

### CHAPTER THREE

## FENTON AIRFIELD, NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA

To reach Fenton, we flew on a Lodestar FK-252 from Archerfield (near Brisbane) to Charleville in Queensland and stayed overnight. The next day we flew to Cloncurry, Daly Waters, and then arrived at Batchelor in the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> April 1943. At that stage Batchelor held the combined RAAF/Dutch 18 Squadron.

The next day they put Joe and me in the back of a jeep and we banged over a rough wet muddy road, bouncing and sliding around, on our way to Adelaide River. At Adelaide River we were issued with .38 revolvers, and when we were sent to Fenton on the 5<sup>th</sup> May we were each given a .45 Colt pistol.

It was a complete eye-opener travelling to Fenton and seeing for the first time the tropical north at the end of the wet season. At that time of year the grass was twelve to fourteen feet high and thick, like slim sugar cane.



Sitting in the back of a jeep entering the US Air Force camp at Fenton.  
(Painting by William Edwin Pidgeon, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 25th Dec 1943, page 11.)

At Fenton, Joe and I were told to choose a spot for our tent with the **American 319<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron**, part of their **90<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group**. Some of the USAAF personnel had already been there about six months and were ready for "R and R" (Rest and Recreation), so there were some places. Fenton camp had been hacked out of the Northern Territory scrub and consisted mostly of military tents and some solidly-built huts. There were also latrines with wooden platforms over holes dug into the ground – "long drops", basic communal showers, a mess area and an Officers Mess.

We met up with RAAF sergeants **Jack Hardacre** and **Johnny Graham**, who had done the WAG (Wireless Air Gunner) and RCM (Radar Countermeasures) courses before us, and told us that due to some bureaucratic bungle, no RCM operating sets were available, or there were no mechanics to install them, with the result that both Jack and Johnny flew as air-gunners in American crews, rather than using their new radar countermeasure skills.

My first trip in a B-24 Liberator was on the 10<sup>th</sup> May carrying out local aerial photography with USAAF pilot **Lieutenant Andrews**. My log book says: "Fenton, Batchelor and vicinity. Mosaic photography. Two hours, fifty minutes." I loved it.

Two days later, I went up with the 319<sup>th</sup>, and we travelled to **Darwin**, then flew over **Bathurst Island** and practised skip bombing off its northern coast. I remember going out on that trip and having a practice at gunnery – at the waist gun. The .50 calibre Browning machine guns were heavier and more powerful than the .303 inch ones I had fired in training.

All the gunners had a great day because we saw a large crocodile between Darwin and Bathurst Island, and everyone had a shot at it. Boy, did he cop it! Later, I will mention how pilots occasionally let other members of their crew have a go at flying the planes. But sometimes too, the pilots had a go on the machine guns, and that occurred on this occasion, the pilot (USAAF **Captain Robinson**) having a shot at that croc from one of the waist guns!

A couple of days later again, I went out as a passenger on a 319<sup>th</sup> Liberator, but with a 380<sup>th</sup> skipper, **Howard Merkel**. We carried out high-level bombing practice, up to 25,000 feet, and I used oxygen for the first time. The trip lasted 3¼ hours. That was over **Anson Bay** at the mouth of the Daly River, south-west of Darwin. No one practiced bombing over land because there were Aborigines about and you didn't want to hit anyone. A prominent rock in the bay was used for bombing target practice.