

## Cyril Francis Twigden 48585 Flight Sergeant

As told to Paul Spencer and edited by Christine Hancock

Cyril was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1920 to Samuel Frances and Effie Gladys Twigden at the Orroroo Hospital in the Mid-North of South Australia. He was the second of 5 children, two boys and three girls.



His parents had a 600 acre farm at Coomeroo between Mount Remarkable and Orroroo, where the main activities were wheat, sheep and cattle. His education was at the Morchard Primary school and later at Orroroo. (Cyril likes to say that he was educated at the Morchard University!) He left school after primary school as being the oldest son he was required to work on the family farm.

After the outbreak of WWII most of the local young men decided to sign up. (About 90 did during the duration of the war). Cyril's father Sammy refused permission but Cyril went anyway. The group of fourteen travelled to Adelaide Railway Station in 1940 where there was a recruiting depot. They were then sent by an old truck to Woodside Army barracks where Cyril spent one night. However his occupation as a farm worker was deemed an "essential service" and he was sent home. By then he was one of the few younger men in the community and he again asked Sammy for permission but was refused. However his mother relented and Cyril returned to Adelaide by train. Having previously been rebuffed by the Army he saw a RAAF Recruitment Office on North Terrace opposite the Railway Station so he joined up there.

He was first sent to Shepparton in Victoria for induction training. Cyril recalls it was the middle of winter and they were all frozen when put off the train from Adelaide. To make matters worse it was pouring with rain. The District Inspectors who met them were all ex-wrestlers and boxers – "...they picked bruisers for the job..." Cyril recalled. They were marched to camp nearby – pools of water and mud were everywhere. "Plough through you buggers, plough through" the District Inspectors called out. Home was a tent with straw pillows and a few blankets. Cyril was still in his best suit and carrying his small suitcase.



After induction he returned to Adelaide to train as a flight mechanic. This was in Twin Street in the city. After this he was sent to Gawler and soon after to Papua New Guinea (PNG). "They sent us by a Dutch ship the van der Legion. They had just been transporting sheep before us and we were down in the cargo hold where the sheep had been. We all became sick, including the Medical Orderly. We were forced to stop at Milne Bay, then Port Moresby" ... before eventually reaching our destination at Lae on PNG's north coast.

At Lae we went into the jungle to a place called Nadzab and that was our camp. I was a mechanic in the 21<sup>st</sup> Squadron and we were there to build an airstrip. We had only been there a short while when a Jap fighter zoomed in over the tree tops and sprayed us with fire. The bloke in front of me and five behind me were all killed but somehow I was not even scratched. Another incident here was with one of the blokes who had a stutter. One other chap picked on him terribly. Finally the stutterer picked up an axe handle and killed him. Never did hear what happened to him.

Australia didn't have much in the way of aircraft. However the Yanks who were there had taken a dislike to the Volta Vengeance dive bombers and the RAAF seconded some. The Yanks hated them so much they used to hide them in the jungle so they couldn't fly them. This was handy for us mechanics for spare parts. They were used to bomb the Japs on the Owen Stanley ranges. The average age of the Australian pilots was about 19 due to the high mortality rate. I remember one morning there were 16 planes flew out in one squadron and only 3 when they came back.

The weather in New Guinea was typically tropical – it would bucket down nearly every afternoon! I had a pet little Rhesus monkey there that would sit on my shoulder and on the end of my bed at night. If I went out of the tent I'd just leave him at the door and he'd be there when I got back. I used to take him to the pictures with me as well.

I returned to Australia for a six week conversion training course to become a pilot. After this I was sent to Morotai in Eastern Indonesia. Along with several others I decided we were entitled to some leave before heading off and subsequently we missed the plane. When we caught up with the rest in Morotai we were confined to barracks and later made to shovel sand all day. When we finished one area we were told to shovel it back!! We flew mainly Boston's and DC3's and flew all around there including Manila in the Philippines. We were attached to the Americans which was good because they enjoyed much better conditions than us especially with food. We did get about 6 bottles of beer a fortnight but it was rubbish. Then the Yank in the next tent to mine starting buying it off me and let me help him drink it!!

At Morotai the Yanks had a lot of Negro drivers. We had to fly to Australia, mainly Brisbane and Darwin, on courier runs and we would always get as much spirit as we could as there was a ready market for it with the Yanks. One day I offered some to one of the Negro drivers – he just laughed and said they made their own. This was made by mixing pure alcohol with some local ingredient they had found – anyway many of them went blind drinking it – it was potent stuff.

Whilst the Americans always seemed well off, the Dutch were also well cared for. Queen Wilhelmina seemed to have plenty of money and they generally had good planes including Mitchell bombers. The Dutch were part of 18 Squadron and most of their pilots had been regular pilots before the war. They were sent on a coast patrol mission from Darwin and got lost supposedly – I reckon they knew where the Japs

were and went the other way. Anyway they were all transferred with their planes to Canberra. They had Javanese crew on their planes and treated them badly.

I also spent time in Manila. General MacArthur had his HQ there in the Manila Hotel. This had been made from imported Italian marble. The local commander was named Mawsley - it was quite a sight to see him travelling around – always with a minimum of a dozen hangers on. The local Asian girls in Manila were generally very well educated and nice looking but they “...never went anywhere without their bloody mother’s or some other relation!” Later in the war I had been promoted to Flight Sergeant and we were allowed to use the Officer’s Mess in Manila – a real no-no in other areas.

Then I was returned to Australia for more conversion training – this time as a flight mechanic for the Liberator bombers and then it was back to Morotai. Once I had just taken off and the next plane followed. The “wheels up” switch was located next to the “bomb selector” and he pushed the wrong one. “A massive explosion - Bang!! They found his false teeth a half a mile away, there wasn’t much of him left!”

Another time I was in the sick bay when a bloke came racing in. He said he had been stung by a coral snake, which are particularly venomous. The doctor calmly told him to have a seat by the wall. But I’ve just been bitten by a coral snake he repeated. That’s alright said the doctor. If you have you’ll be dead in three minutes!! Turns out it was a jelly fish. Another time I found a 6 foot python under my tent.

In Morotai we were flying a load of colas (tar). I was the co-pilot on a Douglas DC3 that had been part of the Guinea Airways and had been commandeered by the RAAF. Guinea Airways was owned by Reg Ansett. A Jap plane came in and strafed us. It missed us in the cockpit but hit the tar – there was tar seeping everywhere and it was impossible to keep control and the DC3 crash landed. We managed to crawl away and later I was found to be severely injured – 5 ribs through my left lung which since then has been collapsed. I was expatriated to Heidelberg Hospital in Melbourne for a couple of months before they transferred me back to Adelaide to Daw Park Repatriation Hospital. I was there for 9 months during which time the war ended. I still needed a further 5 months rehabilitation at the Mount Bracken convalescent home at Victor Harbor before reentering civilian life. I was discharged from the RAAF in 1946.

As part of a servicemen’s job scheme I was given training as a tailor but didn’t enjoy that so I went to the telegram operating room at the GPO before transferring to the Glenelg Post Office where I worked for some years.



I joined the RSL at Glenelg (it was behind the Town Hall). It was great on dance nights nearby because the RSL was able to sell alcohol so I would duck out between dances and grab a beer! It was at the dances that I met a young girl who became my wife in 1946, Betty Flanagan. We moved in with my Mum and Dad. Dad had found the farm too much on his own and had sold it and moved to Adelaide. They owned a large poultry farm on Morphett Road at Warradale

that was four and a half acres. This was in the area roughly from where Paringa Primary School now is towards the railway line.

In 1947 I bought a block of land in Cecelia Street Hove for 69 pounds under the War Service Scheme. The lack of building materials was a real problem in the post war years – it took three years from the laying of the foundations to the completion.

Still working at the Post Office I went to Night School to further my limited education, and entered the State Public Service. I first worked for the War Service Homes and later with the Bankruptcy Court where I was for 30 years. Continuing medical problems associated with only having the one lung brought about an early retirement on my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1980. I still have a bit of fun with Doctor's that don't know I have a lung missing. My general ailment is being out of breath so they naturally go for the stethoscope first – then can't find anything on the left. I love to watch their faces!

I took up golf, lawn bowls where I played top division for Somerton for many years and Betty and I travelled extensively by caravan as well through Australia. Both Betty and I had a real love of gardening and I still am as active as I can manage in the garden today.

In the 1980's our neighbor over the back fence was Ted Lambert, then President of the Brighton RSL Sub-Branch so I transferred my membership from Glenelg. Betty sadly passed away in 2010. I am still living in Cecelia Street today.