



*Escapers & Evaders 3:*

# The Late Arrivals Club

**NORTH AFRICA 1941-42**

Somewhere in North Africa's Western Desert in June 1941 some air force officers founded an exclusive association they named the 'Late Arrivals Club'. Members were entitled to wear a special emblem on the left breast of their flying suits - a winged flying boot.





THERE WAS ONE REQUIREMENT – an airman had to have been “...obliged to abandon his aircraft on the ground or in the air, as a result of unfriendly action by the enemy,” and succeed “in returning to his squadron, on foot or by other means, long after his estimated time of arrival. It is never too late to come back.”

A remarkable feature of the desert war was how many airmen did manage to walk back to their squadrons, often right through enemy lines. Bailing out or crash landing in the desert just 50 miles from the coast, there was little hope unless by good luck a man managed to meet friendly Arab tribesmen.

By the night of 7-8 October 1942, nearly all the Western Desert had been conquered by the Axis forces and the opposing armies faced each other at El Alamein. At about 0300 hours, Wellington IC DV504/G of 40 Squadron RAF bombed Tobruk Harbour, but “Eric the Twerp of Tobruk”, a mythical aggressive German AA gunner, was both aggressive and accurate. One engine caught fire and the propeller spun off. It was time to bail out.

The crew decided before jumping to rendezvous at the crashed aircraft. After parachuting, Sgt John Wood RAAF made his way through the darkness. Pre-war, he had lived in the northern Sydney suburb of Hornsby and worked as a clerk; a few hours earlier he had been based in Egypt as the Wellington's wireless operator.

John ‘Jack’ Wood was born in Taree NSW but after his father's death his mother and three brothers moved to Hornsby to work and support the family. Jack joined the NSW Railways as a junior clerk and then the RAAF in 1940. After training in Australia and Canada, he was eventually posted to 40 Squadron.

By dawn only four of the six-man crew had turned up. Besides Jack Wood, there was the Canadian pilot Wnt Off R Spence and two English gunners, Sgts E Linforth and A Butteriss. What had happened to the other two, Sgts K Bowhill and C Hill RCAF, was unknown.

The four men took stock. They were somewhere near Cappuzzo, about 300 miles from the most advanced British positions at El Alamein. Waiting too long for the others would only lead to discovery and capture. They decided to walk south into the desert, away from the enemy controlled coast road, and then travel parallel to it until reaching safety, thereby adding 50 miles to the journey.

Each man had a small compass, but food and water needed careful rationing. Altogether they had six tins of bully beef: sixteen packets of hard biscuits, three full water bottles, some milk tablets, chocolates, toffee, Benzedrine and chewing gum. There were other complications. Butteriss and Linforth had ankle injuries.

## THE LONG TREK

They kept a record. The fourth day (Spence's birthday) they “...crossed border line south of Sollum, heat terrific... flying boots making it very hard to walk. Going was very hard, loose rocks, unable to get good footholds.”

بيل ماكريبي  
الحكومة البريطانية



BRITISH GOVERNMENT

الى كل عربي كريم

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته وبعد ، فحامل هذا الكتاب ضابط بالجيش البريطاني وهو صديق وفي لكافة الشعوب العربية فنرجو أن تعاملوه بالعطف والاحترام . وأن تحافظوا على حياته من كل طارئ ، ونأمل عند الاضطرار أن تقدموا له ما يحتاج اليه من طعام وشراب . وأن ترشدوه الى أقرب معسكر بريطاني . وسنكافئكم مالياً بسخاء على ما تسدون له من خدمات .  
والسلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته  
القيادة البريطانية العامة في الشرق الاوسط

To All Arab Peoples — Greetings and Peace be upon you. The bearer of this letter is an Officer of the British Government and a friend of all Arabs. Treat him well, guard him from harm, give him food and drink, help him to return to the nearest British soldiers and you will be rewarded. Peace and the Mercy of God upon you. *The British High Command in the East.*

### SOME POINTS ON CONDUCT WHEN MEETING THE ARABS IN THE DESERT.

Remove footwear on entering their tents. Completely ignore their women. If thirsty drink the water they offer, but DO NOT fill your waterbottle from their personal supply. Go to their well and fetch what you want. Never neglect any puddle or other water supply for topping up your bottle. Use the Halazone included in your Aid Box. Do not expect breakfast if you sleep the night. Arabs will give you a mid-day or evening meal.

### REMEMBER, NEVER TRY AND HURRY IN THE DESERT, SLOW AND SURE DOES IT.

A few useful words			
English	Arabic	English	Arabic
English	Ingleezi	Day	Nahaar or Yom
Friend	Sa-hib, Sa-deck.	Night	Layl
Water	Moya	Half	Nuss
Food	Akl	Half a day	Nuss il Nahaar
Village	Balaad	Near	Gareeb
Tired	Ta-eban	Far	Baeed
Take me to the English and you will be rewarded.		{ Hud nee eind el Ingleez wa tahud Mu-ka-fa.	
English Flying Officer		Za-bit Ingleezi Tye-yara	
How far (how many kilos?)		Kam kilo ?	
Enemy		Germani, Tellani, Sizillani	

### Distance and time: Remember, Slow & Sure does it

The older Arabs cannot read write or tell the time. They measure distance by the number of days journey. “Near” may mean 10 minutes or 10 hours. Far probably means over a days journey. A days journey is probably about 30 miles. The younger Arabs are more accurate.

GOOD LUCK

Sixth day (after walking all night still close to the coast): “Butteriss decided to leave us. He had been through hell since our starting, despite our efforts to help and assist him. He... used to fall down on all fours beside our leaky water can, and sucked what water had seeped out... We left him with two bottles of water and one can of chocolate and walked south-east...”

“Eighth day: ... somewhere south of Sidi Barrani... Linforth decided to leave us... we left him with a water can with two bottles of water in same, a tin of chocolate, a chocolate bar, some milk tablets and some gum. He was very game.

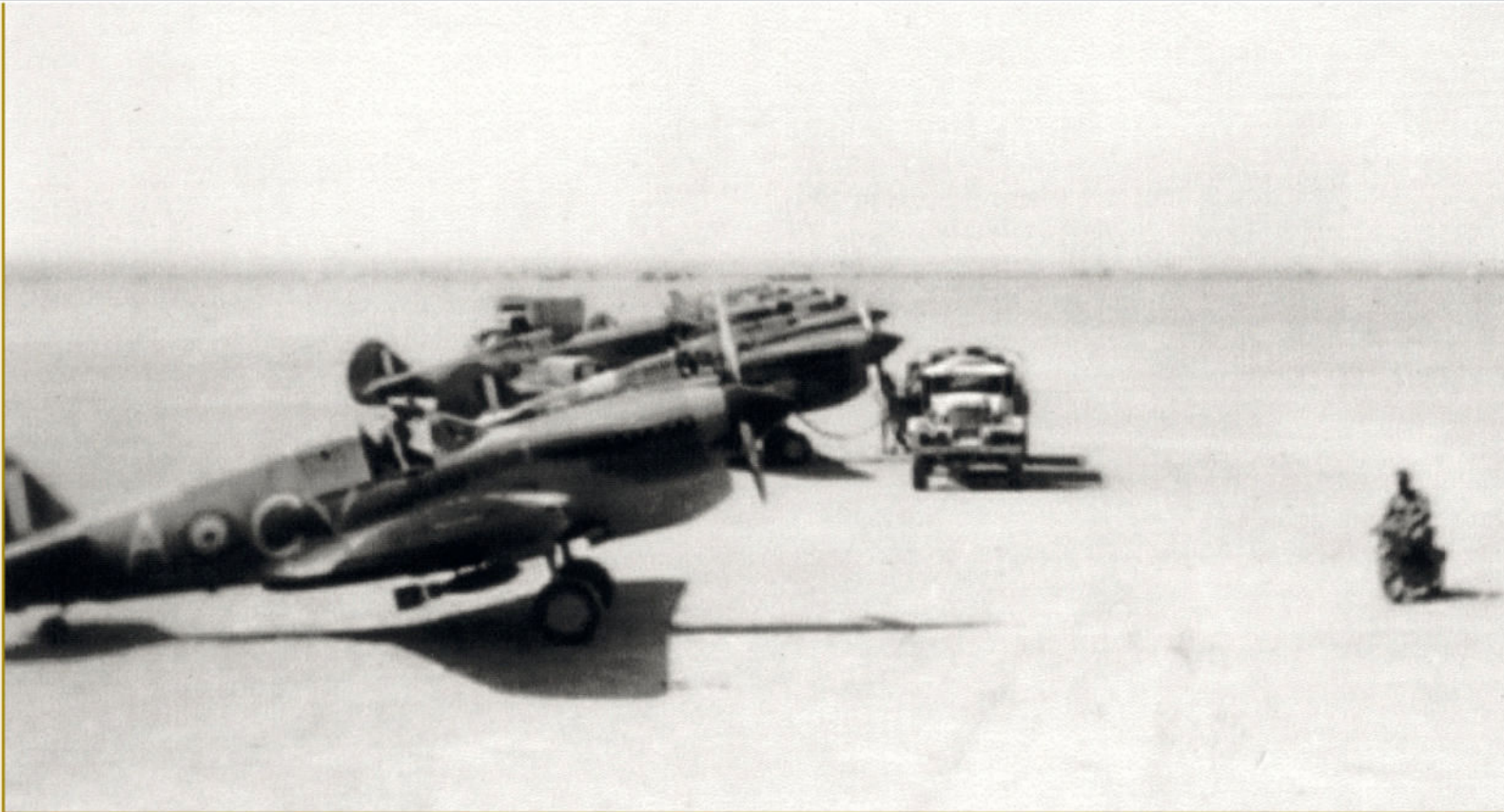
“Between the two of us we now had left four tins of bully-beef, three tins of ration chocolate, about 16 biscuits, about 20 milk tablets, three full water bottles, two empty same, our two-gallon tin about three parts full... We tried to make a can of bully-beef last the two of us three days.” >>>

Top left: Sgt Jack Wood (left) and his Canadian pilot, Wnt Off R Spence of 40 Squadron RAF, as they were after their 24-day trek through the desert. AWM

Above: The ubiquitous ‘Goolie Chit’. Sgt Dave Borthwick of 450 Squadron became “a little concerned” when the Bedouins who found him were “reading” his upside down! Reg Moore

Left: A Bristol Bombay of 1 Australian Air Ambulance.

Reg Moore



**Above: Kittyhawks of 3 Squadron at a landing ground in the flat, featureless North African terrain.** *Reg Moore*

Tenth day: "Started walking, course south-east, hard going, rocks and sandstorm. Found old tomb, decided to remain all night, very fatigued, sandstorm intense. Ate a few biscuits, had a drink each and slept all night."

Twelfth day: "Met two Arabs driving camels to Siwa Oasis. They gave us about three pints of water and two handfuls of dates in exchange for 45 piastres (all the money we had). Also gave us a good drink and a smoke out of a pipe, home-grown tobacco. 'Smoke' floored us."

Fourteenth day. "Had a little rain shower. Managed to have a good drink out of a rock pool, not enough to collect. Sole falling off Wood's shoe, had to fix. Spence's boot also in miserable condition."

Fifteenth day: "Shoes repaired. We walked until 1100 hours, our shoes were giving us trouble, wire fixings cutting into our feet, decided to stop and rest. Heat terrific, had a little to eat and drink, made shelter of brush. 0630 hours, made our way to the edge of the Qattara Depression.

"The country down below seemed to be excellent to walk upon as seen by us from the top, so we decided to make our way down the cliff-side, same was hard going, very steep and dangerous in parts, ruined shoes completely."

Sixteenth day: "Decided to stay night at a date grove. No dates. Shoes giving trouble. Very weak, food and water getting low, tough going. Had a good sleep after a little to eat and drink."

Seventeenth day: "Started walking, hard going, shoes giving trouble, very hot, salt marsh, fairly weak. The marsh was all dried up and we were walking over salt crags which in appearance resemble waves and were 18 to 24 inches high. Being unable to walk in between same we were compelled to walk along the top, stepping from one to another. It was very hot. The food and water were both getting low..."

Eighteenth day: "We made camp at 0900 hours. Sleep was almost impossible, partly because of exhaustion and mostly because of the continual gnawing in our stomachs and the thoughts of food and cool drinks that we could not keep out of our minds.

"Towards dusk we met three Bedouin driving camels, who made us two rounds of bread six to seven inches in circumference, called 'grassa' and which, although they gave us almost unbearable attacks of indigestion, were devoured to the last morsel. Tonight we came upon soft salt, it was tough walking – placing one foot down it would sink up to your shin in soft mud, and having no foothold it was necessary immediately to place your other foot in front of the first to keep walking..."

Twentieth day: "Last night our food gave out, despite our rationing. Water was very low, just about two bottles full. We were very weak, shoes just about off our feet. At night we came upon five Bedouin driving about 70 camels. They gave us a handful of dates and a drink of salty water."

Twenty-first day: "Attempting to walk a few miles during the day, the weather not being very hot, we came across two Bedouin grazing camels. Taking us into their camp they fed us with rice and camels' milk diluted with water..."

Twenty-second day: "We entered camp amidst very curious Arabs. Fed on dates, rice and oil, and drank salty water. Quite a ritual. Still very weak, but recovered."

Twenty-fourth day (2 November): "Arrived at a salt lake at about 0400 hours, mosquitoes unbearable. Hearing and finally sighting what seemed to be a motor lorry from a nearby hill about 0800 hours we headed north and were finally picked up by an advanced armoured division about 5 to 10 miles north of El Maghra."

They had made it! They had survived! In 24 days







and nights, these two men had trudged some 350 miles through heat and hell to safety. After recovering from their remarkable trek, Wood and Spence went back flying. The rest of the crew – Sgts Bowhill, Hill, Linforth and Butteriss – all survived as POWs.

When the war ended, Jack Wood returned to the NSW Railways where he spent his working life. He passed away at Hornsby on 16 January 1996. Relics of Jack Wood's wartime escape, including the water bottle he carried, are in the Australian War Memorial collection.

### DOWN AND WOUNDED

By the end of 1942, the Late Arrivals Club had mushroomed to a phenomenal 345 members. Sgt Dave Borthwick of 450 Squadron RAAF was another whose experiences were harrowing.

On 9 November 1942, after the El Alamein breakthrough, 450 Squadron was one of three squadrons detailed to escort Bostons attacking the Sidi-Barrani-Sollum Road.

Unfortunately the top cover did not rendezvous and six other Kittyhawks aborted, so the escorts, 18 aircraft strong instead of 36, were thinly spread when they were attacked by Messerschmitt Bf 109s of JG77.

Borthwick, flying P-40 Kittyhawk FR210, found a pair of 109s on his tail and steep turned to evade. The 109s followed. After several turns he had gained enough on one his adversaries to open fire. The 109 dived and the Australian followed – a mistake! The German pilot, Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Hackler, had an easy target.

Cannon shells hit the left side of Borthwick's Kittyhawk, one exploding under his legs. His left leg was paralysed and his right Achilles tendon hamstrung. The crippled plane fell on fire. After a struggle, the canopy struck his right eye while being jettisoned and he just managed to bail out in time. He felt the jerk of

his parachute and almost simultaneously landed thud on his backside, rupturing a disc in his spine.

Bleeding badly from behind the left knee, he jammed his handkerchief behind it and bent his leg so his foot was next to his buttock. Using cord cut off the parachute he bound his leg in that position. The bleeding stopped. His water bottle had been punctured and was losing water so he drank what was left. This would be his last decent drink for almost a week.

He judged he was 50-60 miles behind enemy lines and about 15-20 miles inland. Unable to stand, all he could do was crawl north towards the coast roads. He had to drag himself along in a sitting position on his backside using his two hands, his bent left leg and his right leg. Progress was agonising and slow.

On the second day, the only landmark he could see in the flat, featureless terrain was a 'pimple' on the horizon. He aimed for it. There was heavy dew at night but no surface water to be found, not even by digging. He could judge the Eighth Army's advance by artillery flashes in the night sky.

By the fourth day the skin had been scraped from his hands and backside but he reached the 'pimple'. It was actually a cairn of loose, roughly hewn, rocks piled up about eight feet high. When he pulled out a few key stones from the bottom it collapsed. He laid stones out concave side up and next morning there was about a tablespoon of dew in each cavity, just enough to sustain him until someone found him, his only hope.

Night was too cold for sleep at but he drifted off when the sun first rose, sleeping until it got too hot. The rest of the day was spent trying to find shade in the three feet high camel thorn growing around.

On the sixth morning he awoke to find two Bedouins standing over him. They gave him one of their water bottles. He had never tasted better.

Each flier carried a 'Goolie Chit', a note written in Arabic and English explaining that there was a reward payable for being safely returned to the British. "I was a little concerned to see them 'reading' this upside down", he recalled later, but return him they did to a British patrol.

Eventually Dave Borthwick was placed on a stretcher in the back of a utility truck and driven to Sidi Barani. In the dark the truck side-swiped a tank going the other way and almost wiped him out. Next morning, an air ambulance flew him to Cairo. He arrived at hospital emaciated and "a mess" with a ruptured disc, the skin worn off his hands and backside, which had become infected, and anaesthetised it took three or four days to straighten and treat his leg.

The severity of his injuries prevented him from flying with 450 Squadron again. He was soon on a hospital ship bound for Australia.

### THREE BOOTS

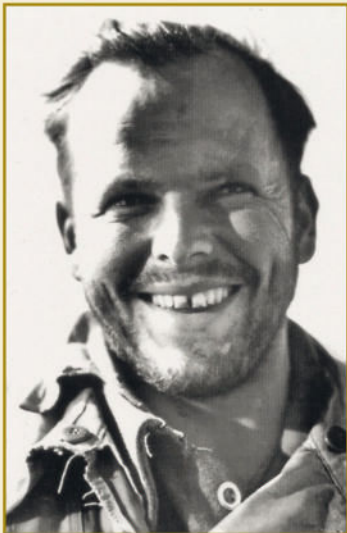
Nicky Barr of 3 Squadron RAAF flew aggressively and gained his initial victory, a Bf 110 shot down south-west of Tmimi, on 12 December 1941 while flying Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk AN336. Next day, he disposed of a Bf 109 and a Ju 88. >>>



Top: Nicky Barr of 3 Squadron RAAF. *Reg Moore*

Above: Nicky Barr back with 3 Squadron after earning his first 'Flying Boot'. *Reg Moore*

**Cannon shells hit the left side of Borthwick's Kittyhawk, one exploding under his legs. His left leg was paralysed and his right Achilles tendon hamstrung. The crippled plane fell on fire.**



**By the end of 1942, the Late Arrivals Club had 345 members. Another of them was Bobby Gibbes. He is shown here just after returning to 3 Squadron after a three-day walk back from being shot down in January 1943. "It is never too late to come back." Bobby Gibbes**

Although born in Wellington, New Zealand, his family moved to Australia and he grew up in Melbourne where he volunteered for the RAAF.

A week after his first successes the squadron converted to more powerful P-40E Kittyhawks and on New Year's Day, he was credited with two Ju 87 Stukas, bringing his score to five.

Soon after he discovered what it was like on the receiving end. He was downed for the first time on 11 January on his 22nd mission.

The RAAF fighters flying top cover for Blenheims bombing El Agheila were attacked by Bf 109s of I/JG27. Barr spotted two Fiat G.50 fighters on his right, and caused the pilot of one to bail out. Next, he saw a diving Kittyhawk with a 109 on its tail. The Kittyhawk crash-landed, and as the 109 circled overhead Nicky shot it down, apparently killing Oberleutnant Hugo Schneider, a nine-victory ace.

Barr identified the downed Kittyhawk as CV-E, Bob Jones' aircraft. Nicky prepared to land on a nearby beach, intending to collect Jones. As he descended, he saw Jones waving and pointing – there was a 109 following him and shooting. Nicky applied full power and pulled up the nose. The 109 overshot and he fired. The Messerschmitt crashed and burned to the south east.

A second 109 was overhead climbing into the sun so Nicky pulled up and fired, scoring strikes on its belly. This 109 pilot, Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz, an ace who would eventually claim 42 kills over North Africa, quickly counter-attacked. Nicky, still with wheels lowered, felt his Kittyhawk take hits and lose power but he was able to force-land safely.

As he climbed out he saw the 109 swinging back, and realised his plane was about to be strafed. Nicky ran out of the line of fire but a 20mm shell shattered rock in front of him, spraying fragments into his legs – painful but not lethal.

Schulz then flew off with one wing low, his plane apparently seriously damaged.

Nicky realised he was alone in the desert with his burning Kittyhawk. As he tried to attend to his leg injuries, he became aware he was being watched by three Arabs, two adults and a child. Luckily, they were friendly Senussi who dressed his wounds and led him to their camp.

Over the next five days, he was guided safely back to British lines, passing numerous Italian and German units along the way. After hospitalisation in Cairo, he returned to 3 Squadron and the immediate award of a DFC. He was also 'officially' presented with his first 'Winged Flying Boot' badge.

On 27 May 1942 Nicky Barr force-landed in the desert with an overheating engine. He had just removed the engine cowlings when he saw enemy tanks. Leaving the cowlings, he took off and eventually reached home after being listed missing for four hours. Next day he was promoted to command the squadron.

He was shot down again just three days later after probably destroying a Bf 109. Of this he wrote: "...on

60th op, an aerial sweep of 'Knightsbridge' battle area, my Kittyhawk aircraft was shot down, crash landed again and I was concussed. Was stranded on German side of minefield, recovered by troops of a British regiment (the Cherry Pickers) and sent to Tobruk hospital for treatment. Back with squadron on fourth day" – and his second Flying Boot!

By 26 June 1942, Nicky was 3 Squadron's top scoring pilot, but his success ended abruptly on his third morning mission that day. The squadron provided close escort to Bostons bombing rear enemy positions. On the homeward trip, his Kittyhawk's engine overheated. He tried diving steeply hoping that a cooler engine would provide enough power to reach friendly territory.

A pair of 109s came after him. He evaded one attack before being hit by 20mm cannon fire. Flames surrounded him and his left leg and foot had wounds – time to bail out.

He had trouble pulling the canopy but suddenly it shot back and he was sucked out of the cockpit with such force that the flames burning his arm, hand, trouser leg and parachute harness were extinguished. With impaired vision he waited just seconds before pulling the ripcord and the parachute opened. He landed badly on one leg and promptly fainted.

From then, there were only brief periods of awareness – a German doctor attending in a casualty clearing station, his leg and foot being encased in plaster, being on a flat-top truck with other wounded...

A few hours after being captured, while the Italians were attending their wounded, he hobbled a quarter of a mile trying to escape. Recaptured, he was transferred to Italy and a hospital at Bergamo.

Nicky Barr did return to 3 Squadron – at Cutella, Italy, in March 1944 some 20 months later – a really late arrival!

In between time, he escaped and almost reached Switzerland before he was recaptured; jumped from a train and escaped when prisoners were being evacuated from Italy to Germany; travelled to Corianna Valli where, being too weak to cross the mountains himself, helped organise prisoners in the district to escape to Allied lines; was captured again by Alpine troops, ill-treated, and handed over to the Germans; and finally obtained guides towards the end of February 1944 and brought ten prisoners through to the Allied lines himself.

On the point of exhaustion, Nicky was hospitalised for three weeks before his visit to 3 Squadron at Cutella. He was awarded the Military Cross. Meanwhile, a Bar to his DFC had been Gazetted back in February 1943.

Although still frail, on 21 March 1944 he flew a new P-51 Mustang to mark the target for B-26 Marauders bombing a fuel dump near San Demetrio. He transferred to England in April and after the invasion of Europe on 6 June 1944 flew some missions over France. A Typhoon rocket strike on a V-1 site in Pas de Calais with 258 Squadron RAF on 16 July was his 93rd operation!

It was just after that Nicky Barr's his third 'Flying Boot' finally caught up with him!

**Nicky applied full power and pulled up the nose. The 109 overshot and he fired. The Messerschmitt crashed and burned to the south east.**