

Prologue

The Mediterranean

JANUARY 1943

Anyone who has been lost in an aircraft experiences a fear that bears no comparison. At night it intensifies. That fear has a smell. It hints of a bilious odour that leaves a body from every pore and permeates the confined space that imprisons the pilot. In this World War II Beaufighter it blended with the mechanical and other smells of the aircraft; grease, oil, aviation fuel, leather. And here it accompanied the audible breathing of a fellow crewman standing braced, only inches behind the pilot. Watson, a Scot, the observer, his navigational tools useless in the blackened atmosphere over an equally blackened ocean. Four eyes staring into the gloom. Two men contemplating a cruel fate, a light drizzle doing little to inspire hope. They were lost, and the fear consumed them.

For eight hours Bob Cowper had flown the course determined by a squadron leader in Gibraltar. Three degrees drift he had reckoned on, but heavy cloud during their dusk departure gave them no chance to confirm this with their own drift sight. They had also been ordered to maintain radio silence due to the supremacy enjoyed by German aircraft in the vicinity of their intended destination, Malta.

An hour earlier, seeking any assistance possible, the Australian had tried the radio, only to find it inoperable. Very typical of wartime electrical components. Brand new Beaufighter, brand new air intercept radar and a malfunctioning radio.

Trim the engines. Two Bristol Hercules, solid, reliable fourteen cylinder radials. Loud, normally reassuring. You could actually hear a good pilot in a multi-engined aircraft; good pilots kept their engines synchronised. Conserve fuel. Maintain safe and economical speed at correct revs and pitch. Low and slow—a pilot's recipe for disaster, and already they were down to eight hundred feet, almost below the cloud cover.

A change of course. North west. Nothing. How do you prepare to die? He'd rather let the Germans or the Ities get them, but not the sea. The uncompromising sea, God's resting place for how many nameless pilots from how many pointless, unfinished missions?

"I don't think I can ever remember my mouth being so dry. There were so many thoughts going through my mind. I knew that if I could just find land—any land—that I would be able to determine where we most likely were. That was unless we flew through the Straits of Pantellaria and missed everything. If it was Sicily, then Malta was going to be easy to find, but I had absolutely no idea where we were. I knew we would have to find land eventually. It was just a matter of keeping it up there long enough to do it, and that was a significant problem right at that moment. We both thought we were going to die."

Almost two hours passed following their descent below the cloud. Eight endless hours in the Beaufighter before an engine hiccup, perhaps a cough; or was it imagined? A reflex turn to feed whatever fuel remained to the starved motor. Then ahead, a light. Partially dimmed, a navigational aid of some description. His eyes remained fixed on the object. Still there, still dim, but now constantly visible as they cleared the remaining cloud.

A minute longer and his night eyes gradually determined a land mass; it had to be Tunisia. A hasty agreement that the source of the light could have been the port of Sfax. A landing strip perhaps? At any rate, it could, should, be friendly as they had been briefed that the British Eighth Army had just taken Tripoli. On the other hand, it could also be harbouring remnants of German and Italian troops. Too bad; it was land. A flyover and a round from their Very pistol, discharging the 'colour of the day' as determined by standing orders. An immediate red flare in response. Red. Danger. The wrong response. We don't know who you are, but we don't want you here.

There could only be minutes of flying left. Head inland; the desert is safer than the coast—a basic rule instilled during training. Find somewhere to put her down, and find it bloody quickly. Landing lights on; one hundred feet, seventy-five. Sand dunes. Ridges running north south. Have to land with them, not against them. One more circle. Constant coughing now. Hell, let's just get down before we fall out of the sky.

“The tension was debilitating. There was no communication between us. Watson was normally a chirpy and cocky sort of bloke but I’d never seen him show such emotion. He wasn’t talking and that was strange in itself. Most of the time you couldn’t shut him up. We both had our own thoughts I guess. Mine were full of fear and his must have been too. I had to get that plane down while I still had something in the tank. A forced landing could be a catastrophe. There could have been no end of them waiting for us. Concealed rocks, gullies, undulations. Even the enemy. Funny, all the time we were over the sea I silently prayed that we’d find land because I didn’t want to crash and never be found. At least if we crashed over land there would be some record of us.”

Fifty feet. Less. Too low to establish height. Doesn’t matter. Survival matters. Hang on Bill. Throttle back, brace, stick back, keep the nose up. A scraping sound, protesting, but oddly quieter than he had expected. Now totally out of his control. Stop, you bastard. It began to slow as the props bit into the dune, rocking forward as they finally conceded, bending under the strain. They were almost stationary when the pilot’s ladder caught in the sand and the underside door to the aircraft was forced open. The momentum spewed a quantity of sand into the cockpit, showering the pilot who was oblivious to the discomfort. They were down.

A silence followed, ghostly after the marathon flight. His ears rang and his hands trembled. Shut down. Fuel off. Habit; there couldn’t be a cupful left. A cautious glance rearward at a grinning Watson, sweat-streaked and slumped in his seat. Brief eye contact. A mutual, wordless connection. They’d survived something well beyond any of their previous experiences.

Watson managed a weak grin. ‘I reckon you don’t land that well on wheels Bob.’

Bob Cowper had crash landed in the Sahara Desert in total darkness and survived. How much longer his luck would hold out was yet to be determined.



Chapter One

Prelude to War

Robert Barson Cowper was born in Broken Hill on June 24, 1922, the first child of caring parents. He had three younger sisters, and from an early age enjoyed a semi-rural upbringing north of Adelaide where his father worked at the Roseworthy Agricultural College.

His youth contained good times and comparable memories that included riding horses and the friendships of childhood during a period when everyone was welcome in a neighbour's home. Collecting birds' eggs, chasing feral cats, stealing a forbidden glimpse of horses mating, swimming in the school dam, yabbing in 'Yabby' dam and spending a year in Adelaide with his Aunt Cissy who encouraged him to breed silkworms; these all rated highly. Upon her death, he was invited to view Aunt Cissy's body in her coffin and elected to, believing later that it helped him accept death as part of the life cycle.

"It was a good upbringing, full of people that I could never forget. Some of them were a bit tragic, like Bob the cook at the agricultural school. The poor beggar, he had this debilitating shaking disorder and you had to have really good hand and eye co-ordination to make sure that what he was serving landed on your plate. There was my primary school teacher too at Kangaroo Flat. Lilly Fanny Poppy Baldwin. Whoever could have invented a name like that? One of my neighbours was Sonny Dallwitz, the only son in a family of eight German immigrant farmers. All those sisters! We used to laugh at the way they put their sentences together. Sonny had to milk the family's cows each morning, before he walked barefooted over three miles to the local school. We were a bit luckier. We had a governor's cart and a pony—Billy—and we used to fight over



Colourful posters urged young men to enlist in the services. They were extremely pointed and were to prove effective with their patriotic messages.

The Cowper family Governor's cart with their horse 'Billy'. Bob Cowper is in the foreground wearing the hat.



whose turn it was to drive. Billy knew the way there and back all by himself, but driving made us feel important. And there was Bob the Swaggy. He was an itinerant, a foot-borne drifter of the period who visited about every three months and my mother would share what meagre rations she could spare in return for a pile of chopped wood.”

In 1933 he received a scholarship to attend Queen’s College, Adelaide, a Church of England school. There was some religion involved but, like most young people, he thought the religious instruction lessons were an opportunity to drift off mentally. How close to God was he likely to come during the mess that was to follow? Would God unfairly remember his laxness or choose to excuse it as a youthful indiscretion?

Five years at Queen’s College provided the opportunity to become actively involved in cricket, swimming and gymnastics. Scouting became a passionate pastime where he learned skills like cooking and knot tying which became valuable assets later in life.



*Queen's College First Eleven. Back row, left to right: Harry Wesley-Smith, Robin, B. Diamond, C. Freeman, D. Fraser, D. Burns, Dudley Haslam (Head Master).
Front row: R. Cowper, R. Wright, A. Price (Captain), E. Lascock, M. Smith, R. Hursthouse.*



*Top: The congratulatory letter from Horwood Bagshaw's Works Manager reflects the etiquette of the period very well.
Below: Bob's mate Tom MacKenzie outside their tent at Port Vincent displaying the skin of the first fox they shot.*

At the age of 16 he left school and joined the agricultural machinery company Horwood Bagshaw in Adelaide's near western suburbs. While he desired to become an engineer, his first job involved little more than sweeping the factory floor for which he was rewarded with a somewhat paltry 12/6d (\$1.25) per week.

Good conduct and good fortune followed however, and a year later he was promoted to the firm's drawing office in the position of junior draftsman. His pay rocketed to 16/2d (\$1.62) per week.

His time at Horwood Bagshaw turned out favourably in many ways. Riding his bike everywhere added to his fitness. In addition to having ridden to work, he rode to the Adelaide School of Mines three nights a week for lessons. And quite often he would be sent on his bike to the local Supply and Tender Board to pick up specifications for projects that the company planned to tender for.

A special friendship developed with workmate Tom MacKenzie which led to trips across the local gulf waters to Port Vincent aboard the SS *Karata*. Here he learned to shoot rabbits and foxes as well as catching and preparing fish meals.

Mr Gurr was his immediate superior. He had a wooden leg and a temperament that occasionally complimented it. In spite of this, he was a knowledgeable and kindly gentleman who had the respect of all the junior employees.

"Mister Gurr used to ask me to prepare quotations which was a weighty responsibility for a young bloke to be doing. I went over them a dozen times or more before I put them on his desk. And then he used to tell me he hadn't had time to check them and had forwarded them on to the appropriate authority. I spent sleepless nights worrying about those quotes, hoping I hadn't overlooked anything obvious. He might have been just kidding, but I could never be sure."

At his mother's insistence he took dance lessons in St Augustine's Hall in Unley under the tutorage of Zel Sanders. While most of the teenage boys in the class were keen about dancing, their primary goal was to seek an opportunity to clasp the overly buxom Zel in a slow waltz, ogling her two most conspicuous assets that were always prominently displayed. Again with his mate Tom, they bustled and bullied for a position in line, never once thinking that Zel may have been enjoying it equally.

He played lacrosse for the Sturt Club and frequently visited the Star Theatre at Unley on Saturday evenings where his legs invariably cramped following a day's sport and bike riding. Girls were noticed but sport was paramount. He dated Irene from the office at work and remembers putting Brylcreem in his hair for the occasion. Good effort that because he scored his first kiss. In a bus shelter. Perhaps there was some credence in the catchy Brylcreem jingle—'A little dab'll do ya!'

As a 17-year-old Robert Cowper was very naïve of things worldly and as distant as the northern hemisphere. When you lived in a city named Adelaide, situated in Australia's central southern extremes, Germany, Poland, France and the UK seemed so geographically remote. They were places you searched for in a school library's atlas or perhaps on the large, multi-folded map of Europe that father had brought home from the first war.

On his 18th birthday, June 24, 1940, he rode his bike to North Terrace during his lunch hour and entered the offices of the Number 5 Recruiting Depot of the RAAF. Robert Cowper was of age and had signalled his intentions to contribute to the war effort.

His immediate family, which included his maternal grandparents, were of English lineage and very concerned about the war in Europe. The air of gravity in the Cowper lounge room thickened as they heard of the horror as France fell, followed by the dramatic evacuation of Dunkirk and other French ports. Then, a combined civilian and military force helped bring over 500,000 troops back to England as the German invaders swept through France. These men became the nucleus of new fighting units and Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, claimed the evacuation to be a 'miracle of deliverance', but tempered the nation's enthusiasm by reminding them that 'wars are not won by evacuations'.

On July 10 1940, just sixteen days after he had volunteered to enlist and been subsequently placed on air-crew reserve, the Battle of Britain officially commenced.

"At night the whole family would sit around the radio when the BBC would broadcast reports of the battle's progress. I heard all these new names, and probably never thought they'd be so familiar by war's end. Dover, East Anglia, Portsmouth, Bristol, Folkestone. Dozens more. They were names I might have heard at school but I couldn't remember. My grandparents lived with us at the time and were concerned about their relatives who were still in



Above: Bob Cowper's maternal grandparents, Mary Barson (nee Ray) and Thomas Henry Barson.

Below: 1950s. German propaganda becomes commonplace as Hitler declares his 'peaceful' intentions to the world.





Bob Cowper's father Henry William Cowper at left with Bob's uncle, Fred Barson (mother's brother). Both had served during the First World War and history was to repeat itself when Bob's cousins also served with the RAAF during the Second World War.

England. I'd not met any of them at that stage, but their names became familiar; George Barson lived near Manchester, and there was an Aunt Alice too. There were plenty of strange place names as well, some of them going into history books while we listened. Dungeness; Biggin Hill; Kenley; Hornchurch; Lowestoft. I used to think they were so funny when you compared them with names like Broken Hill or Kangaroo Flat. But some English things seemed a bit strange to us anyway. My grandmother was from Lancashire and used to say 'pass the booter' at the table. We'd say 'Grandma, it's butter, not booter'. She'd get quite irate and reply, 'I didn't say booter, I said booter'."

The call to duty came during December 1940, only weeks after the Battle of Britain had concluded. The loss of more than 500 airmen during this brief but hectic encounter had seen replacement pilots arriving from training schools at more than twice the speed than in July when the battle had commenced.

Unlike many skilled people whose anticipated contribution to industry forbade them joining the services, Horwood Bagshaw's questionable habit of indenturing apprentices but not lodging the papers with the correct authorities came very unstuck in the case of Robert Barson Cowper. He was free to serve.

During the months leading up to his enlistment, he had continued his School of Mines and Trade School studies for his apprenticeship, worked during the day and busied himself learning Morse Code and other elementary skills that were required of an air crew recruit. Testament to his endeavours were first prizes during 1939 and 1940 for 'Application and consistency' and 'Best Student, Mathematics and Drawing'. Each carried a prize of £1 (\$2.00), more than a week's wages for the young apprentice.

Flying was the new motivation and a greatly extended dose of application and consistency was going to be called on in the months ahead.



