing slippery slopes with no track at all in some places. At one point the guides told us to follow carefully up a very narrow track with a 1,200 foot drop should we slip off. Thank good-

ness it was still dark! Grasping what handholds we could, we slowly, very slowly made it. Looking back after dawn broke, I was sure that some of us probably would not have tried it had we seen the drop first!

After a good rest we set off towards the pass ahead. At this time the first snow started to fall, fortunately only lightly. As we crossed the pass the guides said we had just crossed the border and were now in Switzerland. Whacko! Free at last!! They led us down the track to a log house used by Swiss frontier guards. There was no one there, so we paid the guides who seemed happy, wished us all the best and moved on.

We were all extremely cold. Fortunately there was a fireplace and some wood in the hut so we quickly lit a fire to thaw out our frozen limbs. My left side was really bad. A couple of the boys massaged my side, legs and arms to try to get the circulation going properly. After several hours we had thawed out and were almost dry, so we set off down the very steep slope on a well-defined track.

We learnt later that the pass we had come over was Fuorcla Trupchun at 12,000 feet and we were now in a Swiss National Park. As we went down into the valley, the track widened and went through a forest. We rounded a bend and saw what looked like a German patrol coming towards us. They frightened the hell out of us. They had seen us, and with rifles unslung asked who we were? When we said British escapees, they said they thought so. They were Swiss, and we breathed again!

They escorted us to the nearest village, S-Chanf. On the way it started to rain heavily, so once again we were wet through and bitterly cold. Arriving at about 10 am on Monday 20 September 1943, we were taken to a hotel where a Swiss Army lieutenant explained the situation to the hotel owner. We were shown to a large room and within a few minutes were joined by three Swiss girls—the first we had seen for years. They spoke English and we were the first British they had seen since the beginning of the war. They had hot towels for us to rub ourselves down and thaw out. They also gave us a brandy each—a most welcome act indeed. The hotel owner told us that the Mayor of Zuog was organising clothing for us, even including long johns. It was a great pleasure to throw out all our old clothes.

Mid-afternoon, we were picked up and taken by lorry to Samedan Hospital, where we were checked over by a Swiss doctor, then had a long night's sleep in a comfortable bed. Next day the British Vice Consul, who had been in St Moritz, came in to see us. He took all our details, then told us we would be taken to Wil for a fortnight's quarantine.

We went by train and, on arrival at the hotel where we were to stay, were greeted by several officers who had also made it. We were later visited by the Air Attaché from the British Consulate at Berne, Air Commodore Freddie West VC, who gave us a clothing allowance of 650 Swiss francs and advised us that we would be getting 36 francs a week and a further 20 francs a week living allowance. As escapees, by International Convention, we could go anywhere in Switzerland, provided we advised the police of our proposed moves. And so freedom! Our train breakout on the 11 September was well worth the effort.

In Switzerland we stayed in good pubs and went skiing, rock climbing, swimming, yachting on the lakes, beer drinking and 'she-ing'. I also was able to recover my fitness. I was only 7 stone 10 pounds on arrival, down from nine and a half when I left home.

On 17 November 1943, who should arrive to join us but my great friend Geoff Chinchen, who was with me on the third last Officer Cadet course at Point Cook, prior to the start of the Empire Air Training Scheme. We also did our instructors course together and instructed at No. 2 SFTS at Wagga and then on to 3 Squadron in the Middle East. Geoff had drawn the last number to jump out of our truck on the train but couldn't make it as the Germans had realised by this time that escapes had been made. He did, however, make his escape shortly after from a camp in Austria.

As the legation scheme to get escapees back to the UK got only three escapees back in 11 months, Geoff and I decided it was time to leave Switzerland when the Americans invaded in the south of France, on 16 August 1944, and jumped the border south of Geneva into France. Having a map we walked warily until we reached Annecy in the south. Here we contacted the F.F.I. (the Maquis) and Major Barnalet, whom we had met in Switzerland. The F.F.I. were very active, blowing up railway lines, ambushing and so on.

We eventually moved with them to Grenoble. As the F.F.I. moved in, the Americans came up from the south. Once things had settled down in the town, Geoff and I made ourselves known to them as escaped Australian officers. After further discussions, their Intelligence Officer arranged for us to be flown out. We were put in a jeep and early one evening set off for an aerodrome near Marseilles. It was the most hair-raising ride of our lives. The driver took no notice of our requests to take it easy.

We were put on an aircraft and flown to Corsica, and a day later on to Rome. The Americans said they would be there for a couple of days. We were booked in to the officers' mess, so we took advantage of the break to look at some well-known places in Rome, including the Vatican. In two days we were put on another aircraft and flown to Algiers, then on to Casablanca in Morocco. We stayed a week at the American officers' mess, after which we were flown to an RAF base in Cornwall, UK. There an intelligence officer took all details and confined us to barracks, as it were. Next day confirmation came through that we were who we said we were and we were issued with a rail warrant to London. We reported to the RAAF HQ and finally had 'made it' home.

#### **An amazing post-war coincidence**

When walking round the barbed wire containment camp in the Middle East on my way to Tripoli, a camp containing some 1,000 POWs, I fell in step with a Coldstream Guards officer walking around the wire trying to keep warm. After a while he said to me, 'You are not British, are you?' I said, 'No' and pointed to my Australian shoulder flashes. 'Ah! A colonial, eh?' After chatting further he said, 'I was at Oxford with an Australian, you would know him of course.' I described the size of Australia and the distances between the State cities, but he said, 'You would know him, his name is Harry Hopkins.' I was staggered; I had played cricket and hockey against him for several years.

In 1945, just after the war ended, I was walking down the Strand in London, and passed a chap in uniform. I thought, 'I know that person' and turned back. He did the same. We came back to each other and both said, 'In the Western Desert'. He said, 'Yes, and you know my friend Harry Hopkins.' A few moments later, who should come up but the same Harry Hopkins! To the nearest pub we went—what a small world!