

THE TRANSFORMATION OF EXPERIENCE INTO LITERARY FORM IN MY WRITINGS ABOUT THE WAR

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|| WAS a reluctant participant in the Second World War, reluctant because one of my earliest memories is of the Anzacs returning from the First World War; I grew up hearing their tales of trench warfare.

Although we were conscious in our youth of the rise of Nazism, I still hoped to escape having to go to war. Not until 1938, soon after the Munich Treaty, when I heard a powerful radio address by W. McMahon Ball, did I realise that Nazism would soon have to be faced. McMahon Ball had been permitted to visit a German concentration camp for three hours. Of course, concentration camps were not the death camps they became, but the treatment of the prisoners as he reported it, left little doubt that this regime was capable of anything. Even so, when war broke out, I did not volunteer. It was not until France fell in 1940 that I joined aircrew. Like many another who went into aircrew, I wanted to escape the war of 'the bayonet and the butt'.

In 1941, before Japan had entered the war, I was posted to Canada for training as a navigator; twenty-six of us were sent to the city of Edmonton. From the time I left Australia I began keeping a full diary, also I wrote fully to my parents; I was to hold little back from them in the times that lay ahead. I have been somewhat consoled to find that Wilfred Owen, similarly, did not spare his mother in his letters.

I had hoped to go to Coastal Command rather than Bomber Command. Even with the little experience I had of bombing in training, I knew that we could not achieve a sufficient degree of accuracy to confine our bombs to military objectives. But to Bomber Command we were sent.

We knew that the requirement was that we carry out a 'tour' of thirty operations over enemy territory – a nice, carefree expression, 'tour'. This numerical goal came to dominate our lives. When we reached our squadron we asked, 'How long does it take here to reach thirty?' No one wanted to talk about it. Little by little we found that no one had reached thirty in the past three months. This was to continue until seven months had passed, then we had the great good fortune to get through.

Elizabeth Webby's father, as a Pathfinder navigator, had the much more daunting total to reach of forty-five operations. He was lost on his forty-fifth.

During these squadron days I felt, 'If I survive, I must let people know what this experience was really like.' I came home at last feeling like the Ancient Mariner: I had to tell the story to somebody – to anybody. I suppose it was also therapeutic writing about the experience. I got the war out of my system through *No Moon Tonight* and, in the end, felt unscathed by the experience – unlike many men I knew.

In shaping the book I was helped by the pattern of our squadron days. We woke in the morning wondering if there would be operations that night. If there were, there was a sequence to be followed. First, navigators' briefing at which we would learn the target and draw the route out and home on our charts and prepare as much as we could of the logs we would use that night. Next came general briefing when all the men of all the crews

would gather. It was like theatre; also like school assembly. We, the crews, would be sitting where you are sitting in this theatre. The senior officers would take their places up here on the platform like the line of teachers at assembly, a large map of Europe on the wall behind them. From here were spoken the ominous words, 'Gentlemen, the target for tonight is—'

This over, we went to our operational meal. Occasionally we had time to fit in a show at the station-cinema—it had to be a pretty good show to hold our attention. Last we went to final briefing. We attended this in our flying clothing, ready to go. We were driven to the aircraft about an hour before take-off.

All this preparatory sequence was gut-wrenching drama. All survivors agree on this. Once in the air one felt borne up by the company of the other six men of the crew—silent company except when it was really necessary to speak.

This was the pattern then that helped me shape *No Moon Tonight*. There were other patterns. At the end of every six weeks a crew was given six days off. I used to escape to the country and walk or cycle in Somerset or Devon. And in daily life on the squadron, we could escape awhile with the WAAFs. These girls, like the countryside, stood for permanence; we were transitory beings.

These patterns were full of contrasts. We were living a life that in many respects was normal: we slept between sheets; we ate well—well for wartime. But we went from this to the hell of the target—hell for those we bombed; hell for us above them. When we returned it was to find that some of our friends had been lost. I used these contrasts as I wrote.

In the air I was a very attentive navigator indeed, but in the lead-up I found my attention wandering to the men around me, to their reactions to our circumstances; their expressions; their words. I used these observations, too.

In the centre of the headquarters building there was a room without windows. It had seating accommodation for a hundred and forty or so men and was lighted by chill fluorescent tubes. This was the main briefing room, the room we came to as crews as soon as navigators' briefing was over. I can see it now as it was that day and on the many days to follow, even to visualising individual faces in the bluish haze from cigarettes. Newitt, the tall, fair Canadian; Berry, a big, boyish Englishman with puzzled eyes; Johnnie Roper, a typical RAF man, moustached and precise; my own skipper and crew, six men who were to become almost as familiar to me as my own brothers.

Sitting there waiting, the tension of the room enveloped us. I noticed the taut jaw muscles of the man in front of me; the staring darkness of Kennard's eyes; Ted Laing, his chin in his hand, his eyes on the map of Europe above the platform.

The lights were switched out and the beam of the epidiascope became the only illumination. A hundred pallid faces turned to the screen. The murmur of conversation subsided. Meredith, the senior meteorologist, began the forecast.

I began wondering what it was like always to brief men, never to see the actualities; always to notice the change of faces and to know that the men who had not returned had been lost over places such as this city of Stettin now revealed before us.

I could see the stooped figure of Keith Webber and, beside him, Tony Willis, their engineer. The men further away were dark, almost motionless shapes. The smoke had thickened to a bluish dusk, pricked by the glow of cigarettes.

Elizabeth Webby has spoken of *No Moon Tonight* as 'a novel'. Admittedly it has many of the characteristics of a novel, but it was not my intention to make it so. It was a first

book and that was the way it turned out. When Angus & Robertson published it, Professor Colin Roderick was one of those who praised it, but he, too, classified it as a novel. Ross Campbell, journalist and fellow navigator, was incensed – I presume by the implication that it was fictional – and urged me to rebut Roderick. This I did in the *Sydney Telegraph*, saying that I had written factually, even though I had been selective and had used contrasting scenes, also dialogue, as would a novelist. Roderick replied:

No Moon Tonight is clearly too introspective, too subjective, too full of disguise and evasion, too much concerned with thoughts and suspicions and emotions instead of deeds to be accepted as a reliable factual record. Of what is it a record? Mainly of Charlwood's inner reactions to his environment and, therefore, more a novel, with himself the principal character, than a factual book – Charlwood agrees that he approached the story in the manner of a novelist. This is obviously true, for example, in the highly selective and romanticised appearances of the fictitious character of the WAAF . . .

The fictitious WAAF is now a grandmother of seventy-five with whom I am still occasionally in touch!

In 1990 I wrote a book I called *Marching As to War*. In this I sought to tell of the shaping of our generation between the wars. I was urged to go on, to look again, as an elderly man, at the Bomber Command experience. So I did this. This time I was able to gain access to the diaries and letters of some of my friends – in all, seven, including my pilot's diary. I marked what I needed in each of them, then my wife fed these extracts chronologically into a computer, thus I had up to half-a-dozen versions of what had happened on a particular day. This allowed me a much broader approach. Also, I had by now read a great deal about the Bomber Command war and had access to Middlebrook and Everitt's *Bomber Command War Diaries*. In this book each raid of the war is analysed – the losses incurred both among crews and on the ground over the target; the success or failure of the operation.

Through this approach *Journeys Into Night* did come closer to a documentary record of the experience. I daresay I was still conscious of Colin Roderick's words!

WORKS CITED

- No Moon Tonight*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956.
Journeys Into Night. Hawthorn: Hudson, 1991.