

Hist480 Research Essay

**You Wouldn't Know There Was a
War On**

*A Cultural History of New Zealanders Serving in Bomber
Command during the Second World War*

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This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author in the footnote references. The dissertation is approximately 10,900 words in length.’

Abstract

The intention of this project is to reconstruct the culture of New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command of the RAF during the Second World War. Similar work has emerged on the culture of British airmen but cultural histories looking specifically at New Zealand airmen are yet to emerge. In conducting a cultural history of this subject, this paper looks more closely at the airmens' behaviour, routines and emotions. To achieve this, it will focus on three main aspects of the New Zealanders' culture: rivalries, leisure and attitudes. Rivalries were commonplace and include sporting contests, which were encouraged as a morale boosting tool, tensions between members of aircrews, and also a bitter rivalry between Englishmen and New Zealanders which was caused by unpopular decision making by a handful of English commanders. Forms of leisure were particularly varied. Tourism was an activity New Zealanders commonly indulged in, as was visiting friends and extended family on leave, and frequenting the local concerts and stage shows. However it became clear that they had not quite grown out of their rebellious teenage selves as unsanctioned activities such as joy riding and pranks emerged. In the final chapter it is shown that the cheerful demeanour the men tried to present was the result of self-censorship to protect their families, and that once they began experiencing horrifying situations this demeanour became much harder to maintain.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1 Rivalries	6
Chapter 2 Leisure	13
Chapter 3 Attitudes	20
Conclusion	29
Bibliography	31

Introduction

On 23 March 1941, New Zealander Gilbert Kimberley wrote a final letter to his girlfriend Phyllis, who he met during his time serving in Bomber Command of the RAF. He had just been posted to a Middle Eastern squadron and was writing to Phyllis to assuage any concerns about their immediate future. He concluded by writing:

In view of this all I think we should cancel any idea of becoming engaged for the present. I hope to return here in time after I have finished my operations out there. We may reconsider it then.

I think it is useless doing a thing like that at the moment as anything may crop up and things unexpected may happen in this far too dangerous business to me.

And then I gave my mother a promise before I left N.Z. never to marry before the war ends. So there is bound to be plenty of time and I will not fail to live up to that promise, as she considers it unfair to a girl to be married whilst a chap is engaged in this dangerous life.

So with my very best wishes and my love I must close
Gilbert.¹

But there would be no fairytale ending to this story. As if he had foreseen the coming events, before he had another chance to write Kimberley was killed when his aircraft crashed into a hillside in Algeria on a cloudy night in early April.² In a final twist, Gilbert's family, convinced their son would have honoured his promise to his mother, refused to believe that he was close enough to Phyllis to consider marriage, and only when this collection of letters emerged in the late 2000's was the truth finally uncovered.

In this snapshot of an RAF Officer's life, some key areas of RAF life can be identified. Firstly, we are presented with the reality that life in the RAF was filled with uncertainty. Uncertainty of what the future would hold, or whether you would even be alive by the next evening. This uncertainty had the potential to derail an airman's life, and we can see one example of why in this situation. But optimism often prevailed, as the men found ways to keep enjoying life.

¹ G. Kimberley, letter to Phyllis, 23 May 1941, Kimberley Family Private Collection

² E. Martyn, *For your Tomorrow: A Record of New Zealanders Who Have Died While Serving With The RNZAF and Allied Air Services Since 1915. Volume One: Fates 1915-1942*, (Volpane Press, Christchurch, 1998), p. 115

This essay will look more closely at the culture of New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command during the Second World War. The cultural historiography of this subject is very limited. To date, Martin Francis has produced a very thorough cultural history of British airmen and their place in British Culture in his book *The Flyer*,³ but cultural histories looking specifically at New Zealand airmen are yet to emerge. Because of this, it will be necessary to draw on First World War scholarship as the cultural historiography of that event is more advanced. The most useful example is J.G. Fuller's work *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*,⁴ which covers similar areas as this essay, particularly with regards to sport and recreation, which allows one to draw comparisons between the military cultures of the two World Wars. Most of the historiography of New Zealanders in the RAF is in the form of general histories or personal narratives. This essay will seek to break that mould by looking at three key areas of RAF life in order to reconstruct the culture these men became a part of. To achieve this, I will use the letters and scrapbooks of three New Zealanders who served in Bomber Command. The first is Murray Carncross. He grew up in Wellington where he attended Wellington College and Victoria University College, and was also a scientific research cadet with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. On being called up to the RAF and embarking for Britain, he was just nineteen years old.⁵ The second is Gilbert Kimberley. He was the son of a vicar and grew up at the top of the South Island, including both Blenheim and Nelson. He attended high school as a boarder at Christ's College and then worked as a shepherd near Kaikoura until joining the Air Force in 1939. John Mercier was from Dunedin and is the only one of the trio to have survived the war. All three served in 75 Squadron of the RAF, which was almost completely staffed by New Zealanders, although Mercier was later head-hunted to serve in a pathfinders squadron.

The biggest problem with these sources is self-censorship, where the men filtered out operational details or their most harrowing tales for fear of either having their letters censored, or to spare their families from too much worry. There is not much that can be done to overcome the difficulties self-censorship present, other than to surmise its presence from the content, or compare the content of one airman's letters to two different recipients. This is possible in the case of Kimberley, as I have

³ M. Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2008)

⁴ J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991)

⁵ E. Martyn, *For your Tomorrow: A Record of New Zealanders Who Have Died While Serving With The RNZAF and Allied Air Services Since 1915. Volume Three: Biographies & Appendices*, (Volpane Press, Christchurch, 2008), p. 121

access to letters he sent both back home, and to his fiancé Phyllis living in England.

Of my three chapters, the first will examine rivalries. Rivalries became dotted all over the RAF landscape. Sporting rivalries, for example, were prolific and actively encouraged by the RAF in order to build morale. Rivalries between nationalities, on the other hand, could descend into blatant racism and threaten to undermine the stability of the unit.

The second chapter will look at recreational activities. This is particularly important when studying New Zealanders in Bomber Command because they had come all the way across the world, for the first time in most cases, meaning that their leisure activities often came in the form of tourism and was less likely to involve going home to family, which contrasts with the experiences of British airmen.

The final chapter will look more closely at a more psychological side of the airmen, and consider such things as their attitudes towards their commanders, and how they justified being part of a force that wreaked unprecedented devastation on another country. The final section of this chapter will examine the phrase which gives this essay its title, 'you wouldn't know there was a war on.' This apparently straightforward phrase is in reality rather complicated, and the variety of meanings that were attached to it mean it can be used to symbolise the culture of New Zealanders in Bomber Command as a whole.

Chapter 1

Rivalries

Rivalries became an integral part of the culture of the RAF in general, not to mention the culture of New Zealanders serving in it. Rivalry manifested itself in various forms, some healthier than others. Some rivalries were deliberately instigated by the RAF and others developed spontaneously. There were three main forms that rivalry took which this section will focus on. The first was sporting rivalry, which in itself took various different forms including competition between nationalities, competition within the squadron, and even contests between the men of the Air Force and the local community. These rivalries were mostly healthy and were initiated by the Air Force in order to maintain morale. Some rivalry also developed between different nationalities. Although there were some examples of this occurring between New Zealanders and Australians, the main example that I have found evidence of was between New Zealanders and Englishmen. For the most part this rivalry was ill natured, but the RAF did capitalise on it. The third form I will examine was between ranks or different roles. More often than not this was a divisive phenomenon that resulted in a breakdown of trust between the different men that were tangled up in it. This section will reconstruct these rivalries in order to display how they became a significant part of the culture of New Zealanders in the Royal Air Force, but will also investigate the extent to which they were encouraged by the Air Force, and how beneficial they were to it.

Sporting rivalries were a commonplace phenomenon for New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command. One form of sporting rivalry was competition between men of different nationalities. For example, in 1943 John Mercier participated in a 'test' match between the Australian 'Woo Loo Moo Loo Kangaroos' and the 'Paekakariki Kiwis'. This match, played on a soccer field using a basketball was narrowly edged out by the Australians eighteen points to twelve.⁶ The accompanying photo of both teams mixed together and smiling is indicative of a well natured contest, as is the cheeky nickname applied to both teams. However, 'international' rivalries were not always so well tempered. The Royal Air Force regularly organised matches between themselves and their sister

⁶ J. Mercier Scrapbook, Air Force Museum Of New Zealand Archive, Archive Number 2010/059.23
This is a scrapbook Mercier collated during his time with the RAF, but it is neither paginated nor dated, hence the lack of such details in subsequent footnotes

organisations from around the commonwealth. Officially the match was called 'Royal Air Force vs The Dominions' although the less politically correct name 'Black Troops vs Pommies' was also used to refer to the fixture.⁷ Mercier reports that this match was not played in particularly good spirits, recounting that 'all the hidden bad feeling came out' and that it was just as well for the peace in the mess hall afterwards that the match finished in a draw.⁸ The bad feeling Mercier referred to is most likely an example of inter-nationality rivalry that will be examined later in this chapter, where New Zealanders developed a dim view of Englishmen.

Sporting encounters between nationalities were not the only examples of where some ill feeling was on display during a sporting encounter. Such phenomenon also occurred during encounters within a squadron. For example, at Christmas 1940 75 Squadron arranged a rugby match where an airmen XV played against an Officers XV. Pilot Officer Gilbert Kimberley, writing before the match, expected a 'free fight' as the airmen sought to dish out some pay back to their superiors. This proved to be the case:

They beat us 5-3 a try each. As expected it was a rough and tumble game and a lot of chaps will be limping or have black eyes tomorrow. We only played for 35 minutes. They called it off then as too many chaps were being laid out. Everyone is blaming the New Zealanders for the trouble but I think the Sergeants and airmen were more responsible. They seem to like picking on officers when they get the chance.⁹

Indeed one of the few sporting rivalries which appears to have had no ill feeling attached to it was between the men of the Air Force, and local community teams. Murray Cancross played in one such match against the local district high school, and wrote that 'we were properly towelled to the tune of 19-9. We were playing against the 1st fifteen of the District High School. Rather undignified for the Royal Air Force to be sloshed by a team of schoolboys. Still we didn't do badly considering that most of us haven't played rugby for for nearly two years.'¹⁰ It is interesting that in all these cases, Rugby is the predominant sport. This is indicative of a trend specific to the RAF that had appeared during the inter-war period, in that rugby was far more popular in the RAF than the other military services.¹¹ RAF men would almost always be allowed to play in important rugby matches, whereas

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 26 December 1940

¹⁰ M. Cancross, Letter to Mother, 27 February 1942, Air Force Museum Of New Zealand Archive, Archive Number 1993/19

¹¹ T. Mason and E. Riede (Eds), *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces 1880-1960*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010), p. 122

those wanting to play other sports would more often be told that personnel could not be spared.¹² Indeed, the RAF could be seen going to almost ridiculous lengths to play rugby no matter their location, such as using the waste sump oil from their aircraft engines to bind the sand together in order to form a pitch at a Middle Eastern squadron.¹³

The sporting rivalries reported by these men are the result of sport becoming a popular tool used by the military both before and during the First World War. Prior to the First World War, military sport had enjoyed prominence. In 1888, the Army Football Association was established which created the Army Cup in the same year, a knock out football competition for military teams. The grand final regularly drew crowds of up to twenty thousand, nearly all soldiers.¹⁴ J.G. Fuller reports that sport was a source of controversy when the First World War broke out, as it was seen as an unnecessary activity that sapped the men of vital energy.¹⁵ However, by the end of the war this had changed significantly. Official competitions were organised and turned into a vital tool for maintaining morale. Each unit had its own team, with each battalion carrying their colours to the match determined to maintain their reputation. For example, inter-brigade baseball matches could attract as much attention as a league match back in Canada.¹⁶ Sport retained its importance in the inter-war period. Not only was much investment made in improving sporting facilities, it was actually used to promote recruitment, with a famous poster emerging bearing the words 'the army isn't all work' alongside a picture of a soldier standing in between a footballer and a cricketer.¹⁷ The reason sport became popular in military circles is that it is by nature competitive. The competition provided by sport provoked a range of responses that the army found beneficial. Supporting your unit's sport team was seen as a focal point for emphasising your loyalty to the regiment, which boosted camaraderie.¹⁸ Competitive sport was also seen as beneficial in preparing men for combat, as it helped to create a fighting spirit, courage and aggressiveness, and also taught the men how to deal with defeat.¹⁹ The RAF vs Dominions match described by Mercier shows that these ideas were still popular in the Second World War, particularly the reference to emphasising your loyalty to your comrades through support of your team. The intra-Squadron match described by Kimberley is

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 21-22

¹⁵ J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies*, p. 87

¹⁶ Ibid pp.87-90

¹⁷ E. Riedi and T. Mason, "Leather" and the fighting spirit: Sport in the British Army in World War 1', *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol. 41 No. 3 (December 2006), 515

¹⁸ T. Mason and E. Riede (Eds), *Sport and the Military*, p. 39

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 90

significant for a different reason. Sport was one of the few occasions when men from different ranks could meet and compete with each other as equals.²⁰ As such, the sports field was one of the few places where airmen could get their own back on Officers who had caused them irritation. Kimberley's account suggests that the airmen took full advantage of the opportunity.

Building on this theme, rivalry between the different ranks or different roles within crews was also common. One example of this was rivalry between navigators and pilots in a crew. The issue here was that pilots often did not trust their navigators and were liable to be a law unto themselves. John Mercier and Murray Carncross, both navigators, experienced this. Carncross had one pilot who refused to trust his navigational skills. But he was able to win the battle with that pilot when their aircraft ended up flying above thick cloud. When the cloud cleared the pilot discovered that they were exactly where Carncross had said they were. Carncross was satisfied that at least that pilot would trust his navigators thereafter.²¹ John Mercier was frustrated that navigators were not trusted to calculate the weather conditions, and instead had to use data from the central met service even though this data was often inaccurate. This was a serious problem because the navigator had to incorporate weather data into his calculations to ascertain their position, so he could easily get lost if his weather data was inaccurate.²² Bruce Lewis also noted mistrust between pilots and their navigators in his book *Aircrew*.²³ Lewis recounts a story from navigator Ben Bennett. He told his pilot that they were somewhere between Beachy Head and Reading. The pilot, unwilling to trust his rookie navigator, descended below the clouds to get a more accurate fix, ignoring Bennett's instructions not to descend below fifteen hundred feet because of high terrain in that area. Upon descending anyway, the pilot was greeted with the sight of Windsor Castle looming out of the clouds, prompting emergency evasive action.²⁴

Tensions between ranks also occurred to levels that could be described as bullying. While in training, Carncross and his colleagues were supposed to wear arm bands that distinguished them from the instructors, which they refused to wear. They quickly discovered that most of the staff at their station had no wings or insignia but were simply office staff. They treated the trainee airmen in a derogatory fashion, believing they were there because they were dumb and expendable. Carncross

²⁰ Ibid, p. 17

²¹ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 20 February 1942

²² J. Mercier Scrapbook

²³ B. Lewis, *Aircrew: The Story of the Men Who Flew the Bombers*, (London, Leo Cooper 1991)

²⁴ Ibid, p. 108

put it in no uncertain terms when he reported that 'because we [were] air crew we [were] just something to be shat upon.'²⁵ Carncross and his colleagues retaliated by referring to these staff as 'dead beats' and 'wingless wonders' and threatened that, when he moved on, a few of the 'dead beats' might become 'dead beaten-ups' if they weren't careful.²⁶ However there are also tales of more respectful interaction between the ranks. Gilbert Kimberley, for example, wrote that it was tradition at his squadron for the officers to wait on the airmen for Christmas dinner: 'An old tradition here in the forces is that on Christmas day the officers and Sergeants wait on the men at their Christmas dinner. So before our dinner we were in the airmens' mess acting as waiters and so on.'²⁷

Rivalries between New Zealanders and Englishmen are a common theme in the correspondence from several New Zealand servicemen, although the reasons behind them are not necessarily similar. Gilbert Kimberley encountered one situation which was liable to promote antipathy between nationalities. The problem was that British recruits appeared to be receiving favouritism:

It is amazing how chaps get commissions here and it is no wonder that R.A.F. men and men from overseas don't mix too well. It is alright among pilots but we discovered yesterday a whole crowd of chaps came in as air gunners, have not commenced training yet and have commissions. Our air gunners who have already had 2 months came over here still as L.A.C.'s and some went up to Sergeants on arrival.²⁸

Some of this might be explained using evidence provided by Bruce Lewis. Lewis explains that men who completed a course with the Manchester University Air Squadron as a civilian were entitled to skip some of the Royal Air Force's basic training and would get a quick promotion to the rank of Flight Sergeant.²⁹ But this cannot fully account for the situation that riled Kimberley. For instance, Flight Sergeants were still non commissioned officers. This apparent favouritism did little to endear the British based recruits to their New Zealand counterparts.

Murray Carncross also noted this unhealthy rivalry. He referred to the occasion when he was posted to an operational unit and had to report to his new commanding officer. Some of his friends had been posted to a different section in that squadron and therefore reported to a different commanding officer.

²⁵ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 12 February 1942

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 26 December 1940

²⁸ G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 23 July 1940

²⁹ B. Lewis, *Aircrew: The Story of the Men Who Flew the Bombers*, p. 102

'The chap who was in B section reported to his C.O, a New Zealander, and within half a minute he was out with a week's leave. The C.O. of D Section, and Englishman, kept us waiting for 2 ½ hours and then didn't see us. We were told to report back again in the morning. Just a bad mannered, ignorant "Pommie" and this has decided me that there will be no Englishman in my crew if I can help it.¹³⁰

Ironically, within a month Carncross ended up fighting to have an Englishman reinstated in his crew. Their English wireless operator was removed by their Commanding Officer who wanted to create an all New Zealand crew. The decision was not welcomed by Carncross who had developed a strong working relationship with the Englishman, who he described as a 'damn good chap', although he did add 'unlike most Englishmen'.³¹ Nevertheless, the point stands that the actions of a few English commanding officers adversely affected the perception New Zealand airmen had of Englishmen in general. The surprise Carncross felt on discovering that an English wireless operator was an amicable fellow emphasises the point. However, some good did potentially come out of this rivalry as Bomber Command found a way to use it in order to improve efficiency. Gilbert Kimberley reported that they subtly leaked statistics around the squadrons in order to encourage competition. 75 Squadron was said to have the lowest casualty rate out of all the squadrons flying Wellington bombers, as well as the most flying hours and the best fuel economy. In Kimberley's own words, 'So we have a name to keep up and believe me these other squadrons don't like it and are trying hard to beat us down. But they will have to go for it.'³² This may seem as much like inter-squadron rivalry as a rivalry between nationalities. But it is important to remember that out of the RAF squadrons equipped with Wellingtons, 75 Squadron was the only 'New Zealand' squadron, and the vast majority of them were British.³³ It is therefore likely that this developed into a 'New Zealand against the rest' situation where the New Zealanders were determined to prove their worth against men of other nations.

This unhealthy rivalry between nationalities is interesting because it seems to confirm some of the attitudes Jock Philips noticed with regards to British Officers. He suggests that some of the reasons behind New Zealand men being suspicious of British leaders are that they were seen as 'artificial' leaders who led from behind, rather than showing proper fortitude, mucking in and leading from the

³⁰ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 6 April 1942

³¹ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 29 April 1942

³² G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 26 December 1941

³³ C. Jefford, *RAF Squadrons: A comprehensive Record of the Movement and Equipment of all RAF Squadrons and their Antecedents since 1912*, (Airlife Publishing, Shrewsbury, 1988), p. 140

front.³⁴ The sense among New Zealanders that British officers were artificial and unwilling to get their hands dirty, combined with the prevailing sense that New Zealanders were dependable, courageous men offers a potential explanation for the unhealthy rivalry that established itself between New Zealand and English airmen.

Conclusion

Rivalries became a significant factor in the culture of New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command. Rivalries within sport are the clearest examples of this, reflecting the growing influence sport had had in the military services since the late nineteenth Century. Sporting rivalries were encouraged because they enhanced comradeship, loyalty to your unit and were seen to promote a fighting spirit. John Mercier's experience with the RAF vs Dominions rugby match suggests this spirit was alive and well in the RAF at the time. Sporting rivalries were also significant in that they represented one of the few times that men of differing ranks could meet and compete as equals. But rivalries of other varieties were less beneficial. Tensions between nationalities were very evident. It appears that they were sparked by different leadership styles evinced by English Commanding Officers when compared to New Zealand ones. This led to the perception that Englishmen were arrogant and unfairly favoured their countrymen. The evidence suggests that this perception was unfair and probably an overreaction to the actions of a small group of English Officers, but the fact remains that it sparked a bitter rivalry between New Zealanders and Englishmen. The rivalry between pilots and navigators was the most dangerous, as it sometimes led pilots to conduct unsafe manoeuvres. Navigators felt belittled both by the Bomber Command hierarchy and by pilots. The former made policy decisions that made it harder for navigators to do their job, while distrust of navigators was rife amongst the latter group. This rivalry only seemed to calm down once individual navigators had proved their worth to individual pilots, making it a tedious ordeal.

³⁴ J. Phillips, *A Man's Country*, (Penguin, Auckland, 1996), p. 204

Chapter 2

Leisure

With such a large force consisting predominantly of energetic young men, who would have plenty of time off duty due to Bomber Command both preferring night time operations and being restricted by weather conditions, it was natural that recreation would become a substantial part of an airman's life. This could range from antics performed on camp, to officially organised balls and concerts. When reading the letters of those who experienced RAF life at the time, one gets the impression that military operations occasionally threatened to break out and get in the way of the leisurely life led by the airmen. It seems likely that this impression is partly the result of the men using self-censorship to tone down the horrific aspects of their experiences, which will be looked at in the next chapter. Nevertheless, the fact remains that leisure formed a big part of the Bomber Command culture. This will be the focus of this chapter. Leisure activities took many different forms. I will therefore group them into three categories in order to provide a more succinct overview. The first will be tourism. Considering that for many of the young New Zealanders involved in the RAF this was their first experience of travelling overseas, the fact that tourism became intertwined with their RAF experience is hardly cause for surprise. Tourism can be identified at all stages of the journey, from stopovers on pacific islands on the voyage out, to making a visit to Big Ben and Buckingham Palace. The second category will be time spent on leave. This could overlap significantly with tourism, so to differentiate between the two I will discuss tourism in terms of when an airman went on leave in order to visit an exotic location, landmark or other place of interest. This does not rob leave of its importance as a category because there are many more examples of the significance of time spent on leave, such as meeting relatives, going to the theatre and socialising with fellow countrymen. The final category will be recreation conducted while in camp. This could include officially organised balls, or unsanctioned activities like joy riding.

Examples of tourism are spread throughout the letters that New Zealanders sent back home. Murray Carncross first encountered it when his ship stopped in Suva, allowing them three and a half hours leave to perambulate over the city. Despite being a short stop, it had a profound impact on Carncross who filled up eleven pages writing about the occasion. He reported feeling uncomfortable

being the only white person in streets full of curious 'natives' and was less than impressed by what he perceived to be rife laziness: 'It's amazing the laziness that exists in Suva. Honestly now, I don't believe one person in a hundred does honest work for a living.'³⁵ But he was impressed by the cheerful greetings he received from the locals: 'Every second native would say “bulla” and you would respond “bulla”'.³⁶ Interestingly this bares close similarities to Gilbert Kimberley's experience when he arrived for final training in Methil, Scotland, where the airmen were practically treated like celebrities by the local 'young fry' who bounded up eager to collect their autographs. This combined with the fancy hotel meal and sightseeing trips they were given led him to the conclusion that 'they certainly didn't live up to the Scottish reputation.'³⁷

Tourism also extended into Britain. Murray Carncross revelled in the opportunity to look around London, describing for example the wonders of the London Underground in great detail right down to the automatic ticket machines that could supply the correct change regardless of what coin was used to pay for the fare. He produced a four point explanation of why it was his preferred form of transport:

1. Because it was the only place I couldn't get lost in
2. It was cheap (far cheaper than taxis)
3. Even at night time, the underground is well lit up
4. It is fast³⁸

He also described visiting the Tower of London, which he nicknamed 'Bloodytower', including the rooms where Henry VIII's wives were kept, although he went on to admit that 'I'm not a hell of an interested in this historical stuff (sic.)'.³⁹ Kimberley's extensive list of places of interest that he had visited in London, including Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, the Parliament buildings and the Horse Guards Parade, makes his letter appear more like someone writing home from their proverbial 'overseas experience' than from a war.⁴⁰ It was a two way process, however, with Kimberley also promoting his home country to his fiancé, for example:

So we have seen the famous Welsh mountains. There are one or two small ones but they are only hills to us.

Excuse me if I am a little sarcastic. I don't wish to make you believe I am running down

³⁵ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 30 May 1941

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ G. Kimberley, letter to Mother, 23 July 1940

³⁸ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 19 January 1942

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ G. Kimberley, letter to Mother, 23 July 1940

this country but the Welsh hills are nothing comparable with our mountains even in height, beauty or ruggedness.⁴¹

This is a theme that was present throughout many of his letters to Phyllis, and even without her responses it seems a safe assumption that she was also extolling the wonders of her home country.

The idea of soldiers as tourists has been examined in scholarship, by historians such as Richard White.⁴² Discussing why tourism was prevalent amongst troops, particularly those of Australian or New Zealand origins, White argues that this is because of the sheer distance those men had to cover to get to the European theatre. British and French troops were fighting the war on their own doorstep, and Americans barely had time to acclimatise to find their sea legs before arriving in Europe without any stopovers. But Australians and New Zealanders faced a month long voyage. While at sea, they played games and enjoyed stopovers at exotic locations much like people would do when embarking on a normal holiday. This activity created a touristy atmosphere.⁴³ This theory is supported by the evidence examined previously. Both Carncross and Kimberley experienced various situations during their voyage which lent themselves to the creation of a touristy atmosphere, with both referring to stopovers at exotic locations, and Carncross describing organised games they played on deck.⁴⁴

However, White's argument falls down in other areas. He argues that tourism was particularly strong amongst Australians and New Zealanders because, except under extraordinary circumstances, they could not return home to friends and family during leave. This meant that they became tourists as soon as they went on leave.⁴⁵ The problem with this concept is that it oversimplifies the situation, and forgets that the commonwealth colonies retained strong links with Britain, meaning it would be unsurprising for the men to have family ties there. Leave performed a social function, allowing the men to remain integrated with society and family alike. It is common to see tales of men going on leave in order to visit relatives, or even visiting locations of significance to their family history. Murray Carncross is a good example of this. He regularly visited Cambridge both in order to visit his mother's cousin, and also because he wanted to visit the place where his grandfather grew up. He reported visiting the river where his grandfather learnt to

⁴¹ G. Kimberley, letter to Phyllis, 21 September 1940

⁴² R. White, 'The Soldier as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War' in *War and Society*, Vol.5 No. 1 (May 1987) 63-78

⁴³ *Ibid*, 67

⁴⁴ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 30 May 1941

⁴⁵ R. White, 'The Soldier as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War', 67

swim, although he was rather disappointed at the dam obviously built for that purpose, saying that it only 'misses being a creek by about two feet.'⁴⁶ Gilbert Kimberley made similar use of leave, paying a visit to his aunt and cousin in Salisbury.⁴⁷ Kimberley also had a fiancé living in Britain who he regularly corresponded with and visited while on leave, one letter for example sees him planning a trip to visit her in London when he is next on leave in 'a fortnight's time.'⁴⁸ So while White is correct in concluding that tourism was a significant part of the experience of going to war, it is an oversimplification to imply that tourism was the sole activity engaged in while on leave.

Time spent on leave constituted a significant part of an airman's recreation time. Possibly the activity which received the most attention in the airmen's correspondence was attendance of live stage shows of various descriptions. Indeed, this appears to have been a significant activity while training in New Zealand too. Kimberley described how, when he was training at Wigram in Christchurch, a facility in town was provided for men from the forces to go for entertainment, including meals and dances. The Old Girls Associations of Christchurch's various schools took it in turns to provide entertainment there every week.⁴⁹ One wonders how this entertainment would have compared with John Mercier's experience when he ended up going to a show headlined by Phyllis Dixley, 'England's most famous striptease artist'.⁵⁰ Mercier collected various programs for productions including *Laugh Town Laugh*, and *The Student Prince*.⁵¹ Murray Carncross also frequented stage shows, including one headlined by the hugely popular comedy duo Flanagan and Allen, during which he reported that Frances Day, another comedian performing, was so funny that even she struggled to get some of her lines out.⁵² Sometimes leave descended into a farce. Murray Carncross discovered this when a group of his friends, having recently received a set of inoculations, decided to descend upon the local hospital in order to try and get some extra sick leave because of their swollen arms. The rort backfired spectacularly when the doctors, sensing mischief, prescribed them with no.9 pills, which turned out to be powerful laxatives.⁵³

Entertainment while on camp was equally varied and included both officially organised functions, and more spontaneous activity. Mercier, Carncross and Kimberley all make reasonably frequent

⁴⁶ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 14 March 1942

⁴⁷ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, Undated

⁴⁸ G. Kimberley, letter to Phyllis, 1 September 1940

⁴⁹ G. Kimberley, letter to Mother, 17 February 1940

⁵⁰ J. Mercier Scrapbook

⁵¹ J. Mercier Scrapbook

⁵² M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 19 January 1942

⁵³ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 12 June 1942

mention of events organised by the Air Force to entertain the men. Mercier, for example, kept in his scrapbook an invitation to the Commanding Officers and Officers of his station to an evening of 'cocktails and dancing', which he annotated with the words 'boy, what a do!' and described the menu as including lobster, jellies, salmon and trifles, a lush meal indeed for war time. Kimberley wrote that an amazing number of shows were working their way around the various camps, and testified to their high quality. Indeed, according to him the shows served a dual purpose. While they entertained the men, they also provided employment for the actors and musicians who had been deprived of their places of employment by damage done during the Blitz, meaning that it was common for famous actors to be part of the cast. At one show Joyce Phillips, who was evidently well known at the time, impressed the audience so much that they encored her five times.⁵⁴ Kimberley also reported that most of these shows were only available to men of certain ranks, which made it a refreshing change when the events organised for Christmas time were opened to everyone regardless of rank.⁵⁵ Murray Carncross adds to the picture of entertainment on camp with the report that picture shows were screened every night, along with regular variety shows and dances. He also says that tennis courts were provided 'right outside the mess'.⁵⁶ Of course, it was only natural that less official means of entertainment would surface. Carncross provides the most deviant examples of this. One 'do' he and his friends held was raucous enough to require them to purchase a replacement chandelier.⁵⁷ But the most dramatic example of such entertainment was conducted by one of his friends who was being posted to another squadron and decided to put on a show when he flew out. The end result was a daring piece of joy riding: 'The plane came tearing across the drome with its belly scraping the grass all the way. He came roaring straight towards us and pulled the stick at the last minute and cleared the offices by inches... It was only good luck not good judgement that prevented a crash.' Carncross was convinced that even the pilot must have been shaken by how close the stunt came to disaster.⁵⁸

It is unsurprising that live shows of varying forms were a dominant form of entertainment for the airmen. The military had discovered the potential for these shows to relieve stress and boost morale decades before the Second World War. During the First World War they were extremely common even near the front line. One soldier active in 1917 found when he was on rest from the trenches

⁵⁴ G. Kimberley, letter to Mother, 5 November 1940

⁵⁵ G. Kimberley, letter to Mother, 26 December 1940

⁵⁶ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 14 March 1942

⁵⁷ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 6 April 1942

⁵⁸ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 10 May 1942

that there were four large concert halls within five minutes walk of his camp, each hosting concert parties every night.⁵⁹ It is likely that the aim of these shows was as much to relieve the stress of military life as to satisfy the men's craving for some degree of normality.⁶⁰ Indeed, the same could be said for much of the recreational activities engaged in by the men. The fact that these shows often offered a way for people to enjoy watching their favourite actors or musicians, most of whom probably rose to prominence before the war, doubtless strengthened the sensation of experiencing normality. Music played a particularly key role in establishing this sense of normality and often led to reminiscence about more prosperous times. Carncross wrote about being able to listen to some of his favourite old music again once an automatic gramophone had been supplied for their mess⁶¹, while Kimberley wrote of the delight at being able to hear some of the music that he had been deprived of, since his gramophone at home had broken, on the 'wireless'.⁶² Martin Francis came to a similar conclusion, writing that the messes were often dominated by a wireless set with the volume set very high, which was tuned into a station providing 'big band music and popular ballads'.⁶³ Even unsanctioned activities, such as the low flying stunt Carncross witnessed or his attempt to trick the Canadian hospital into excusing him from work, is evidence that some aspects of the men's previous lifestyles were retained. Instinct suggests that such pranks would have been commonplace at school, which most of the airmen were fresh out of. Martin Francis agrees. Francis noted that the behaviour of RAF men often drew on the traditions of schoolboy pranks and 'dares' that the men developed at school, especially English public and grammar schools.⁶⁴ Francis also argues that these activities strengthened unit camaraderie while also offering a form of stress relief.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Leisure came in various forms for New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command. Tourism was one of the central themes of their leisure activities. Both on the journey to Britain, when they often made stops to explore exotic islands, and upon arrival in Britain, where the men made a pilgrimage to the usual tourist destinations such as Buckingham Palace and Big Ben. But while on leave, the men were not mere tourists. Leave also played a more social function, allowing the men to visit

⁵⁹ A. Russel, *With the Machine Gun Corps* (London, 1923), p135, quoted in J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 97

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.103

⁶¹ M. Carncross, letter to Mother, 27 February 1942

⁶² G. Kimberley, letter to Mother, 5 November 1940

⁶³ M. Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945*, p. 155

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 34

⁶⁵ Ibid

extended family or enjoy a production with friends. Indeed, productions of various kinds including comedy shows and concerts were one of the key forms of recreation the men indulged in. But the men also sought further relief through unsanctioned forms of entertainment, which often resembled the type of rebellious behaviour they would have been familiar with at school including pranks and dares. This form of entertainment could lead the men to conduct daring stunts, such as the low flying stunt witnessed by Murray Carncross.

Chapter 3

Attitudes

While this dissertation has so far examined aspects of the airmen's culture that mostly involved their activities, it is now time to turn our attention to the men's psychological lives. This chapter will seek to answer questions about what the men thought about the experience that they were immersed in, and their attitudes towards the war itself. Specifically, this chapter will seek to look at three main areas. The first area considered will be the men's attitude to their involvement in the war. The men tended to adopt a fairly jovial approach to the war, giving off the appearance that they were having the time of their lives. However, this attitude often became strained as the war progressed and they were exposed to increasingly tense circumstances. The second section will look more closely at the military aspect, and ask how the men felt about the way the military was conducting affairs. In some cases, the men were in complete accord with military tactics, in others their criticism of the military command was severe. The third is the section which gives this dissertation its title, the phrase "you wouldn't know there was a war on." This phrase is used, either explicitly or by implication, throughout the correspondence of all three men I have researched. It is significant because the various contexts it is used in and the different meanings it can carry mean this one phrase can be used to symbolise so many of the different attitudes and experiences the men had. These ranged from the admiration of the staunch attempts by locals to carry on their lives as normal in defiance of the conflict, to frustration at what some took to be a slack attitude that undermined the effort others were putting into winning the war.

One of the things that immediately comes across when reading the sources left behind by all three men I have studied is the light hearted attitude that, on the face of it at least, they had towards their involvement in the war. Gilbert Kimberley, for example spoke of his excitement at being able to fly such extraordinary machines. Writing to his fiancé just before he joined his first active squadron, he wrote 'you have no idea how keen and eager we are to be in the air once more. It annoys us to see planes taking off and landing and to realise we have to wait a few more days.'⁶⁶ He continued, 'I wanted to fly something big and I've got it, twice the size I expected to.'⁶⁷ He also spoke of how he

⁶⁶ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, 14 August 1940

⁶⁷ Ibid

enjoyed being part of his squadron, saying 'they are certainly a happy go lucky crowd here which suits me.'⁶⁸ Murray Carncross reported similar sentiments to his mother, saying 'let me impress upon you once more that my year in the Air Force has been the greatest of my life and I've never regretted joining for one instant... I still enjoy the life immensely and I'm far happier than I was working in "civvie" life.'⁶⁹ In his previous letter, Carncross had also reported that he was 'thoroughly convinced' that he had joined the best of the services and that he had 'had a grand time' to that point.⁷⁰ John Mercier was slightly less explicit in sharing such sentiments, but dropped several hints nevertheless that he shared a similar opinion. Maybe the best example of this was when he put a photo of himself in the company of two ladies in his scrapbook alongside a ticket to an Air Force dance, beneath which he wrote the caption 'Oh boy did we like Edmonton!'⁷¹

Interestingly, these outpourings of excitement and enjoyment of the life they were now experiencing all came before each man was flying missions. Once they had experienced a few months of missions over Germany, their stance became less jovial. Mercier suddenly became more serious while on leave in London in July 1944 after only narrowly avoiding being the victim of a German V1 rocket, which exploded in a building nearby. This coincided with him beginning to fly missions deep into Germany, as opposed to the comparatively short and less risky missions he had been flying into occupied France until that point. His words at the time were 'we'd been playing at war, now it suddenly became rather serious.'⁷² For Kimberley, things became rather more serious during October of 1940. That month, two things happened. First, his fiancé got caught up in the blitz and wrote to him describing her terrifying ordeal. Her letter is now lost, but whatever it said clearly had a profound effect on Kimberley who responded:

'I got quite a fright when I read that your Tuesday night was worse than Monday. I began picturing you in some hospital writing your letter and so hurriedly read that awful bit to reassure myself that you were O.K. It must be a horrible place at night in London, and I do hope that you will now live in peace and quietness and escape the horrors of the Nazis.'⁷³

In the same letter, Kimberley also reported that he was in mourning after one of his best friends was killed when his plane crashed at sea. However, he did not dwell on this for long and placed much

⁶⁸ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, 6 October 1940

⁶⁹ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 30 March 1942

⁷⁰ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 14 March 1942

⁷¹ J. Mercier Scrapbook

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, Undated

greater emphasis on trying to calm down his parents. He said 'I think they think it is far worse than it is... In fact they seem quite worried about me, so I will have to try and send some cheerful letters trying to cut down the bad parts.'⁷⁴ He had another bout of seriousness after being hit in the leg by shrapnel from an anti-aircraft turret while on a mission over Berlin. Around the same time as he was injured, the Air Force had placed restrictions on leave in anticipation of circumstances which could necessitate recalling men from leave, resulting in complaints from various girlfriends. Kimberley's blunt response was 'I can see that people don't really realise how serious this war is and it is amazing how chaps get letters from their girl friends and relations complaining of how stupid it is to place restrictions on a chaps leave.'⁷⁵ He voiced further concerns in that letter, reporting 'to ordinary people this life sounds easy and thrilling, but it is dangerous and as I found out hard tiring work which chaps never get any thanks for but just a lot of abuse especially from intelligence men.'⁷⁶ The fact that this was the last letter he ever wrote before his crash adds to the poignancy of his frustrations. The situation is a little different for Carncross because once he finished his training and was posted to 75 Squadron, he only had a couple of months before being killed in action, so he had less opportunity to encounter such sobering experiences. He did have one situation where an acquaintance of his was reported missing, but held up hope that he would turn up. But in the same letter, he again repeated to his mother that 'I've never regretted joining. It has been the greatest experience of my life.'⁷⁷ Even so, before he was posted to an active squadron, he dropped hints that he was frustrated at the way some people failed to take their duty seriously. For example he wrote 'it makes me mad to read about men (so called) bribing their way out of service... It's the same old story, "one law for the rich and another for the poor." Believe you me, when I come home the real fight will just be starting.' So even if he tended to present an image of youthful exuberance, it is clear that he also harboured a strong sense of duty. It is also clear that the illusion of war being a fun, enjoyable experience became significantly harder to maintain once the men graduated to flying real missions into Germany.

Looking more specifically at the attitudes of the men towards military tactics, more tension emerges. Murray Carncross was undoubtedly the most critical of the decision making of his superiors, although all three certainly had something to say on the matter. Carncross offered a scathing critique of his superiors. For example, he took exception to his commanding officer who

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, 23 March 1941

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 7 July 1942

suggested that some of the officers were too friendly with their sergeants, to which he responded 'I can see myself being reduced to the ranks if they ever come at me with that tripe.'⁷⁸ As officers and sergeants had to fly together as crews and were effectively responsible for each others lives, Carncross felt that developing a strong bond between them was highly beneficial for them in order to function well as a crew which explains his displeasure.

In this instance, Carncross's experience draws interesting parallels with that of junior officers from the First World War. During that conflict, junior officers serving in the army were instructed to 'keep a certain emotional distance.'⁷⁹ The intention of such an instruction was to ensure the manliness of the officer remained intact, partially so that his ability to enforce discipline would not be compromised.⁸⁰ But the fact that Carncross found himself confronted with similar instruction in the Second World War is a point of interest. It conflicts with Martin Francis's argument that the Air Force, which naturally was the newest of the military services due to the comparatively recent arrival of aeroplanes, had developed its own 'distinct culture and ethos' in which 'flyers saw themselves as a completely new class of warriors.'⁸¹ The similarities between the instructions Carncross was given and those given to First World War army officers shows that the culture of the Air Force during the Second World War was not completely distinct, and contained some traditions established by the army.

Carncross also had even more stinging remarks to make about those further up the chain of command. He made a sustained effort to praise the Russian and Chinese forces who he believed were doing more than their fair share in their struggles against the German forces. At one stage he went as far as to write 'I only wish that Britain would borrow Russian and Chinese generals instead of employing old stooges who are still fighting the last war.'⁸² This complaint carried two meanings. He believed that the military commanders still undervalued the significance of utilising air power to the detriment of those on the front lines:

It sickens me to hear the same heart rending cry from our men and allies "no air support." Will the D – H – 's (sic) in control ever learn! God, if only they could be made to go through the campaigns they plan instead of sitting on their bums in a nice arm

⁷⁸ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 29 April 1942

⁷⁹ M. Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, (Manchester University Press, New York, 2009) p. 165

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ M. Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945*, p. 14

⁸² M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 12 February 1942

chair smoking a big fat cigar.⁸³

He also felt that Britain's strategy was too passive, later complaining that 'I only wish to hell we could attack instead of just sitting on our behinds with everything toppling around us.'⁸⁴ Gilbert Kimberley made a similar remark to his fiancé. Talking about German bombing raids on London, he wrote 'it is a wonder our chaps don't retaliate. I think the Nazis can thank their lucky stars they are fighting against a far more civilized and considerate race of people than themselves.'⁸⁵ It appears that the ethical concerns related to participating in bombing raids were given little thought by the crews. Kimberley offered a slightly naïve justification, comforting his fiancé about the bombing of London with the assurance that 'if you do hear many bombs dropping you can rest assured that we are dropping them with double vengeance over Germany, but not on women and children, on hospitals and churches etc.'⁸⁶ To his parents, he was far more explicit: 'Of course, we take a particular delight in dropping bombs on their aerodromes and giving them a good taste of machine guns.'⁸⁷ John Mercier made similar remarks about the raids he participated in, for example:

Date: 18/9/44

Target: Bremen

Summary: A really wizard prang. One of, if not the most successful prang I ever saw.

When we left, the city was a mess of flames – a lovely sight. A beautiful clear night, bags of flak, but no fighters. Oh she was a lovely do.⁸⁸

It seems inevitable that some of these remarks were bravado. Writing retrospectively in response to some questions sent to him by a schoolboy, Mercier spoke of how frightening the missions were, saying that the missions were very frightening and 'no fun at all.'⁸⁹

The comments made by both Kimberley and Mercier highlight one of the difficulties of using these sources to explore the genuine attitudes of the men. As Paul Fussell put it, the letters of servicemen are of dubious reliability because they 'are composed largely to sustain the morale of the folks at home, to hint as little as possible to the real, worrisome circumstance of the writer.'⁹⁰ There is undoubtedly some validity to this statement. Kimberley, in reporting his intentions to send home a

⁸³ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 10 May 1942

⁸⁴ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 14 March 1942

⁸⁵ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, Undated

⁸⁶ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, 21 September 1940

⁸⁷ G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 5 November 1940

⁸⁸ J. Mercier Scrapbook

⁸⁹ J. Mercier, Letter to Francois, Undated

⁹⁰ P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989), p. 145

less gloomy version of events, and Mercier, in his retrospective acknowledgement that he found the ordeal terrifying, freely admit that their correspondence at the time cannot be relied on to provide a completely accurate picture of their attitudes. But this does not spell disaster for historians. It shows that the deliberate act of overemphasising positive aspects of their experiences in order to calm the nerves of those at home, and maybe even themselves, was endemic within the culture of the airmen. This is a significant point in its own right.

The phrase 'you wouldn't know there was a war on,' or derivatives of it, is used repeatedly throughout the sources used in my research. It might seem innocuous, but the contexts in which it is used and the different meanings it can carry means it represents a dualism that can go some way to explaining the overall culture of New Zealanders serving in the Royal Air Force. There were three main contexts in which it could be used. The first was in situations where the airmen were praising the resilience of the local population for their determination to carry on life as normal. A prime example of this is the following extract from one of Gilbert Kimberley's letters:

You hear nothing of war here and except for sentries and men in uniform you would not know there was a war on. Everyone carries on with their business calmly and think there is nothing on. Everyone carries gas masks around. People seem to read of air raids in the papers and that is all there is to it; they seem to take it as all in the days work. We see dozens of women in uniform. The womens [sic] auxiliary Air Force look very neat and smart in their uniforms and so do the army girls.⁹¹

In this case the phrase is used to praise the resilient spirit of the locals he had encountered, but seems out of place because seeing everyone carrying gas masks and reading of the latest air raids is an utterly extraordinary situation that could only ever happen while there was a war on.

The second context in which the phrase could be used was in situations where the airmen were involved in some sort of escapism, a deliberate attempt to maintain some facets of civilian life in order to temporarily forget about the stress of the war. Sometimes this version overlapped with the first context, such as at Christmas when airmen and townsfolk alike united to try and uphold a festive spirit. For example, Kimberley described the scene he found in Cambridge on Christmas eve of 1940:

We were in Cambridge on Christmas eve and it was great to see the crowds of shoppers

⁹¹ G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 23 July 1940

and the town decorated. Hard to think there is a war on. Just as good as N.Z. But of course the black out and cold air makes things much quieter. We went to a very enjoyable dance there. So you see we really lead quite a peaceful life except on the nights we do have to go and pour out our load of fire and destruction.⁹²

Similarly, he used the phrase when writing to his fiancé to describe the sensation he experienced while boating on the Thames:

We enjoy our afternoons down on the Thames and I wish you were there, we have such a lot of fun. We got two canoes last Sunday, the first time we went... My seat would persist in moving and I would get a horrible board digging in my back. During my very careful efforts to rectify it we tipped much to everyone on the river's amusement... But still it is all in the fun and we have a great time. We have been down nearly every afternoon this week and believe me it is great. We seem to forget there is a war on whilst there and gives us time to forget our flying work, which is also good.⁹³

Carncross also used a phrase of similar meaning while in London. He was in London in between finishing his training in Canada, and being posted to another training unit in Britain. During his long eighteen page letter he wrote to his mother during this period, he wrote at length of the fun he had had journeying round the tourist hot spots. Near the end, he wrote 'one night at the pictures in Bournemouth we had an air raid warning but ¼ of an hour later the "all clear" was sounded and this was as near as I've been yet to seeing any sign of the war.'⁹⁴

In this context, the phrase has a deeper significance. In each case, it is again somewhat nonsensical. When Kimberley used it to describe the Christmas festivities, he had just flown flying eight missions in twelve days. Carncross's use of the phrase came in the same letter that he described bomb damage he had seen in London's East End, indeed the scene at the cinema came after he had witnessed this carnage. This suggests that the phrase was less about describing a perceived reality, as an identification of an inner yearning for normality. In particular, it suggests that the work they were engaged in was causing them more distress than their communications let on, and that they were willing to cling to any activity that offered them a momentary escape from the war and a reminder of what normal peacetime life felt like. This is especially true of Kimberley's comments about boating on the Thames. Barely more than a month before, in August 1940, as covered

⁹² G. Kimberley, Letter to Mother, 26 December 1940

⁹³ G. Kimberley, Letter to Phyllis, 8 September 1940

⁹⁴ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 19 January 1942

previously in this chapter, he had told of his excitement about being able to fly such magnificent aircraft. Yet by September, after only flying a handful of missions, he was already describing the relief he felt when he was able to take a break from flying and forget the war was on. This suggests that he had failed to fully grasp the seriousness of the war before entering active service. Indeed, it is ironic that he complained about civilians not fully grasping the seriousness of the war when his own expectations of how fun flying would be points towards a similar level of naivety.

The third context that the phrase was used is exhibited by Murray Carncross, who used it to slate the slack approach he believed the country was taking to the war. One of the hottest topics he ripped into was that of petrol usage. Carncross was furious at the way the locals were using petrol 'like water'⁹⁵, and said that he could not clear his conscience after using petrol to be taken on a joy ride round the country with a friend in their car. This was because the petrol arrived in Britain in what Carncross described as 'six knot convoys' which were always at risk of being attacked by the Germans.⁹⁶ As Carncross said,

'A seaman in one of those tankers has one of the most dangerous and nerve wracking jobs of the war and I wouldn't take his job for quids. These men are giving their lives and getting no recognition for it, but there are these swine selfish enough to waste the results of the men's efforts. If you could see London today you wouldn't think there is a war on. There are literally thousands of taxis... still doing a roaring trade.'⁹⁷

In this scenario, it requires no explanation that our phrase has been used to voice considerable dissatisfaction with the efforts of the local population. When used in this third context, the meaning of the phrase directly opposes the first context we explored. Interestingly, the low flying stunt Carncross witnessed which was described in the previous chapter also represents an unnecessary use of petrol, but the offence did not draw Carncross's ire. This suggests that it was not the wasting of vital resources that upset Carncross. Instead, his complaint was against what he perceived to be a lack of respect some people showed towards those on the proverbial front line, something a fellow RAF pilot could hardly be accused of.

It is now an appropriate time to revisit duality of the the phrase 'you wouldn't know there was a war on'. There is something inherently bizarre about how the men both complimented some people for being able to maintain the illusion that there was not a war on, while complaining about others for

⁹⁵ M. Carncross, Letter to Mother, 21 May 1942

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Ibid

behaving as if there was not a war on, even using the same phrase in both circumstances. Taken at face value, it appears that the phrase is simply a stock cliché with three stand alone meanings. But this would not be a satisfactory conclusion, because all three meanings can be linked together. The first meaning is one of respect for those doing their best to carry on despite the trying circumstances. The second acknowledges that the war was a tiresome and stressful experience, and that some recreation and attempts to forget about the seriousness of the war were important. The third meaning shows that a spirit of togetherness was important to the men, hence the need to criticise anyone perceived to be failing to contribute to the war effort. Combined, these meanings speak of a culture that placed much importance on recreation and relaxation, but also respected hard work and emphasised the need to work together to win the war so everyone could get back to their normal lives. In this way, the phrase 'you wouldn't know there was a war on' is a powerful symbol of the culture of New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command.

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed that the war was not all fun and games for the New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command, even though their correspondence makes it appear that it was. The situation was much more complex. They often believed that those in charge were incompetent, or that Bomber Command's tactics were too passive. It is also clear that being involved in dangerous missions had a profound effect on their outlook. While they did their best to maintain the illusion that they were having the time of their lives, this became much more difficult to sustain once they began experiencing the darker side of war, be it as a result of friends being killed or experiencing traumatic situations first hand. Even so, they did their best to keep this stress to themselves in order to protect their families from getting too worried. But the phrase 'you wouldn't know there was a war on' undoubtedly offers the most in-depth insight into the men's attitudes, as the three meanings it can carry each highlight something the men perceived to be a vital part of winning the war.

Conclusion

Martin Francis writes that in the final summer before the Second World War broke out, a young RAF fighter pilot called Tony Bartley still possessed enough free time to do a number of things including learning to play golf, going into Edinburgh every Saturday for drinks, fly a 'decidedly cumbersome Oxford trainer' under a railway bridge in a daring stunt, and fall in love with a local lass.⁹⁸ As we have seen in this paper, New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command during the Second World War often had a similarly laid back experience. The wonders of exploring a new country for the first time and the wide array of recreational activities on offer filled the men's correspondence and speaks of an organisation that had developed a relaxed culture. There can be little doubt that much of the time these men had while serving with the RAF was spent fun seeking and visiting the tourist hot spots. The intense rivalries the men found themselves a part of only adds to the perception that these men were less concerned with the job at hand than with finding ways to distract themselves. The image of the airmen playing their officers at a game of rugby and having to call the match off after barely half an hour because too many men were receiving black eyes is not one which conjures images of a disciplined and focused military unit. Their attitude to their duty could be care free as well, writing jovially about their operations with a naïve disregard for the repercussions felt by those on the receiving end.

But looking deeper, it becomes clear that it is an oversimplification to define the men as a group of larrikins. There is no reason to think that the accounts they provided that led to such a perception are inaccurate, but as at least one of the men admitted they were liable to downplay the horrors of their experiences in their correspondence in order to protect their family. This means that it is very difficult to study what went on inside the aircraft during missions, or how much anxiety they really felt leading up to one. But this is not devastating to the cultural historian, for it shows that finding ways to distract not only their family, but also themselves, from the stress and terror of active service was engrained in the culture of New Zealanders serving in Bomber Command. Indeed, much of the evidence discussed in this paper shows their methods for doing just that. But this veil of cheerfulness could never completely disguise the solemnity that was an inevitable part of RAF life. As John Mercier wrote just after the Christmas festivities of 1944,

⁹⁸ M. Francis, *The Flyer*, pp. 15-16

In spite of all the gaiety, there was always the underlying feeling, and it was always present at any do, of the bods who'd had do's here before you, or with you. The talk always came back to "remember so-and-so, he used to such-and-such," "when did he buy it?" And how soon would it be said of you.⁹⁹

So even if fun and hilarity appeared to dominate the culture of New Zealanders in Bomber Command, hidden in the background was an acute awareness of how finite and precarious their existence was.

⁹⁹ J. Mercier Scrapbook

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Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 27 February 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 14 March 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 30 March 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 6 April 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 29 April 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 10 May 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 21 May 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 12 June 1942
Carncross, M. Letter to Mother, 7 July 1942

Kimberley Family Private Collection:

Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 5 January 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 11 February 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 17 February 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 18 February 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 10 July 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 17 July 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 23 July 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 5 November 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Mother, 26 December 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 14 August 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 1 September 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 21 September 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 8 September 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 6 October 1940
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 23 March 1941
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, 23 May 1941
Kimberley, G. Letter to Phyllis, Undated

John Mercier Collection, Air Force Museum Of New Zealand Archive, Archive Number 2010/059

Mercier, J. Scrapbook, Archive Number 2010/059.23
Mercier, J. Letter to Francois, Undated

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