

Explanatory Comments

These letters and telegrams were written by Peter Driffield Gilbert (1922-1968) between July 1941 and September 1944 in the years he served in the RAAF during World War II. Recipients include his father Henry Gilbert (1880-1947), his mother Eva Winifred Gilbert (nee Short) (1879-1968), his older sister Nancy (1918-2017), and his two older brothers John (1919-1973) and William Anthony (Tony) (1920-1996)

In all Peter wrote 119 letters and sent 38 telegrams.

The original letters were kept in a compendium, in order of the date written; the first 34 are numbered, followed by a new set of numbering from 6 -10. The remaining letters are unnumbered. Spelling, punctuation and abbreviations etc have been transcribed as written in the original letters.

In annotating the letters I have tried to establish the identity of the people and places that are mentioned in the letter. If there is no footnote, it means that I have not been able to accurately identify the person. The person is usually only footnoted the first time they are mentioned in the letters but sometimes information from later letters has been used to identify them.

Some footnotes are referenced; others come from information and stories passed down from family members.

In completing the annotations, I have been grateful for the following online data websites:

- TROVE
- Genealogy SA data base
- The Virtual War Memorial
- The DVA Nominal Rolls
- National Archives of Australia records
- 3 Squadron Association website

I was also able to cross reference some dates, people, places and incidents in the following publication:

3 Squadron at War, W/Cdr John Watson and Louis Jones, D.A.F, 3 Squadron Association, Halstead Press, Sydney, 1959

The following people have also assisted in the research behind the annotations:

- Georgian Allan
- Stewart Allan
- Penelope Bailes
- Elisabeth Bramford, School Archivist, St Peter's College
- Sue Brennan
- Grant Dawkins
- Bill Fowler
- Jock Gilbert
- James Oglethorpe, 3 Squadron Association

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Jennifer Gilbert, September 2024.

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Darling Mum

Just a few lines to let you know we arrived safely. The journey over wasn't bad but I only got a couple of hours sleep as we had eight in the compartment and had to deposit ourselves on racks and such like. I like a fool picked one of the racks and I can tell you that trying to get comfortable on a rack is well nigh impossible. At Murray B². we were given a free supper of sandwiches, cake and tea which was most acceptable. We eat (*ate*) again at Serviceton, not free this time. From then on till about six we tried to sleep without much success as what with a couple of Black Gins³ singing and laughing all the time and the boys snoring.

We arrived at 9.25 and were taken out to Pt Cook in a tender. Apparently it was one of their best days. I admit the sun was shining but apart from that, it was as cold as charity with a 40 m.p.h wind blowing and completely freezing you.

We spent the day seeing M.O's⁴, getting blankets, pillow and paliasses⁵ and being talked to by the C. G.I⁶ who I don't think knows whether he's coming or going. The hangars and classrooms are 1¼ miles from the barracks will be doing a lot of walking in the four months we're over here.

We didn't get any leave today as the sergeant forgot to mention it to the C.G.I.

Well I think I'll knock off now and try and catch up on the lost sleep.

With love
from
Your Youngest

PS Leave every weekend from Friday at 5 o'clock till 1 am Sunday morning

¹ Point Cook, RAAF base and training ground, Victoria

² Murray Bridge, South Australia

³ Possible reference to indigenous women, currently outdated and inappropriate and would be considered racist today

⁴ MO – Medical Officers

⁵ Paliasses – straw mattresses

⁶ CGI – Certified Ground Instructor ??

L. A. C. GILBERT
 № 1 S.F.T.S 13P
 Pt Cook
 31/7/41

Dear Dad

How are you three lonely people? I suppose by the weekend I'll realise that I won't be seeing you and I'll begin to feel lonely too. Anyhow I've got over the first dislike of the place, and I like the station very much. Of course the quarters aren't anywhere as good as Parafield but the meals are much better.

I am trying to fly Wirraways which are extra good crates. Very different to the little Tigers. The cockpit is full of instruments and levers which tend to confuse one slightly but I'm getting pretty familiar with them now. Today I nearly forgot to put (down) the undercarriage which would have made landing a bit difficult. I've had 3 hrs and 50 mins dual and hope to go solo at about six hours. My instructor said today that I would be right in about an hour's time which will make about five hours. Anyhow I am not in any hurry as long as I do go solo.

It's been record weather here since we came here but tonight it's starting to rain. I hope it doesn't keep up for a week or so like it was before we arrived because the drome is an absolute mess now.

Last night Jack Solly⁷, Steve⁸ and myself went to a concert given by a party from Melbourne which wasn't bad. They've got a extra good picture place here, just like an ordinary one, with seats sloping up towards the back.

Well Dad I think that's all the news for the moment. Give my love to Mum and Nance⁹.

Your affectionate son

Peter

PS the above address is the best, I don't think the other will find me

⁷ Sergeant Jack Wellington Solly, 1917-1985, RAAF 416158. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/1606523>; NAA A9300, SOLLY JW; Accessed 11th September 2024

⁸ Flight Lieutenant Malcolm John Stevenson, 1922-2007, RAAF 416159, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/502673> a school friend of PDG from St Peter's College (His name appears on the St Peter's College Honour Board <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038>

⁹ Nancy Winifred Gilbert 1918-2017, PDG's only sister and the eldest of the four Gilbert siblings.

No 1 S.F.T.S
Pt Cook
8/8/41

Dear Nance

How are you? I suppose you are very busy helping to get the garden party ready. I should think it is just as well Kate isn't there or else there would be a lot of strife. It was certainly a good description of young Johnnies. You did a very good job at the trading table particularly as there was another table.

I've seen Dick¹⁰ quite a lot really, I spent last weekend with him. Five chaps and five lasses from the hostel had dinner at the Australia and then we went on to the Embassy which is a very nice place, better than the Lux so they say. It was certainly expensive 25 shillings for the night, but quite worth it. I got to bed about 3am at the Victoria in Little Collins Street, quite a comfortable place and we got a room for four which cost us only 4/3 each which was jolly reasonable. On the Saturday night we went to Susan and God, a play at the Comedy, which was jolly good.

I got Dad's letter at lunchtime today with John's¹¹ enclosed. It was rather a coincidence because I had written to him last night. His letter all about Syria was very interesting. I showed it to Jack Solly and he thought it was very good and that he wrote a very good letter.

I went solo after seven hours which wasn't too good but it was great getting off. This last week it rained on Monday night and made the drome un-usable so we got our weekend leave from the Tuesday till Wednesday at 1 AM. Steve didn't come up but Jack and I went out with some of the other boys. We went to the Tivoli on Tuesday night, it was a fair show with only women in it.

Jenny Howard showed up and Dilly Foster compered the show¹². We didn't get up till after 10 next morning, had some breakfast about 11 and then I caught a tram to South Yarra and tried to find Esther's¹³ place but was unsuccessful. I thought the number was 527 but when I got there, a chap in trousers and a pyjama coat opened the door, so I trammed back to the city. In the afternoon I went to see Norman. He was in a bit of a hurry so he told me how to get out to his place and I bussed there and spent the afternoon with Bet¹⁴ and Nellie Beg. I met Jack back at the Victoria and went to eat at Russell Collins a very posh place. Dad asked about 13P, well that's 13 course pilots, and it will make certain of getting me.

Well that's all for the time
Give my love to Mum and Dad
With love from Pete

¹⁰ Most probably Dick Wallman (Flight Lieutenant Richard John Robson Wallman 1922-2013; RAAF 407920 <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1066743&c=WW2#R> Accessed 11th September 2024. Dick was a school friend of PDG's from St Peter's College. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=7>

¹¹ PDG's older brother John,(1920-1973) served in the AIF with the 2nd/27th

¹² Jenny Howard was a British entertainer and Dorothy (Dilly) Foster appeared in this show. NEW SONGS AT TIVOLI (1941, August 25). *The Argus (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957)*, p. 2. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8200589>

¹³ Esther Harris, (nee Bacchus, a family friend of the Gilberts, married to Reginald Harris, living in Melbourne at the time this letter was written

¹⁴ Bet/Betty Gilbert (Albinia Elizabeth Tolmer, 1906-1995 – PDG's cousin on his mother's side (Eva Winifred Short), married Norman Gilbert (no relation). They were living in Melbourne at the time this letter was written

No 1 S.F.T.S
Pt Cook
12/8/41

Darling Mum

How are you all at home? I'm looking forward to seeing you at the end of the month. I suppose you will be coming over about the 22nd, for that's the date of the long weekend and also one of Tony's¹⁵ leave times I think.

I got a pair of mittens from Mill¹⁶ yesterday which were most acceptable. I would like you to send over my scarf, the issue one isn't warm enough. I think I will want some more socks but you needn't send them just bring them when you come over.

It seems ages since we got here but it's only just over two weeks. I've done about 19 hours flying already. I had four hours flying the other morning and felt properly done in.

Last night Steve and myself went along to our instructor's room with the two other chaps he instructs. We thought it was going to be a lecture but when we arrived we found three other instructors settled in. One of them went and got his four pupils and there were 12 of us in Mr Green's room and we settled down for a jolly little beer party which was very surprising and very nice. They're all a decent lot of chaps, the instructors. Our chap, Green comes from SA and went through in about course 5.

Well there's not much news, Mum.
Give my love to Dad and Nance.
With much love
From Pete

PS photograph is of Wirraways in formation¹⁷

¹⁵ William Anthony Gilbert (Tony) 1920-1996, PDG's older brother. Served in the RAN

¹⁶ Melicent Mary Swan, nee Tolmer, 1909-1996; PDG's first cousin on the Short side (Melicent's mother Albinia was Peter's mother Eva Winnifred's older sister)

¹⁷ No photograph was with the original letters

Darling Mum

I was glad to get your letter today. It seemed a long time since I had a letter from you, though it really isn't. I thought I told you in one letter that our long weekend was next weekend and that I thought Tony had one also. We get off next Friday until Sunday night at 1am, so if you can get over then it will be extra good.

I got Mrs Colley's jumper about three days ago and it's a super one, nice and long with polo neck but sleeveless. I haven't written to thank her yet, I must do so soon. Mr Williams sent Steve and I a parcel of eats which was very good of him.

I do hope it was a nice day on Saturday and that the bunfight was a success. It was bad luck that Kate had to go to hospital and miss it all.

Dad certainly seems to be working hard these days with his ARP etc. I hope he's not doing things too hard. They were certainly lucky to get that £6000, it must be the biggest windfall they've had for some time.

I've been on two X countries yesterday and today. The one yesterday was pretty crook as I had an awful headache, but the one today was jolly good.

The other day I had a 15 hourly test which went off quite well. Dick and his crowd get their wings on Thursday and then have three days leave.

I haven't got to Esther's yet but perhaps we might go out and see them when you are over here. This last weekend I went up to town and stayed at the Victoria as usual. I went to the W.A.A.A.F's Ball on Friday which was quite a good show. Much to my surprise I saw Rex¹⁸ there. On the Saturday night I took Peg to the pictures and then back to camp

That's about all the news for now so hoping to see you next weekend.

With much love
Mum Darling
From Peter

¹⁸ Dr Rex John Lipman AO, AM 1922-2015, AIF VX69785 (last rank Captain), <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/16681>
Accessed 11th September 2024

Rex was a good friend of PDG's from Adelaide and fellow graduate of St Peter's College.

<https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=4> Accessed 11th September 2024

PDG was best man at Rex's wedding **APA citation**

Delightful Floral Setting For Crafers Wedding (1947, May 23). *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954)*, p. 10. Retrieved September 4, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article74651937>

Sept
Feb 13th

Dear Nancy

I got yours and Mum's letters today. I'm sorry to say I couldn't read yours very well but that's by the way¹⁹.

I haven't had a chance to see Mrs Norman yet but I'll try and do so after the leave.

Well I had my wings test last Wednesday and I'm afraid I made rather a mess of it but everything is all right. The great day will soon be here and I'll be home for three days "Yipee". I don't know if I told you but I'm flying back. The plane leaves at 7:15 on the Monday so it gives me an extra night in Adelaide.

How long have you known that John had been in hospital with jaundice because you been very quiet about it. I look forward to seeing his letters, I haven't seen one for ages.

It's been wet and cold here this week, so we had leave on Tuesday but I didn't go into town.

Well there's not much news
Cheerio and see you soon
Love Pete

¹⁹ Nancy's handwriting was famously difficult to read by all past and present family members.

My Dear Mum,

How are you all over there in the old ancestral home. It must be very quite (*quiet*) after the Australia. As you say those two weekends were certainly extra good. It was great having you three over here and it made the time go very quickly. I got a letter from Mrs Norman (Arabella). It was very good of her and I will have to look her up. She told me she had spent the afternoon with you on the roof garden. Did she talk as much as she did that night?

I got a postcard from Tony from the sickbay, saying that he was feeling much better. I suppose he will have to stay in there for at least a couple of weeks. It's really very bad luck for him as it will probably put him back quite a bit. I only hope I don't get them.

Chook²⁰ & co arrived in Melbourne last Tuesday and I had got special leave to go up and see them. Much to my surprise he and Spit Steel²¹ and Guy Riley²² arrived down at Cook in a car which a friend of Mr Fowler had put at their disposal, so I went up to town with them and had dinner with them in the red hen, saw their train of and then went out and spent the evening with Norm and Betty.

This last weekend I went to Esther's place. I got there about 7.15, as we couldn't get away any earlier. I had a lovely tea, went and had a haircut and then back to bed. A beautifully comfortable bed it was to. Esther gave me breakfast in bed, which vied well with The Australia, about 8.30. I got up about 9 and went to the ice-skating and I managed to get round quite well without sitting on my Dad and Mum²³. I think the rollerskating did me in good stead. I went to the football in the afternoon with Dick and Brit Jones, then called in at Bet's for a little while and finally back to Esther's for dinner. In the evening Britt and I went out to some pretty awful dance at Kooyong Road, a church dance of all things. Brit's mother knew the minister's wife and she's been asking Brit to go for a long time and he's been putting it off and off until he had to go so I went to keep him company.

Well I think that's all the news at the moment. If you see Aunt Marjory²⁴, would you thank her for the letter she wrote to me and tell her I'll be writing any day now.

Give my love to Dad and Nance
With much love
From
Peter

²⁰ Flight Lieutenant David Murray Fowler (Chook) 1922-1989 RAAF 416255 was a school friend of PDG's at St Peter's College. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1047677&c=WW2#R>; <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=2> Accessed 11th September 2024

²¹ Sergeant David Hayward (Spit) Steele, 1922-1942, RAAF 416219 enlisted in 1941, a school friend of PDG at St Peter's College. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1016328&c=WW2#R> <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=6> Accessed 11th September 2024

²² Flying Officer Charles Guy Riley, 1922-1942, RAAF 416285, enlisted in 1941, He was a school friend and old scholar of St Peter's College <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1061515&c=WW2#R>; <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=5> Accessed 11th September 2024

²³ Rhyming Slang – bum

²⁴ Marjory Gilbert 1888-1985 PDG's aunt on his father Henry Gilbert's side of the family. Marjory was one of Henry's younger sisters

Sept 29th

Darling Mum

I was very glad to get your letter yesterday. I was feeling a bit homesick and it cheered me up a lot.

I haven't done much flying since I've been back, only about 2 ½ hours. One hour I went up with one of the other chaps, as safety pilot while he did instrument flying. We did about half an hour I.F and then went up above the clouds and did aerobatics.

I got two hours in the officers mess for not doubling when I should have. I had to do them on Thursday and Friday nights, so I didn't go into Melbourne until the Saturday morning. I called on dear old Arabella and we had lunch at the Florentino. We didn't go to a cinema as I had to meet some of the chaps at 2 o'clock. She was very displeased with me as she expected me to go to the pictures, then have dinner and go to another picture but that was too much for me. She is a dear old thing but will be rather a nuisance if I don't look out. I think Tony found the same thing.

I asked at the desk if that parcel had been called for and as they had gone I suppose someone pick them up.

In the afternoon I went ice-skating at the St Moritz down at St Kilda and with the help of some of the girls down there I got on pretty well. I had dinner at the Silver Grill then went out to see Betty and Norman. They were going down to the Palais at St Kilda with the Armstrongs who live in the flat above so I tagged along with them. It's an extra nice place far better than the Palais at home. I danced with Betty and Mrs Armstrong then had a few dances with the unescorted girls around the place, two were simply terrible but the third was very nice. The only trouble was I didn't see her until about 20 minutes before I had to go and was only able to have one dance.

I got back here about 12:45 and found your letter waiting for me. Poor old John has had bad luck hasn't he. I do hope he gets back to his unit, it would be terribly boring to be stuck in a training depot.

Well that's all the news for the moment.

Give my love to Dad and Nance.

Much love

From

Peter.

Pt Cook
Oct 7th 1941

Dear Dad

How are you all over there? As you supposed the weather here has been pretty crook. We fly one day then it rains and we miss out the next day. Today was the best day we've had for a long time.

I received that bond you sent over on last Wednesday but wasn't too sure how to send it so I waited till I could get an envelope in Melbourne and got Norman to post it. You probably have it by now.

I went up for the weekend last Friday and stayed at the Victoria as I didn't know in time to ring up Esther. That night I went to a dance at Invergowrie Hostel to which a lot of the boys went. We didn't get to bed till about 3:15a.m. I went out to see Esther but she was going out so she asked me to dinner. I went down to see Betty and Norman and found them busy painting a wardrobe. Norman got obstreperous and painted my nose, then Norm and I went into town to get the office car and a few beers.

We went back to Pt Cook on the Saturday night and since it rained pretty hard we got leave on the Sunday night and went to the Power House²⁵ where we had tea. I met a very nice girl and had a very pleasant time. I slept at the Victoria with two of the other boys and had a most comfortable sleep. In the morning I went to French without Tears with John Walters²⁶ and enjoyed it just as much as when I saw it before.

I was sorry I missed Tony last weekend, I thought I might have seen him at the Power House but he didn't show up, though I saw Morgan Yeatman²⁷. I'll be coming back in two weeks' time for the long weekend. We might fly over but haven't made up our minds yet.

I got a letter from Aunt M²⁸ the other day so would you let her know I got it and that I will write soon.

There's not much news here.
So please give my love to Mum and Nance
from
Peter

PS the negative you will get was taken at Power House on Sunday night.

²⁵ The Power House was a popular place for servicemen and women in Albert Park; <https://www.lscph.org.au/from-the-archives/> accessed 4th August, 2024

²⁶ Flying Officer John Reynell Walters 1921-1999, RAAF 416036, probably school friend of PDG from St Peter's College
<https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1066821&c=WW2#R;>
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=7> Accessed 11 September 2024

²⁷ Morgan Huyshe Yeatman, 1922-2007, RAN PA2151 possible school friend of PDG; enlisted in the navy in 1941, reached the rank of Lieutenant <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1198011&c=WW2#R;>
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=7> Accessed 11th September 2024

²⁸ Aunt Marjory Gilbert

Pt Cook
Oct 13th 1941

Darling Mum

I got your letter a few days ago. I'm sorry you didn't get a letter when you expected one. As a matter of fact I think I wrote to Dad the night before your letter arrived.

Well things are just about the same here except the last three days have been beautifully warm and yesterday morning I lay out in the sun for about four hours and my face got quite burnt.

The weekend before last I went to a dance at Invergowrie which was quite a good show. I was a bit tired to enjoy it properly. Miss Kirkhope spoke to me and thought I was John, she seemed quite positive that I was John, asked me if I knew any girls at Geelong. It took quite a time to convince her that I was myself. It was really pretty clever of her to even remember that John had been to that place.

On Saturday afternoon I went to see Esther but she went out but asked me to dinner that night. So I went down and saw Bet and Norm. They were just painting a wardrobe and everything was in a hell of a mess. Norm managed to paint my nose and I made it horribly red rubbing it with some Solvol. About 5 o'clock Norman and I went into town to get the office car and had a few drinks on the way back.

It rained all Sunday so they gave us leave again on the Sunday until Monday night. On the Sunday night some of us went to Power House and that's an extra nice place. John Walters and I had tea down there. We had our photographs taken and that's where the print came from I sent you. I met a very nice lass by name of Gillespie-Jones and last Friday night I took her to the pictures.

We had to fly on Saturday and I only did fifty minutes the whole day which was damned annoying.

There is some talk that we mightn't get a long weekend next week but if we do I will be coming over and will wire you what division.

Well I hope to see you all then.

With lots of love
From
Pete

Pt Cook
Oct 20th 1941

Darling Mum

Just a short note to let you know we had quite a good trip over. I did sleep on the floor but in the compartment and we bought pillows from the porter which made things pretty comfortable. We got into Melbourne at 9:20. I dropped my bag at Flinders Street station then went out to Bet's. They were still in bed or just up and in dressing gowns. Bin²⁹ was sitting up in bed shelling peas and Bet had just put the pork on for dinner. I stayed to dinner.

Tony came in just before dinner and was looking very well. He had had a letter from John who said that Gordon had now got jaundice.

After dinner I went up to Esther's and saw them for a short time as they were going to tennis. They are going to Adelaide in two weeks' time.

Tony and I sat about and made ourselves some tea. Then he and I went into town. He was going to chapel at Scotch College so I went for a ride out there in the tram with him, then came back, met a couple of the boys and went out to Power House.

We had tea there and I met the lass I told you about and had a very good evening.

I got back to Cook about 1:15, in bed by about two. I haven't felt really tired at all, so I'm very lucky.

No more news now

Much love
from
Pete.

²⁹ Albinia Frances Tolmer, nee Short, 1876-1964, also known as Bin, Bet's mother and PDG's aunt on his mother's side of the family

Pt Cook
Oct 26th 1941

Dear Dad

I'm just writing this before going to the pictures so it will be pretty short. I haven't got a letter from you yet but as the mail wasn't collected on Saturday, it was probably in that.

Everything is the same here, it's raining at the moment and pretty cold so the sooner the next 18 days go the better. I'm afraid we've had too long at this place, all the boys are sick of it.

This last week we've been flying all day, actually that's the idea but most of us do about an hour's flying then sit round on our bottoms for the rest of the time. We've done most of our gunnery now. In the air to ground we fire 600 rounds at a target on the ground and I managed to get 70 shots on the target and that's about the average for the course. In the air to air, firing 200 at a target towed by another plane I managed to get none on at all, pretty good, don't you think. One thing the Huns will be pretty safe.

As usual I went up to Melbourne for the weekend and stayed at Esther's, Tony was there also. Esther and Reg were going out for dinner. I met Esther just as I was going up the hill, so I went up to the house, had a shave and shower then went down to Bet's for dinner. About 10 minutes after I arrived Tony rolled up, so we had quite a big dinner party.

I went off to the Palais down at Saint Kilda with three of the boys and four lasses. I took the one I met at Power House. We had a very good evening and got home about 3:00 AM.

Tony went to the Embassy with Sheila, Binky and some other lass. Bink was down for the weekend and I happened to meet him in the little red bus much to my surprise.

I went back to Cook in the afternoon so I could get a good sleep after my late night.

Tell Mum I saw Bin and she had just received Mum's letter in which she said something about us outstaying our welcome which seemed to tickle them more than somewhat.

Well Dad that's all for now
Love to Mum and Nance
From
Peter

(No number but in date order)

Pt Cook
Nov 4th 1941

Dear Nance

Thanks for your letter which arrived yesterday. What the hell do you mean by writing in pencil, disgraceful when you know I can't even read it when written in ink. After spending approximately 3 hours to decipher it I gleaned quite a lot of information. Fancy old Hennie getting engaged it must have been a surprise. I didn't know she knew Peter Jay.³⁰

It was great getting the letter from John. He was a bit before time addressing me as Sergeant Pilot. As for his advice, I'm never silly in a plane.

I'm glad you been having such a gay time this last week. How long were Nev and Arthur down for? It must have been a relief for them after Darwin.

I had a great sleep coming over in the train and my stomach didn't trouble me at all. Dad said something about the crash. Well nearly all the trainees saw it. We were all out on the drome when it happened, I was about 100 yards from it and it didn't look very nice. I think it was just inexperience as it was only his first solo.

Well we finished all our flying. We did a small cross country last night and it was a marvellous night. I've never seen anything so splendid as Melbourne looked with all its glittering lights. The cross-country was from Cook to Bacchus Marsh to Geelong back to Cook. Geelong looked jolly good too and I spent a few minutes doing steep turns over it.

As you say I'm very nearly a fully fledged pilot but I'm beginning to believe what we've been told all along, that even though we finished our training we still know nothing about the flying game.

Well there is no more news for now.

Cheerio
Love you
Pete

PS please remind Tony that he owes me a quid and as I mightn't see him before he goes he better send it to me PDG

³⁰ Helen Magnus Ward (Hennie) 1918 – 2010, engagement to Dr Peter Jay 1917-1972 **APA citation**
Lady Kitty Hears (1941, October 27). *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954)*, p. 10. Retrieved August 4, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article44963752>
Dr Peter Gerald Jay, 1917-1972, AIF SX23066, old scholar of St Peter's College.
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/586728> Accessed 4th September 2024

Pt Cook
Nov 11th 1941

Darling Mum

I'm so sorry to hear that you are in bed. It's a long time since you've been ill in bed and I do hope you will be up and about soon. It's very bad luck for Tony that he has to get crook on his leave but you'll both be able to look after each other.

Well we've finished all our flying and lectures and are now spending our time getting our clearances. I've been posted overseas but I had a full medical examination with the others who are also going and one of my eyes isn't what it should be, I had the same trouble at the first examination³¹. I'll probably have to see a specialist and things will be decided then for the best I hope. Steve is going to Pearce WA to 25 Squadron³² which is very tough luck, I only wish he was going overseas with us. Neither Steve or I got commissions, we're happy Sergeant Pilots.

We went up to town last weekend per usual and I slept on a mattress on the floor at Bet's. On the Friday night about five of the lads and myself went down to Luna Park and had quite a lot of fun. On the Saturday morning I went in to see old Arabella. I was supposed to go to lunch with her but decided I couldn't stand it, so I rang up from Bet's and told her that we were going to the races but I would like to come in and see her. It was rather awkward, for some of the boys came into the lounge and made faces which made me laugh and she asked me if I wanted to go with them.

I met Dick after that and we went back to Bet's and had a colossal lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon getting over it. Dick went back to Laverton about 6 o'clock. I stayed and had dinner with Bet then took Shirley to the pictures and got back to Cook about 12:30. It was a very nice last weekend.

Well Mum that's all the news, I hope you'll be quite well by the time I got home which will be Friday.

Much love
From
Peter

³¹ No specific information about the exact nature of the eye problem is but could be astigmatism which is family condition.

³² This information confirms that Steve is actually Malcolm John Stevenson who enlisted with PDG in 1941. The NAA records show "Steve's" transfer to NO 25 Squadron on 26th November 1941; NAA: A9300, Stevenson MJ, Page 25 and Page 30 of 45

TELEGRAM

Received 17th November 1941

Mrs H Gilbert 26 Lefevre Tce North Adelaide

Things more hopeful
Anderson³³ eye man recommends
I carry on waiting now for confirmation by
Chief Medical Officer
Peter

³³ Possibly Dr Joseph Ringland Anderson, a well-known ophthalmologist, practising in Melbourne at that time.
<https://portal.scotch.vic.edu.au/ww1/honour/andersonJR.htm> accessed 4th August 2024

Darling Mum

Just a short note to let you know I arrived safely after a pretty crook trip over. I didn't get any sleep at all and after the late night before I felt pretty tired out.

I left my case at Flinders Street station and went to see Anderson but he wasn't in so I went back in the afternoon. I rang up Cook and told them I wouldn't be back at 1200 and they told me to come down by the tender at 4 o'clock leaving from Spencer St, so I moved my bag down there then went out to Bet's. I stayed there to lunch then went in and saw Anderson, I did about half an hour's exercises then went down to Cook.

So here I am once more, this time, however, in the Sergeants' Mess which will make all the difference I think. I asked one of the chaps here about Christmas leave and he said we were getting six days so if that comes off things will be great. I of course will let you know more later.

Going to bed now so must stop

Much love

Peter

TELEGRAM

Dr Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce
North Adelaide

Arrived safely after
crook trip letter
on Thursday
Peter

Dec 8th 1941

Darling Mum

I was very glad to get your letter. It arrived on Saturday and I had been looking forward to it all the week.

I saw Dr Anderson in the afternoon after ringing up Cook to tell them I couldn't get down by 12. I was rather lucky I did because they told me a tender was leaving Spencer Street at 4:15 so I got a ride down.

It was rather funny for I left my coat in the tender and I nearly got a new one out of it but they didn't have one in the store to fit me so I had to set about finding my old one as it's been raining like hell all the week. It turned out that F/O Gratton³⁴ had got hold of it and he is one of the SA Grattons and had been purser on the Moonta when I was on it. It's amazing how you come across people you know.

I have to come up to town every day for the eye exercises which is rather a nuisance as Anderson can't always arrange appointments when I can get up. I suggested to him that I live up in Melbourne so he gave me a note to the SMO who recommended it for the period of eye training only. I tried to fix it up on Sunday but they hummed and hah-ed and had to refer it to the CO, but as he was at out fishing nothing could be done. Perhaps it's just as well for this week Bet has got another boarder and I would have to stay at the Vic.

That empty compartment as you call it wasn't empty very long so I went to my own seat where I spent a very uncomfortable night, not sleeping at all. Yes I saw Dick, I was in his compartment until about 11 o'clock. I went out and had lunch with Bet, went into Anderson then down to Cook.

It's quite comfortable down there in the mess, I know a few of the chaps which makes a difference. I don't get up till about 9:00 so I've missed breakfast every morning so far. But I don't think that will go on for very long, because I think they are going to try and make me do lectures and things. I suppose it will be better than doing nothing.

I had quite a good time last weekend, on Friday night six of us went down to the ice skating. I don't suppose you'll approve of this but I'm telling you; We met up with some girls, really very nice anyhow the one I met was. She talked nicely and behaved as well as any of the girls I know. We took them to supper and saw them home.

Last night I saw the boys off to Sydney and I felt very envious. But after this morning's news which looks very black I'm afraid, they might be kept back here. The only bright thing about the Japan business is that they mightn't be so particular about pilots' eyes in the future. Anyhow Anderson told me this morning that I should be OK after the next two weeks training, so here's hoping.

Well I think that's all for the moment, so cheerio, Mum Darling, hoping to hear from you again soon.

Much love

Pete

³⁴Flight Lieutenant Gordon Sydney Gratton, 1918-2011, RAAF 407235, was stationed with No 1 S.F.T.S at Pt Cook at the time this letter was written.(NAA A9300, Gratton, G S, Page 24 of 41.)

Sunday 14th

Dear Dad

Your letter arrived on Friday and I also got one from Janet Melrose³⁵. 2 letters in one day, almost too much for me.

Things are going along the same as usual, doing nothing in the morning and going up to town every afternoon. I've only got one more week of eye training to do and then I'll know my fate. I can't say my eyes feel any different to what they ever have, but I seem to be able to do the exercises better than I did before.

You remember that I agreed with you about the observing well I still agree it would be the right thing to do, but the more I think about it the less happy I feel about it. Anyhow I'll wait and see what turns up at the end of the week.

I went up to town for the weekend per usual and stayed at the Vic with two of the boys. We met Dick Wallman and Pete Watson and had dinner together, then Dick, Pete and I went ice skating again and had a jolly good time. On Saturday morning I did my eye exercises at Anderson's rooms then popped out to Bet's, changed into shorts and shirt and went down to the beach with one of the boys. Got back to Bet's in the evening and had a quiet evening. This morning we went for a drive up to Sassafras to look at a cottage they are thinking of renting for a few weeks and then came back to Cook this afternoon.

I got Mum's letter at Bet's and also one from Steve who seems to be enjoying it over there. Please thank Mum for her nice letter and think it would be best to send any letters to Pt Cook.

Have you heard from Tony yet? I do hope you have. Would you please send his address to me, I can't remember it and Mrs Johnstone was asking me for it.

As you know, all Xmas leave is stopped, so I won't be able to get over worse luck; but the sooner these little yellow b----ers get a good hard kick in the pants the better.

Well Dad that's all for now, give my love to Mum and Nance
Peter

³⁵ Possibly Janet Melrose 1922-2022, daughter of George and Ethel Melrose of "Willogoleche", Hallett; ENGAGED (1949, November 10). *Chronicle (Adelaide, SA : 1895 - 1954)*, p. 8. Retrieved 4th August, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article93750294>; and <https://funeral-notices.co.uk/notice/gillespie/5016075> accessed 4th September 2024

Darling Mum

How are you after the hot spell over there, the heat does seem to knock you out doesn't it. Last week I got four letters from you and Dad on Friday, 2 down here and the other two up at Bet's where I spent the weekend. I also got one from Nance earlier in the week, please thank her for me.

I don't know whether I told you, but I saw old Irvine the other day. He is officer in charge of flying for armament school and I went up with him in an Anson, there was no dual control but I flew her most of the time. Well I finished my eye training and Anderson tested me on Friday. He said they were greatly improved. I had to report to the M.O. yesterday and he gave me a thorough test, taking about 15 minutes. He also said they were greatly improved but that it rested with the S.M.O to say whether I was fit to carry on flying.

Tony's letter was certainly interesting, I wonder if he was seasick or not. It must have been rather a gruelling time in the forward lookout. I showed both John's and Tony's letter to Bet and Norman, they thought they were very good.

Well Mum it's hard to believe Christmas is so near. I don't think I'll be able to get up to Bet's on Christmas Day but will probably be up there on Boxing Day. Excepting Dad's your Christmas presents have not been bought yet, so I'm afraid they won't arrive on the day. I haven't the foggiest what to get you but no doubt I'll think of something.

Well there's nothing more so all the best Mum darling to you, Dad and Nance for a very happy Christmas.

With much love
From Pete

PS Please give my love and best wishes to Auntie and Agga³⁶, also the Dutton Tce ³⁷aunts

PPS Please find out Chook's address for me and send posthaste

³⁶ Alicia Melicent Short (Auntie) 1872-1964 and Ethel Augusta Short (Aunt Gussie (or Agga) 1874-1964; sisters of PDG's mother Eva Winifred Short who lived together at the family home Bickham Grange

³⁷ Dorothy, Marjory and Emily Gilbert, PDG's aunts, who resided in Dutton Tce, Medindie at that time

Darling Mum

Thank you all ever so much for that lovely parcel of eats and the cake. They arrived on the 26th but I was up at Bet's for the weekend so I didn't get them till yesterday. I was very pleased you put in the Lux³⁸ as I always like that the best. I've already polished off 1 box of chocs and they were very good.

I do hope you had as happy a Christmas as possible. Did you go out to Bickham or not?³⁹ I got a letter from Aunt Greta yesterday but she didn't say if you had been out. I wasn't able to get up to Bet's for Christmas Day but I went up for the weekend. Christmas here was nothing startling as a matter of fact it was very hard to believe that it was Christmas. However the parcels from over there made all the difference. It really was good of old Jim⁴⁰ to send me those cigarettes. He always thinks of us boys though, doesn't he.

I've now finished my eye training as you know from another letter but am still hanging around waiting for a posting. I suppose it will arrive soon because I'm absolutely fed up with doing nothing. Did I tell you that all the chaps I was going away with are all back and posted round Australia? They were all packed and ready to embark when their posting was cancelled. All I missed was a trip to Sydney. Old Cad has been sent up to Darwin all by himself, some have gone over to Mallala and the others all round the place.

I got a letter from Tony yesterday wishing me all the best for the new year. He seemed to be very well and very enthusiastic about having been up in the Crows Nest. I must write to him, I'm afraid I didn't write for Christmas.

Would Dad please bank the cheque I've enclosed. I was going to send it over in notes but Norman thought it would be better to send a cheque. I think Dad can fix it up. It is some accumulated pay of mine.

Well Mum darling thanks very much again for the eats.

All my love and best wishes to you three for the new year.

From
Peter

³⁸ Possibly Lux toilet soap or Lux Soap Flakes for doing laundry

³⁹ Bickam Grange, the Short family home located in Dernancourt, a suburb of Adelaide, formerly known as Paradise. In the 1940s, PDG's uncle Frank Piers Short 1886-1966 (brother of Eva Winifred Gilbert nee Short) and his wife Greta (Constance Margaret Long Short nee Thompson 1901-1993 lived there

⁴⁰ James or Jim, one of the staff – gardener - at the Gilbert home in North Adelaide

Jan 13th 1942

Darling Mum

How are you after your little trip? it was extra nice being able to see you again although it was for such a short time. Did you see Mrs Norman on Sunday or not.

Nothing has happened here yet. I'm still waiting for a posting and I'll probably be waiting for a while yet, the way I can see it. It looks as if they've forgotten all about me but I've given up worrying now. I did a bit of work this afternoon in one of the flights, checking up log books. It was great having something to do. Later in the afternoon I went over to Laverton with Eric Ramsey to see a couple of KittaHawks that have arrived there, I don't know where from. They are certainly fast looking jobs and I wouldn't mind being behind the stick of one of them. A few more of those in Australia would certainly help us out.

I'll let you know as soon as anything comes through which might be anytime now though you never can tell with the Air Force.

Well, that's all for the present

Much love
From
Peter

Dear Dad

How are you over there? There's still nothing doing here. I think I'll have to get another signal sent up to Air Board.

Last weekend I went up to Bet's, stayed the Friday night and went to the skating, then came back on Saturday afternoon. It wasn't the normal leave but I thought I might as well take it. The normal leave was on Tuesday, yesterday to be correct.

I went in with three of the boys and stayed at the Federal. We went to the flicks on Monday night and saw a jolly funny show with the Marx brothers. We spent most of Tuesday morning in bed, wandered around in the afternoon and went to the pictures in the evening.

Here I am back again writing this in the flight office. Things are brightening up here, four Beaforts arrived yesterday and apparently there is going to be a squadron of them. It would be rather good to get onto them, extra good experience. There's no more news except that I'm quite OK.

From
Peter

PS Excuse the scroll I was using an ordinary pen

Darling Mum

I've at last got some news for you concerning my future. I've been posted to Laverton as you can see from the top. I came over from Cook this morning. I'm in Communications Flight, their job is to fly big nobs round the countryside. They have about five different types of planes, none of which I've ever flown and I'm not likely to get any flying here either. From here I'm posted to Nhill, that will be on March 16th to do operational training on Wirraways and as Wirraways have been given up as front line planes. I may, after learning battle tactics in them, go on to something good like a Tomahawk or a Kittahawk, anyhow that's what I'm hoping.

Things will be pretty easy here for the seven weeks, so I am going to apply for some recreation leave and I'll let you know if I can get over. I hope it will be for seven days.

I think Laverton will be a far more interesting place than Cook, as American planes seem to come in here a lot. I told you, didn't I, that a Liberator was here and that I had a talk with a couple of Yanks. Today a Flying Fortress came in, a colossal thing. I've already had a talk with two of them and neither of them had a nasal twang. I'm beginning to think that the terrible American twang is all boloney.

I went up to town on Saturday as I had a telegram from Murray⁴¹ asking me to meet him. I met him at about 2.30. His mother was over, staying at Chevron with Mrs Monfries⁴². We spent the afternoon swimming in the pool at Chevron. In the evening there was an impromptu dance and John Smeaton⁴³ was there. He asked us all to go round to Doug Tweedie's⁴⁴ flat, funny coming across both of them like that. I'm afraid I got pretty tight, I know it was silly of me. I'm telling you just in case it gets to your ears by means of other channels.

Well, Mum dear, that's about all the news and I'll let you know if I'm able to come over.

Much love
Pete

⁴¹ Sergeant Richard Murray Burchell, 1922-1996, AIF SX14382, 2/9th Australian Armed Regiment, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=677722&c=WW2#R> Accessed 8th September 2024, old scholar of St Peter's College, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038> Accessed 8th September 2024; school friend of PDG and lived in the same street growing up. PDG was best man at Murray's wedding to Vivian Joyce Thomas in 1946 To Wed Today (1946, September 18). *The Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954)*, p. 9. Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article245526076>

⁴² Mrs Monfries and Mrs Burchell were friends. Murray was best man for Max Monfries **APA citation** Miss Wendy Halliday Bride Today (1947, January 16). *News (Adelaide, SA : 1923 - 1954)*, p. 7. Retrieved September 8, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article127076554>

⁴³ Sub Lieutenant John Anthony Smeaton, 1916-1971, RANVR, enlisted in 1944, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1196081&c=WW2> Accessed 8th September 2024 old scholar of St Peter's College <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038> Accessed 8th September 2024

⁴⁴ Corporal Douglas Charteris Tweedie, 1921-2005, RAAF 417606, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1016916&c=WW2#R> Accessed 8th September 2024

Dear Nance

Thank you for your letter which I got today together with Mum's. Thank Dad for his also. I also had a letter from Aunt Marjory and one from Peg. It was great getting a bunch like that, it's the first time I've had so many in one fell swoop. I'm sorry I forgot the birthday. I didn't actually forget it altogether, I knew it was either Jan or Feb but couldn't remember the date. Anyhow all my best wishes for your 25th year.

I told Mum that I might be able to get some leave but now there is talk of me doing a conversion course onto Hawker Demons, and then going up to Richmond in Queensland for army co-op for a month. However I'll let you know what happens.

I got Sunday and Saturday off this weekend. I went up on Friday night, clocked in at Bet's and went ice skating per usual. Bet and Mrs Armstrong and Paul went up to their hideout at Sassafras, Norman drove them up Saturday afternoon and came back about 8 on Sunday evening. Bet didn't want to go a bit and was awfully cross about it.

I met Murray on Saturday afternoon and he was going to stay at the Essington Lewis'⁴⁵ place, so they asked me too. I don't know whether Mum or Dad has ever been in it, but Mum would just adore it I think. Lovely high ceilings and big studded doors and a colossal hall with staircase going up from it, something like the Lance Lewis's⁴⁶ but not from the centre of the hall. I can't describe it, you would have to see it for yourself.

I had a jolly good time on Saturday night, we all went to a nightclub affair and didn't get home till 4:30am, the latest I've ever been. We didn't get up till late on Sunday as you can imagine. Sunday afternoon was uneventful except a few people dropped in, we had tea there and then I went down to the train with Murray and a chap called Bob Radford, saw them off and then back to the flat, where I slept the night and came down to Laverton this morning. An extra good weekend all around.

I almost forgot to tell you. Bet had a very funny letter from Tony and he seems to be quite bright and happy. I've written twice to him lately but haven't had one from him.

That's all the news for now
o cheerio
Love
Pete

PS Excuse the worst scroll on this page as there are no lines and I'm trying to write on my bed PDG

⁴⁵ Essington and Lance Lewis were brothers born in Burra, South Australia. Essington Lewis was involved in mining and engineering, particularly with BHP and lived in Melbourne. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lewis-essington-7185> Accessed 8th September 2024

⁴⁶ Lancelot Lewis lived in Adelaide and was involved in the Australian agricultural company, Goldsborough Mort & Co. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/345233> Accessed 8th September 2024

Laverton
Monday 9th

Dear Dad

Thanks for your letter of last week which I got on Wednesday I think. I was very sorry to hear about Budgie, but in Mum's letter which I got today, she tells me that he is back safely after his adventure out into the world. It certainly was lucky getting him back, one chance in 100 I should say.

Your evacuee seems to be having rather a hard do of things, what with a sick baby and not having heard from her husband since she left Singapore. Have you got her for the duration or does she move on elsewhere?

John seems to be having quite a good time over there what with snowball fights. Would you please send me his letters to read, I will return them as soon as I've read them. I haven't had a letter from Tony yet which I'm very annoyed about as I've written two to him lately.

I still haven't flown yet and it looks now as if I won't be going to Richmond but I'm not sure yet, so can't say anything definite about leave. I can tell you I'm getting more and more fed up with the Air Force as each day passes. My daily programme for the last three months has been, get up any old time, do nothing, then lunch, do nothing again, then tea, go to the pictures or have a few beers in the mess, then bed. Highly enlightening life I don't think, but I'll be OK once I get up to Nhill and start flying. I met a chap last night who had been up there and he says it's extra good.

I went up to town again for the weekend, had quite a good time, stayed with three of the boys from Pt Cook who I knocked around with when I was there. But I'm getting too much leave I think, because I don't enjoy it as much as I used to. Anyhow I think it's just a fit of depression I've got which will soon wear off.

That's all the news I can think of.

Give my love to Mum and Nance
Peter

Laverton
Feb 14th 1942

Dear Dad

Thanks for the letters which I will return as soon as possible.

At the moment I'm in my pyjamas writing this at Bet's desk. Norm has just left for the office and I've got the beds to make and the housework to do, as Bet is still up at Sassafra.

I see from Tony's letters that he did get mine so I'm pleased they didn't go astray. John seems to be very fit and enjoying the snow over there.

Would you please bank or buy War Savings Certificates with the enclosed cheque which as before is a little accumulated pay?

No news that I can think of, will write later next week.
Peter

Laverton
18/2/42

Darling Mum

Thanks for your letter of a few days ago and also for the parcel which I received today. The cigarettes came just at a good time, as I had let myself get a bit low in funds and have had to borrow for a couple of days, but it's payday tomorrow so everything in the garden will be lovely.

I got your telegram yesterday at about 1:15. I showed it to the Adjutant and got leave straight away I tore about and got changed, hopped out on the road and got a lift right up to town in an army car. Very lucky I thought. I looked up Norman but he hadn't heard from Tony. He found out for me that the express was due 3.40, so I shot down to the station and met Tony. He had to go straight down to Flinders at 5.05, so after dropping his kit he and I had a few drinks together then he pushed off. I thought he looked very well and fit but he was very annoyed at being pulled off his ship⁴⁷.

You better hang on to something because this will probably be a bit of a shock to you, I went up in a plane today, now have a stiff whisky and you'll feel better. Now that you're feeling better I'll tell you about it. I went down to Flinders in the Demon I've been telling you about with another chap. I flew down and back but he did the dives and whatnot for the gunnery practice. I don't suppose Tony had any idea that I'd be in it.

I stayed up at the flat again this weekend. Norm was there Friday night but I had the flat to myself for the rest of the time, rather boring but very nice to have the run of the place, they're awfully good in that way. Bet is going over to Woodside on Friday for a week, I think, maybe longer. I wish I could get over but I don't think I can now. If I had only known for certain that I wouldn't be wanted for three weeks, I would have put in for it, however these things can't be helped.

Well, things look pretty bad at the moment, don't they, what with our impregnable Singapore up the spout, Jap occupation of Palembang and sundry other setbacks. It's a damned awful situation, hundreds of pilots like myself in a sort of backwater and the Japs on the doorstep so to speak. However, things will probably turn soon and we'll have the upper hand.

Just at the moment we're having some typical Melbourne weather. It's been raining pretty heavily since about 5:30 with thunder and lightening chucked in. I'm off to the concert tonight which will pass the time away.

No more news Mum dear.
Much love
Peter

⁴⁷ Tony was serving on the Perth from 1st November 1941 – 8th February 1942. He then was promoted to the rank of Sub Lieutenant RANVR on the Cerberus on 9th February 1942; NAA A6769 Gilbert WA Page 2 of 2
<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=5216657> Accessed 5th August 2024

Laverton
Feb 26th

Dear Dad

Thanks for your letter of the 18th which I only got today, as you didn't put Sgts Mess on it. It went to 5 Sqdn and 7 Sqdn before I got it, one of the chaps in 7 Sqdn who knew me gave it to me.

I have at last started a bit of flying as I told you in Mum's letter. I have since last Friday had nearly nine hours in the Demon. Yesterday and today I went down to Flinders by myself for Naval Co-op. I thought of dropping a message for Tony but decided they mightn't approve. It's quite interesting, you give them torpedo bombing and dive bombing and they practise on you with their gun equipment.

I will not be moving to Nhill now as the O.T.U has been moved to Sale which is about 150 miles east of Melbourne. I hope to be going there on April 2nd, two weeks after I was due at Nhill. I don't know for certain that I'll be going but unless they forget about me I should be going

Last night I went up to town with Bob Craven⁴⁸ and a couple of pilot officers from Com Flt. I've had a sumptuous (*sumptuous*) dinner in the Australia dining room, oysters, mixed grill and sweets, then went to the pictures, a jolly good evening. When I got back I found a telegram from Tony which I couldn't understand, it said leave tonight meet Express which express I couldn't say, anyhow I got it too late, so it didn't matter.

I don't know whether you heard or not that Tokio (*Tokyo*) radio announced that Adelaide was to be bombed today and Melbourne sometime this week. They seem to be very sure of themselves though that is no reason why we should think that it would be impossible.

I got Mum's letter on Tuesday telling of Bill Bailey and other items so I didn't mention the rest of the parcel beside the cigs, they were very welcome. As I do not get up for breakfast, I've been breakfasting on figs and dates.

No more news now
Love to Mum and Nance
Peter

⁴⁸ Robert Craven 1919-2002, enlisted in 1941 in Adelaide and served with No 80 Squadron, achieved rank of Flight Lieutenant; <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/512060> Accessed 11th September 2024

Darling Mum

Here I am settled in at Sale. I came down on Sat. night, stayed at a hotel in Sale and came out to the station yesterday. It's about six miles out of the town and is still very much in the construction stages. There is no water laid on and you wash in a basin. I think I'll be going into Sale a few times a week to have a bath. I would like you to see the lavatories, ultra smart, a very fine piece of tin surrounding a concrete area of about 20 ft x 9 ft and placed haphazardly in what I should say was definitely surrealist style, are several circular objects with lids, these are the dykes. However, they serve the purpose. The mess is better than Laverton, the stewards wait on you instead of having to line up yourself. Actually its not a bad place and will be quite OK for four weeks but might be a little deadly if I had to stick here longer.

Tomorrow, weather permitting, we start flying, which I'm looking forward to. The course consists of bombing and gunnery formation flying and battle tactics and takes up about twenty to thirty hours of flying.

I didn't have much sleep coming over on Thursday night. The train got in about 1000 hours. I went and saw Norman, got the key to the flat, went out, had a shower and shave, changed my clothes into my own bag, then tootled down to Laverton. Everything was running quite smoothly so my absence was not felt. I didn't stay long and returned to town, had a few drinks, then went down to skating to say farewell to the lass I told you about.

I got back to the flat about 1am and found Tony just preparing for bed. Norm, Tony and myself knocked over a couple of bottles and talked till about 2:30 and I had to get up at 6. So I felt rather tired by the time I reached Sale.

Norm went over to Adelaide on Saturday night, you've probably seen him. I didn't see Tony before I went on Sat night. He was certainly lucky that he left the Perth⁴⁹. It was a very sad thing. He must have got a shock to see it in the paper.

No more news
Much love
From
Pete

⁴⁹ HMAS Perth was sunk on 1st March 1942 during the Battle of Sundra Strait. Many of the crew were killed or taken prisoner.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Perth#:~:text=HMAS%20Perth%20\(D29\)%2C%20a,the%20Battle%20of%20Sunda%20Strait](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Perth#:~:text=HMAS%20Perth%20(D29)%2C%20a,the%20Battle%20of%20Sunda%20Strait). Accessed 5th August 2024

Tony had been posted to the Perth on 1st November 1941 but was re-posted to HMAS Cerberus on 9th February 1942.
NAA A6769 GILBERT WA

O.T.U.
Sale
25/3/42

Dear Dad

There's not much news since my letter to Mum but I'll think of something as I go along. Please thank Mum for her letter which I got a couple of days ago and also the collars.

Has John been home yet? I suppose you are all in a flat spin waiting for him. I can just imagine it, Mum and Nancy and Flo rushing about preparing the fatted calf. I wish I could be home at the moment to see him but it's not much good wishing.

Last Sunday I was Range Safety Officer, which might sound important but isn't. The range is about 20 miles from Sale and on the coast. The safety officer's hut is right on the beach. We went over in an ambulance about 06.30, spent most of the morning messing about with a fishing line off the beach, cooked chops over a homemade fire and sunbaked all the afternoon. In fact, it was a very pleasant picnic and I think I'll have to work it again.

We've started regular flying now, one day lectures and one flying. It is certainly interesting flying - combat, section formation, squadron formation, air to air gunnery and so on.

Would you tell Nancy that I haven't come across Upjohn⁵⁰ yet. He is in the Hudson section of the O.T.U. and I haven't got round to looking him up yet.

I am enclosing 10 pounds which I would like you to do with as before. Also would you please send over my other pair of shoes which I left behind by mistake.

That's all for now
Love to Mum and Nance
Peter

PS

Just received your letter
thanks very much. PDG

⁵⁰ William Gordon Upjohn, 1915-1961, posted to the Officers Training Unit at Sale on 26th February 1942.
<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=5242336&S=2&R=0> Accessed 6th August 2024

March 29th 1942

Darling Mum

Thanks for your letter telling of your telephone talk with John and the mention of the Spog⁵¹ (?) as you call it.

The latest news is that the O.T.U. is moving to Port Pirie. The OC of the flight thinks we'll be going tomorrow week but he is not sure. That means we'll only have one more week here. Bob Craven left today. He has been posted to 23 Sqdn Archerfield in Queensland⁵², probably onto Kittyhawks.

Dad asked in his letter what sort of planes I was doing the training on. They're the old Wirraways. We do about thirty hours flying, all to do with fighter squadron work. After we finish the course, we more than likely go to a Yank Squadron, where we do a conversion onto Kittyhawks, then we go to an Australian Kittyhawk Squadron.

The last few days the weather has been lousy. Since Thursday its been raining on and off and there's been a ground mist in the morning which doesn't clear up till about ten thirty. One morning last week, taxiing the crates up to the flight from the dispersal area you could barely see twenty yards ahead. Today it turned out quite fine and will probably remain so for three or four days, then swish the rain will come again. I don't know how they'll get any flying done when the winter really sets in, but that won't worry me as I won't be here.

There's no more news for the present. I'll let you know when we get to Pirie which we might or might not do.

Love
From
Peter

⁵¹ The original letter has the word "spog". This could be "spog", a slang term for boast or brag, or "Sprog", a term for a baby or child. It is unclear as to what this word is referring to.

⁵² Records from NAA Record Search confirm that Robert Craven was transferred to 23 Squadron at Archerfield from 3rd April 1942; NAA: A9300, CRAVEN R B Page 9 of 54, accessed 6th August 2024

TELEGRAM

Received 11 April 1942

Mrs H Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce
North Adelaide

Much love and congratulations
for anniversary to you
both arrive Monday on
embarkment leave Peter

Dear Dad

Thanks for your letter which was most heartening, also Mum's. I've just got into the flat and found your wire, thanks so much.

We got off last night but had to report back at 0800 hrs this morning and with the usual airforce efficiency, sat round all morning waiting for something to happen. We got off again about 2 o'clock and have to report again at 2.30pm tomorrow when the same thing will occur again.

Tony is up this weekend and last night we had quite a dinner party, Norm, Bet, Norm's sister and her husband to be, Tony and myself. Six of us all round the little dining room table. Bet cooked us a delicious dinner. Afterwards Tony and I went up to the Jamiesons and spent the evening with Judy and Mary⁵³.

Tonight Tony and I are going to the Embassy. I'm taking Mary and Tony's taking some other lass who I don't know.

Last Sunday as you know, I spent the day with the Jamiesons, except for the afternoon when I went to see Mrs Turner. I had tea with her then went back to the Jamiesons for the evening meal, then Mary and I went down to Power House. Monday I was Orderly Sergeant, so slept on the Station Monday night. I was at the flat Thursday night and took Nan to the pictures, we saw the show Nancy liked "Blossoms in the Dust". On Wednesday evening I popped in to see Mrs Craig for about an hour before dinner. She told me to tell Mum that she missed her very much. Also that Mum left too soon because the Rajah of Sarawak is staying there at the moment. What a pity Mum missed him.

Tomorrow I am going to midday dinner at the Botanic with them and will take Tony along.

The photographs didn't turn out too badly for a first shot, some a bit overexposed and some a bit underexposed.

That's all for now
Much love to Mum and Nance
From
Peter

PS Thanks muchly for the parcel PDG

⁵³ The Jamieson sisters: Judith Nancy Gilbert (nee Jamieson) 1922-2002 and Mary Angela MacEwan (nee Jamieson) 1924-1998. Judy would become PDG's sister-in-law on her marriage to his older brother, John in 1943

No 2 Clowes Flats
Clowes St
18th May

Darling Mum,

Sorry I haven't written for so long but what with one thing and another I haven't got round to writing. If you see Aunt Marjorie⁵⁴ tell her that I'm also sorry for not having yet written to her but that it won't be long now.

As you will gather I'm still here and am fed up to the teeth. To make matters worse, a short time ago I got as far as the boat with my kit, but they didn't have room for me. It was all very sudden, three chaps were A.W.L⁵⁵ who were meant to be going, so they called for three volunteers. I and two of the other boys volunteered. We rushed round getting our kit together, were paid 5 weeks in advance, had it taken from us, then paid out again. Two of the A.W.L chaps turned up, so the three of us drew lots, I got the second prize, so if there had been room for me I would have gone. Rather annoying, what.

I told you on the phone that Tony and I were going to Admiralty House, which we did and had an extra good time. I've been to the Jameisons quite a lot lately, they are a very nice family, I think.

There's no more news except that Bet is still looking after me very well.

Much love
Peter

PS got a wire from John for the 8th with 'place of origin' deleted⁵⁶ PDG

⁵⁴ Miss Marjory Gilbert, 1888-1985, PDG's aunt (sister of his father Dr Henry Gilbert)

⁵⁵ AWL – Absent with Leave

⁵⁶ The 8th refers to PDG's birthday, 8th May. At that time John Gilbert was serving with the 2/27th Australian Infantry Battalion. It returned to Adelaide in March 1942 but only briefly before being dispatched to Port Moresby to relieve the militia Battalions that had held the Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track NAA: B883, SX4520 Page 10 of 25, and Virtual War Memorial vwma.org.au/explore/units; Accessed 4th August 2024

18/6/42

Dear Dad

Just a few lines to let you know I'm still here and fairly well except for a bit of a cold which has just come on. I woke up with a very stuffy nose this morning, but it seemed to clear up later on in the day.

The trip over wasn't too bad. There were only Jean and Arthur⁵⁷, another chap and myself in the compartment as far as Nhill, then two more got in. The porter was a nice bloke and let me stay in 1st class without any fuss. We didn't get in till 10.55 as for some reason we went round via Geelong.

Murray got on the train and I spent the day with him and went to the pictures in the evening.

On Tuesday afternoon I went out to Essendon to see the chaps in Communication Flight which I was in when they were in Laverton. I went up to see Jean and Arthur last evening for a while. I gave them half a dozen silver teaspoons which seemed to thrill Jean very much. Tell Mum that Jean was terribly pleased with her posy and that she's still got it in water in her room, or at least it was there last night.

Bet & Norm have gone down to Brighton to see Norm's sister tonight. I didn't go as I felt a bit tired with this cold, so I'm holding the fort.

No more news, love to Mum & Nance
Peter

⁵⁷ Jean and Arthur – Jean Ellen Chidlow (1919-2014) and Arthur Dawkins were engaged in Adelaide in December 1941: ENGAGED (1941, December 22). *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954)*, p. 10. Retrieved August 6, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article45744030>. They married in 15th June, 1942. PDG was the best man. Married (1942, June 15). *News (Adelaide, SA : 1923 - 1954)*, p. 5. Retrieved August 6, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128557435>

Flight Lieutenant Arthur William George Dawkins (1915-1992); RAAF 416328 served with PDG in No 3 Squadron. He is often referred to as "Dawks" or "Dawk" in following letters. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/502155> and references in *3 Squadron at War*.

TELEGRAM

Received: 29th June 1942

Mrs H Gilbert 26 Lefevre Tce, North Adelaide

No news Quite well except
for cough. Love
Peter

TELEGRAM

Received: 2nd July 1942

Going to Sassafras
tomorrow Goodbye Love Peter

Reply printed on back of original and sent 3rd July ??

You are much in our thoughts. All the best and lots of love from us all. Dad.

Note inserted in the compendium

Thursday July 9th

Peter arrived quite unexpectedly in time for dinner. "Mulbera"⁵⁸ had to put in to port for repairs. Spent night and all Friday with us but had to report back to ship by midnight as supposed to sail at dawn of Saturday 11th.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Possibly refers to SS Mulbera, a British passenger ship which seems to have been used to transport troops at various times during WW2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Mulbera Accessed 4th August, 2024

⁵⁹ This note was added to the original text, possibly by PDG's father or mother

AUS 416168
SGT GILBERT P.D.
3 Sqdn⁶⁰
R.A.A.F
ABROAD

15/7/42

Darling Mum

How are the remenants (*remnants*) as Tony calls you three? I'm pretty fit and almost minus cough. We are all beginning to feel pretty bored and will probably be more so by the time we reach our destination.

We did not leave when we thought we were going to. I was up in town for a few hours, but I didn't go home, as I didn't want to prolong once again the farewells. I hope you understand.

So far everything has been very quiet. The days have been very nice and smooth and we've been making pretty good time.

The gramophone so far has been a great success among the majority, but a few of the boys don't appreciate the records. We're going to try and get some more, as the few we have will be played out.

It's fairly hard to fill the nights. I've been going to bed and reading but that gets you down. Last night we played cards and I won about a bob, tonight we're having pictures which will be jolly good, Mickey Mouse, Pop Eye and some other one, I think they are.

This will be the last letter you'll receive for at least a month, so don't go worrying about possibilities. That's all I can say.

So Cheerio and lots of love to you three
Peter.

⁶⁰ PDG served with No 3 Squadron from 13th September 1942 until 28th January 1944. Information about this RAAF unit can be found from the following:

<https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/709>

<https://www.3sqnraafasn.net/>

National Archives of Australia – operational logs and other information

3 Squadron At War, Wing Commander Watson, John and Jones, Louis, DAF, 3 Squadron Association, Halstead Press, Sydney 1959

AUS. 416168
SGT GILBERT PD
No 3 Sqdn
R.A.A.F
ABROAD

28/7/42

Dear Dad

How are you three at home? It seems a long time since we left, but it is only a little over three weeks. Since we left the last port, from which I wrote a letter to Mum, we've had beautiful weather. Actually as you know it is pretty sticky and you get up a fair sweat at any exercise.

We had no chance to see our last port of call or the capital as we arrived after dark and left again next day at midday. I wish we could have seen the capital as from what you & Mum said it must be very pretty.⁶¹

The pictures that I said we were having were quite good but rather old. Also, it was terribly hot. There were some more the other night but I didn't go as I thought it would be too damn hot. At the moment we're trying to organise a ship's concert which will be held on Thursday and should turn out alright.

We've been making very good time owing to the weather and, I should be seeing Lady Tarbat⁶² in four or five days. I don't know how long I'll see her for, but I hope its long enough so that we can see a bit of the place.

We are all in shirts & shorts or less, and even then feel pretty warm. I slept for two nights on deck in a deck chair but wasn't very comfortable. So last night I slept in the cabin with the fan going all night and it was not too bad. A lot of the chaps took their mattresses on deck but I was too lazy.

We made a complaint about the food they were dishing up to us and it has improved a great deal.

I am sorry to say the old gramophone is slightly out of order and unless I can get someone to use a bit of solder on it, it will never play again. I forgot to tell Mum that the oranges were delicious and extra juicy.

No more news for now.
Love to Mum and Nancy
Cheerio
Peter

⁶¹ Possibly Perth on route to Egypt

⁶² Could be a code to let his family know that he was heading to Colombo. From later letters it seems as if the Gilberts were acquaintances with the Tarbat family. Lady Tarbat was the wife of Sir John Tarbat who was a member of the Senate of Ceylon https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tarbat Accessed 9th August 2024.

His wife Gladys Victoria Tarbat nee James was born in Melbourne. The following Trove article places her in Colombo. NEWS FROM COLOMBO (1938, January 9). *Sunday Times (Perth, WA : 1902 - 1954)*, p. 24 (First Section). Retrieved August 9, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article58800018>

PS Excuse pencil, pen lost (*the original letter was written in pencil, but the text has been written over in pen by someone else*)

PPS Arthur Dawkins sends regards PDG

AUS 416168
Sgt. GILBERT PD
Royal Aust. Airforce
c/- RAF
Ceylon

4/8/42

Darling Mum

How are you all at home? We arrived at Pam's place⁶³ on August 1st at about 11 o'clock. We all went ashore and strolled round the streets. It certainly is an interesting place. We were pestered all the way up the main street by the shopkeepers and their stooges "Come in sahib. Look not need buy".

One of the chaps and I went into a jewellers called de Silva. He showed us a lovely looking bracelet 45 Rs. I told him it was no good and he got quite annoyed and showed us another of the same but lower quality stones to prove it was no good.

We went into the green bar in some pub and beer cost Rs50 or 5/- a bottle so of course we didn't stay long.

In the afternoon we went out to the Galle Face⁶⁴ swimming pool. There were six of us. We decided to get rickshaws. Four of the boys took them and Jock Lusby and I found another two. We hopped in and told them the Galle Face. We went about 20 yards before they asked for 1R each. We said nothing doing and offered them 35 cents. They threw up their hands in disgust so our first rickshaw ride ended. Eventually we got a car out for 75c each.

The Galle Face is certainly a nice looking place which only officers can go to. However the pool is open to all ranks. We spent about two hours there and had tea and bread and butter brought to us.

We went back to the ship, changed into drabs⁶⁵ and dined about 9 o'clock at the GOH hotel opposite the jetty. We had a lovely dinner which cost us 4Rs each 8/- . We went to a dance at the Town Hall which is a colossal building, you've probably seen it. I had the experience of dancing with a dusky maid, half caste, really very pretty but not for me.

We got back to Colombo about 12.30 and wandered round trying to get something to eat. Wally a rickshaw waller⁶⁶ told us the Russian Hotel down in the back blocks. We had two rickshaws and two of us piled into each one.

Off we set through poky little streets with blokes asleep on the paths and in the gutter. It was naturally very funny and we just about burst ourselves laughing. We arrived at the pub and after a lot of jabbering got into the place. The eating part consisted of several little rooms next to each other. Sort of place you'd take someone to dope them and rob them. However we got out alive after quite a good feed and arrived back at the ship at 3am.

⁶³ Possibly Pamela Tarbat, daughter of Sir John and Lady Tarbat who were living in Colombo.

⁶⁴ Galle Face Hotel, a luxury hotel in Colombo, Sri Lanka

⁶⁵ Drabs-the uniform made from cloth of an olive drab colour

⁶⁶ Original spelling; usual spelling is "wallah" meaning a person concerned or involved with a specified thing or business

Next morning we were told we were going no further. We disembarked at 12:45, caught a train at about 2 o'clock and we shot 60 miles (*next word cut out of the letter*) to a crest camp or another ED at a place called (*next word cut out of the letter*).

This trip took four hours and a more amazing sight I've never seen. Grass houses all over the place and then you come upon a brick one of some European design, some dilapidated, some in good state of repair. All along the line, kids begging for cigarettes, selling cocoa-nuts or bananas. We bought some bananas and they were lovely, those little ones.

The camp is not too bad. We are sleeping (in) huts made of cocoa-nut palm with cement floors. They are very nice at night and fairly cool in the daytime. We are right beside the latrines and showers which is very handy. The meals are simple but good food.

Yesterday we went to the town of (*next word cut out of the letter*) about five miles from the camps. Three of us got a ride in a battle cab (?) driven by a captain with an Indian soldier sitting behind. He was a magnificent looking man with turban and black flowing beard.

Bob Wardrobe⁶⁷ and I walked from (*next word cut out of the letter*) to the swimming beach and saw some funny sights such as women picking wogs out of each other's hair. The swimming beach is a beautiful little cove, the beach fringed with palms. The surf was great and we spent about 2½ hours there.

You ought to have seen us going back to (*next word cut out of the letter*). There were eight of us in rickshaws, strung out in a long line, sitting back and waving to the admiring multitude.

If I wrote everything down, I'd never stop writing. No doubt you got a shock to get such a long letter from me as it is, so I'll not fray your nerves anymore.

We still haven't got to the war yet but I'm resigned to waiting.

Goodbye for now
Love to Dad and Nance
Lots of love
Peter

⁶⁷ Flight Sergeant Robert Bruce Wardrobe 1919-1943 RAAF 412221 served with No 3 Squadron. He was killed in a flying accident in Libya in 1943

<https://aviationmuseumwa.org.au/afcR.A.A.F-roll/wardrobe-robert-bruce-412221/>

4

The eating part consisted of several little swoms next to each other. Sort of place where you'd take someone dope them & rob them. However we got out alive after quite a good fed arrived back at the ship at 3 a.m.

Next morning we were told we were going no further. We disembarked at 1245, caught a train at about 2 o'clock & were shot 60 miles to a rest camp or another E.D. at a place called.

The trip took four hours & a more amazing sight I've never seen. Grass houses all over the places & then you come upon a brick house of some European design, some dilapidated & some in good state of repair.

All along the line kids begging for cigarettes, selling cocoa nuts or bananas.

The swimming beach is a beautiful little cove, the beach fringed with palms. The surf is great & we spent about 2½ hours there.

You ought to have seen us going back to [redacted]. There were eight of us in rickshaws, strung out in a long line, sitting back & waving to the admiring multitudes.

If I wrote everything down, I'd never stop writing. No doubt, you get a great shock to receive so long a letter from me as it is, so I'll not annoy your nerves anymore.

We still haven't got to the war yet but I'm resigned to waiting.

Goodbye for now
Love to Dad + Nancee
lots of love
Peter

Al. E. Gustine

TELEGRAM

Sent 6th August; Received 8th August 1942

GLT GILBERT
LEFEVRE TCE
NORTH ADELAIDE

ADDRESS NOW CARE RAF CEYLON. NOTIFY CLAIR⁶⁸.
PETER GILBERT.

⁶⁸ Clair Marie Chidlow, 1922-2015 sister of Jean Chidlow who married PO Arthur Dawkins on 13th June 1942. PDG was the best man, Clair was the bridesmaid. *Married (1942, June 15). News (Adelaide, SA : 1923 - 1954), p. 5. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128557435>* Clair and PDG corresponded regularly during PDG's war service.

AUS 416168
Sgt. GILBERT PD
R.A.A.F.
c/- RAF
Ceylon

10/8/42

Dear Nance

I think it is your turn for a letter. How are you all at home? I sent a cable to you, to let you know my new address, I wonder if you got it or not.

Here we are, still out in the cactus, amongst the man-eating mosquitoes and the foot long centipedes. As yet I haven't come across them but I suppose I will soon.

The other morning four of us went for big-fella walkabout through the jungle. It was awfully interesting seeing the natives at work. We saw them making rope which they do very ingeniously. I wonder if you saw them when you were here. We saw their paddy fields with the old buffaloes lying about and the men crushing the dried corn by dropping a big stone on it. It was very pretty going along the shady paths with the shadows here and there.

I took my camera with me and took two or three snaps. One of Jack Lusby⁶⁹ shaking hands with a little wog about two feet high. I'll send them home if they are any good. We felt a bit thirsty, so we paid one of the little wogs to climb up and get us some coconuts, I don't like the coconut water very much but it was better than nothing.

We still go surfing every day. For the last few days we've had to hitchhike as we've been broke. Yesterday they paid us two weeks pay in advance R120, so we are again in a financial state. To celebrate we had dinner out of camp in a restaurant run by some native bloke who claimed to have travelled all over Europe. It was quite a good meal, but the steak wasn't grilled so we told him how to cook it and he promised to have it grilled for us next time.

We got back to camp about 9 o'clock to find all the other chaps out. They had gone to a native festival. It was a pity we missed out on it, because it was apparently very interesting. It started at 8:00 PM and went all through the night till about 9:00 AM this morning. They certainly do things in a big way when they have any festivals.

They're an awfully friendly race but at the same time stick their hand out for five cents. The little kids are the nicest and also the nicest looking. I think I might bring one home as a souvenir, a curly headed little girl when I come.

⁶⁹ John Vivian Fitzhenry Lusby (1913–1980), known as 'Jack' was an Australian cartoonist, journalist and short story writer. Jack Lusby enlisted in the Royal Australian Airforce in 1941, was posted with the No. 3 Squadron RAAF to fight in North Africa and Middle East and was 'loaned out' to No. 458 Squadron. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Lusby
Accessed August 2024

You probably wonder at the active service on the envelopes, after the easy time I relate we're having, well that gets the letters free of stamps.

That's all for now
Lots of love to Mum and Dad
Love Peter

PS Remember me to Flo and James

TELEGRAM

Sent 11th August; received 13th August 1942

EFM MRS H GILBERT
26 LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

ALL WELL AND SAFE WRITING LOVE
PETER GILBERT.

AUS 416168
Sgt. GILBERT
R.A.A.F
c/- RAF
Ceylon

18/8/42

Darling Mum

How are you all at home? I've been feeling a bit homesick lately, I think because I've got nothing to do and so much time to think.

There's very little news but I'll do my best to tell you what news there is.

The Monday before last four of us hired a couple of outrigger canoes, two of us went in each with an old boat-man. One of the photographs shows you one of the boat-men and Alan Shannon⁷⁰. I was up the front taking the picture. We went for about an hour up the river. We saw a lot of water buffaloes, funny looking things with their heads just sticking out of the water. We didn't go up far enough to see any crocs which was a pity. On the way back, we saw about a fifteen pounder fish stranded in the reeds. The old boat-men got terribly excited, jumped out and pounced on it. It was a very profitable day for them as they sold the fish for 10 Rupees or £1.

The canoes are very hard to control, for when we took over for the boat-men, it just turned round and started the other way.

We've played two cricket matches against the same team. The first match we lost badly, only scoring 49 to their 79, but we won the second which we played yesterday. The pitch is grass but very bumpy and some of the balls just shoot along the ground after they've lobbed, which is a bit hard for even the best bat.

Last Friday night they turned on a concert for the troops. A party came up from Colombo. It wasn't too bad but we felt pretty tired so we left at half time.

All last week it was pretty hot and sticky, but today its quite cool, after a heavy shower last night. These huts are practically weatherproof except for a few drops which get through.

Well that's all for now.
Lots of love to you all
Peter

PS Please give my love to the respective relations

⁷⁰ Flight Lieutenant Alan Lancelot Shannon, 1905-1972, RAAF 286213 served with RAAF in 77 Squadron and was with 74 Operational Unit when he was discharged in 1945. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1063031&c=WW2>; NAA: A9300, SHANNON A L – Accessed 9th August, 2024

TELEGRAM

Sent 29th August (?); Received 4th September 1942

EFM GILBERT

26 LEFEVRE TCE NTH ADELAIDE

ADDRESS AS ORIGINAL WELL LOVE GILBERT

AUS 416168
Sgt Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

4/9/42

Darling Mum

How are you all at home? It seems a long time since we called in but its only two months and in those two months, I've seen a fair bit of new country. There is a space of two weeks between the last letter and this one, because last week we were on the move once more.

The orders to move didn't come before time either, as we were all properly browned off by the camp in Ceylon. We were told we were on our way to India, at which I was rather pleased as the more I can see of the world in this trip the better.

Well, we left Ceylon without me having a chance of seeing the Tarbats. We spent one uncomfortable night in a Ceylon train, which was about as good as a third class carriage at home if there are such things. It had a few foreign elements in it, such as cockroaches and a few other smaller animals which managed to find their way to some of us quite successfully. The lights were also left on all night which didn't make it any easier to sleep. Apart from those little discomforts it wasn't too bad.

When we got to India, we had a far more comfortable train with sleepers. There wasn't any bedding provided, anyhow it wasn't needed. My first look at India was not very impressive, for all there was to see, was sand-dunes covered with a coarse sort of bush. But as we travelled further up, the land became more and more fertile, until everywhere you looked was under cultivation. The second evening we had dinner at one of the towns on the track, actually in the station restaurant which was very nice and clean. They gave us a jolly good meal for a couple of rupees.

Next night we changed trains again, after having the day in one of the big towns. Three of us hired rickshaws for an hour and went through the Indian quarter of the town which was very interesting.

We left at seven o'clock to cross India in an even better train than the second one. There were six of us in each compartment which was like a small room, the width of the carriage, with two bunks, one above the other, along either side and two across the carriage. It was quite a little home from home where we spent thirty six hours.

On the way across, we must have stopped at nearly every station because we were always stopping. At every station the train would be besieged by hawkers on the platform and by kids begging on the other side. I got a photo of a crowd of these kids and if it comes out all right, I'll send it home.

The hawkers were a persistent lot and had everything you could want. Some were selling cups of tea which I didn't touch, others had soap, toothbrushes and all toilet requisites, also cane sticks covered with leather and fancy bits, and bead necklaces. I don't know why but I didn't buy anything at all.

You probably read about the riots in India, well they quietened down just before we got here but they might have flared up again, so there were armed guards on the train. One time the train stopped miles from anywhere just before a bridge and I thought we were in for some trouble, but it turned out that two soldiers guarding the bridge had been killed by a train a few hours before.

We had a lot of meals on the train and mostly of chicken but round about the end of the trip, we had a spot of duck for a day or two, but I didn't enjoy it much as I was a bit crook during the time.

Well here we are, once more on a ship and on the last stage of the trip.

That's all for now
Love to Dad & Nance
Lots of love
Peter

6. (new numbering system??)

416168 Sgt Gilbert
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

12/9/42

Dear Dad

This is just a short note to let you know that all is well with me and that the journey is nearly over. I suppose we will be seeing a few aircraft soon and it won't be before time.

Since we left India, it's been very hot and you could hardly move without sweating. As you can imagine, we have not been doing anything very energetic and I think I've read more books in the last few days, than I've ever read before.

We called in at one port on our way. I've never seen anything more desolate looking as this place was, with its sombre brown buildings at the base of bare rugged hills, the same colour as the buildings.

For the first few days out, we were all put on submarine watches, each watch being for an hour. None of us saw anything luckily. Today we started aircraft watches, for half an hour duration. It's been rather good having these watches, as its been something to do besides reading books.

From the news, it looks as though things over here have quietened down a bit, and that Rommel has been knocked back on his heels.

Well Dad there's no news at all so I'll end this note.

Lots of love to you all
Peter

(Address and date torn out from the corner of the page)

PS I've received no mail
so far but some
should arrive soon PDG

Darling Mum

How are you all at home? While I'm writing this you should be sound asleep in bed as it is twenty to eight over here.

Well, we've arrived in Egypt and have started another wait. We arrived at our camp on the 13th. It's funny how thirteen seems to crop up around me.

We came to the camp by truck along a road on each side of which was nothing but desert. It's a horribly dreary sight at first but you get used to it after a while. For the first night we slept in tents. It brought back memories of scouting days but also a sore hip with them.

(The following paragraph has words missing, being on the reverse side of where the address was torn out)

-----moved over into concrete huts, -----titions of three rooms each.....courtyard. They're quite nice.....flats, unfurnished though. The night we moved in was a very hectic one as we had to knock some furniture together. There are four of us in each little flat and we all went out to scavenge a few bits of wood for tables and seats. Our hunt turned out pretty successfully and we started in to do a spot of bush carpentry.

We started on the table and it was amazing how accurately our approx. measurements turned out. We couldn't have done better with all the carpenters tools, as it was we only had a saw and hammer. After about an hour the table was ready for launching. It was slightly wobbly but now serves the purpose. The was the first article finished and Mick Shearman⁷¹ and myself were very proud of it, as we two made it while the other two were still trying to make a form. We of course offered to help these two very inexperienced carpenters but were rudely told to buzz off. Alex Macdonald⁷² (Mac) started out to make a small table. After nailing bits of wood all over the place, he finally took our advice and the table turned out quite well. We also pinched a top off one of the lavatories and made a stool out of it, on which I'm sitting now.

Living conditions are really pretty good. There are good shower rooms and pretty clean lavatories. There are kero tins dotted over the desert which serve as urinals, these are called Desert Lillies, a very apt name I think. The food isn't terribly good but you can't expect too much out here.

⁷¹ David John Shearman, 1921-1943, RAAF 411394, was killed in a flying accident in over the Mediterranean Sea on 2nd May 1943. He served with No 3 Squadron and the OUT RAF <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/646769>; accessed 9th August 2024

⁷² Flying Officer Alexander Macdonald, born 1920; RAAF 411071 served with 3 Squadron 1942; <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1056028&c=WW2#R>; accessed 9th August 2024, NAA A9300, Macdonald A, Page 41 of 53, Accessed 5th September 2024, and referenced in 3 Squadron at War, Page 240

There's nothing to do here except eat, sleep and trudge around the desert. We have a parade at 0900 hours every morning, which is just a check up to see that we're still here. So apart from our first days activities of furniture making, there has been nothing to do at all.

We've again got a different currency, but this time we'll be here long enough to get to know the Egyptian currency really well. Things are very dear, 9 pence for a small slab of chocolate, about 6 pence for those long packets of chewing gum and clothing is also very expensive.

Tomorrow we are going into Cairo for 48 hours leave which is the most we can get. It will probably be enough as cash doesn't go too far in Cairo I believe.

I'll finish now as I must write another letter tonight.

Lots of love to you all.

Cheerio. Peter.

Photograph including Alex Macdonald and Arthur Dawkins

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C304436>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

MEA0887

Photograph of Desert Lily urinals between tents

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C283376>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00669.007

24/9/42

Dear Nance

How are things at home? All well I hope. I'm pretty fit and still lazing about in the sun, getting fairly brown.

Our little home is now jolly comfortable. The four of us have beds of varying degrees of stability, there are two tables, one for our cooking utensils and one for writing. There are also several stools round the place. All this furniture has been made from odd bits of wood round the place. Each of us takes a turn at Duty Cook. His job is to make an early morning cup of coffee, sweep out the room and fill the water bottles and tins. In fact we're a happy little family and we mean to be as comfortable as we can as we look like being here for a few months.

Since I wrote last week, I've been up to Cairo for 48 hours leave. Our leave started at 12 noon but we were out on the road at about 10 o'clock as we had to hitch hike all the way, the distance being further than Victor Harbor⁷³. We didn't have to wait long and we were soon bowling along towards Cairo. This truck took us for about half an hour and we transferred to another which eventually broke down after about another half an hour. We didn't wait very long before a car came along which stopped. Only three of us could get into this I was lucky enough to be one of three. The car was driven by a New Zealander who took us right to the NZ Club where we were going to stay. It was a very comfortable ride but the other boys were not so fortunate, coming all the way in an open truck which took about 4 hours. Alan Shannon and I, who were waiting for them, thought they must have turned over or something, but eventually they arrived looking very hot and tired.

We got beds at the Annex of the Club which was a couple of streets away. It had several dormitories with seven beds in each, very comfortable, with a small locker beside each bed. The cost was only ten piastres or 2/6 a night.

After we had settled in some of us wandered around the streets, took some films to Kodak House to be developed and bought some more. There are lots of modern shops and cafes round the place. I should think a little different from when Dad was there. We finally finished up our wanderings in a place called Grappis for a drink. It's a very nice place, you go in off the street to a restaurant, and through that, out the back, is an open air café with over hanging vines under which the supposed society of Cairo sits and sips its drinks.

We hadn't been there long when we palled up with three AIF chaps who have been out here two years, very decent coves, all Victorians. We went that night with them to one of the cabarets to see what it was like. There were taxi-girls all over the place who expected you to buy them a drink if you danced with them. I had a dance and the girl asked me to buy her a drink. I told her we had some beer, she could have that if she liked but she didn't and flounced off in a very bad mood.

The cabaret finished about 12 o'clock and we drove off in a Garry⁷⁴ for some supper. We all ended up in the AIF chaps hostel which was run by an old French woman. When we arrived, there was another

⁷³ Adelaide to Victor Harbor – 84kms

⁷⁴ Possibly "chand gari" – a three wheeled vehicle like a rickshaw or tuktuk

chap in Jimmie's, one of the AIFs, bed. Old Madame came in and it was really funny to see and hear the scene between Jimmie and Madame. Jimmie trying to make her understand and Madame screaming away in French and throwing her arms all over the place. Finally things were settled and we arranged to meet them at noon the next day.

We were up pretty early the next morning and had a breakfast of fruit salad and icecream at the NZ Club. We met up with one of our chaps and we went down into the bizaures (*Bazaars??*) to buy suitcases. We went down lots of narrow streets into the heart of the native quarter. We passed the Blue Mosque but didn't go inside. We finally got to the shop where we were getting the cases. We spent about an hour there whilst a very pretty little French girl tried to sell us the shop. We finished up by tossing the proprietor for odd ten piastres off the price of the bags.

We met the boys at 12 and spent the afternoon at the Empire Club, one of the many service clubs round Cairo. We had an extra good dinner at the Tavern Francaise then went to another cabaret which was much the same as the night before.

We said good-bye to the boys who were going back to the front on Sunday and hit the hay. Next morning we were up early and on the road and so our first leave in Cairo ended.

That's all for now.
Lots of love to you all
Cheerio
Pete

A416168
Sgt Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

8/10/42

Dear Dad

How are things at home? I hope you are all well. We've had another move since I wrote last to another transit camp, which is worse than the last. We were all very annoyed at being moved as we had settled comfortably into our three roomed billets and expected to be there for quite a long time.

We're all in tents here and there's quite a lot of sand blowing round as it is the months of winds over here. The flies here are the worst I've ever struck and as I'm trying to write this the brutes are buzzing all round me annoying the life out of me. The only good thing about this place is that I'll be flying again in about nine days' time which is very hard to believe. I'm rather wondering how I'll make out. I suppose after a few dual circuits I'll be okay.

The other day five of us went for a tour out to the pyramids. We hired a guide called Ashur who has been a Dragoman⁷⁵ for 25 years. We went out to Mena by taxi and from there we had horses which we rode round the pyramids and Sphinx. We all had our photo taken with the Sphinx and pyramids in the background which I'm sending home. It's really an extra good one so I hope it gets home alright.

Ashur was a marvellous guide and a real showman. It was worth the money just to listen to him. The trip took three hours all together and was a very interesting three hours. Ashur has had a very colourful life. He's been all over Europe as guide to the Rockfellers, has been guide to all the big nobs who have come out to Egypt. He's a full blooded Bedouin and is very proud of it.

So much for our trip to the pyramids. No. I'm wrong, I forgot to tell you that we climbed inside one of the pyramids and what a climb. We were bent double all the way up on kind of gang planks which had hand rails on either side. To get to the King's tomb we had to almost crawl along a tunnel which opened out into a high roofed vault which contained the tomb, 7ft x 3ft, made from alabaster. It was awfully interesting to be treading where ancient Egyptians trod thousands of years ago. I suppose you did the same trip when you were here last show.

Last night I met a chap, who was at Parafield with Chook, Spit and Co, who I hadn't seen since I saw them off to No 2 ED Sydney on their way to Canada. He had some very sad news for me. Spit Steele⁷⁶ and Guy Riley⁷⁷ have been killed before going into Ops. It's very hard on Mrs Steele as Spit's brother

⁷⁵ A dragoman was an interpreter, translator and official guide

⁷⁶ <https://aviationmuseumwa.org.au/afcR.A.A.F-roll/steele-david-hayward-416291/>; Accessed 5th September 2024; NAA: A705, 163/163/482, Steele David Hayward, Service Number 416291, File Type-Casualty

⁷⁷ <https://aviationmuseumwa.org.au/afcR.A.A.F-roll/riley-charles-guy-416285/>; Accessed 5th September 2024; NAA: A705, 163/55/201, Riley Charles Guy (Pilot Officer) Service Number 416285, File Type-Casualty

was also killed.⁷⁸ Noel, the chap I met told me that Chook had been shot up in his first Op flight but is quite OK now⁷⁹, thank goodness. It's pretty crook when your particular friends start going.

So far I've received no mail from you or anyone. I received one cable from you about two weeks ago and that's all. I wonder if my letters are getting thro' to you. There's been some talk of a large stack of mail just come in, so something might be in that. There should be some mail in Egypt following us about. It will be a great day when the first letter arrives. Here's hoping its soon.

Well that's all for now.
Love to Mum and Nance
Cheerio
Peter

⁷⁸ <https://aviationmuseumwa.org.au/afcR.A.A.F-roll/steele-geoffrey-moore-407810/> Accessed 5th September 2024; NAA: A705, 163/163/325, Moore, Geoffrey Moore (Sergeant) Service Number 407810, File type - Casualty

⁷⁹ "Chook" was seriously wounded and taken off operational duties. NAA: A705, 163/32/129, Fowler, David Murray, (Pilot Officer) Service Number – not known, File type – Casualty. Accessed 5th September 2024

11/10/42

Darling Mum

These are just a few more photos that I've taken and got from the other boys. I forgot to put them in the letter I wrote to Dad a few days ago.

Since I wrote to Dad we've had a big sandstorm. A tornado arrived first, taking part of the mess roof with it and blowing down most of the tin wash houses and tents. The tent I'm in miraculously stayed put, helped by one of the boys who valiantly held on to everything. The storm lasted for about an hour and a half, during which time all our belongings were well covered with sand. We all donned gas marks to keep the sand out of our eyes.

I wrote to the aunts yesterday and told them about the storm and how things were going, so you'll probably get the letters at the same time.

I asked them to tell you that I had heard that Spit Steele and Guy Riley had been killed. Would you please convey my sympathy to their mothers as I don't know their addresses. Chook also has been shot up but is now OK again, thank goodness.

Well Mum, this was just a note, so as there's no more news, I'll stop.

Give my love to all the relations and tell them they'll get a letter soon.

Lots of love to you all.
Peter

AUS 414148
Sgt Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

28/10/42

Dear Nance

I think it is your turn for a letter so here goes.

Yesterday I started flying at last. It seemed a bit strange being up in the air again and I made an awful mess of it to start with. After two hours I settled down and felt quite at home again. As a matter of fact, I was begging (*beginning* ?) to get very down hearted and the instructor was getting peeved as I was doing everything wrong, when suddenly everything came back to me. I did three good circuits and the instructor said I'd go off by myself tomorrow, that's today. It was great to have the feel again.

So today I hopped off at seven and had a little over an hour and have been hanging round the flight ever since. I haven't been off in the really fast kite yet but expect to do so in a couple of days.

There are four of us on the course, Bob Ulrich⁸⁰ a WA chap, and two pommies. The day we came down here, we were up at four am and caught the train at Cairo at about 7.15. We travelled third class which wasn't so bad as the journey was only three hours and we had a reserved carriage. While we were waiting to go, we saw some prisoners marched from the train and also some internees. The prisoners looked quite happy to be out of it I suppose.

The mess down here is awfully cheap. It costs only 15 piastres a week (3/9) whereas we paid four piastres a day at the other place. The food is much better here but you don't get enough. I had lunch a little while ago and I felt as if I had just had a snack.

The flies down here aren't nearly as bad as at the other place. But here to make up for it there are the malaria mosquito. We've got mosquito nets, I'm under mine now to keep away the few flies that are about, but last night a mosi (*mozzie*) must have crawled in with me as I've now got twenty two bites. They might be sand fly bites; I don't know though.

I think we'll be here about ten to twelve days and then go back where we came from before being posted to the squadron.

There doesn't seem to be much out about the push so far but from all reports we seem to be doing pretty well. I wonder if this time will be the last, I hope so. The Russians seem to be still holding out. I take my hat off to them, they must have suffered terrific casualties and hardship. If they hold out and then make a new offensive I reckon the whole aspect of the war will change.

The old Aussies seem to be doing well in the Owen Stanley Range⁸¹. I wonder if John and his mob are in that or are they still up at Glen Innis.

⁸⁰ Robert Young Ulrich, 1922-2009 ; RAAF 406966 served with No 3 Squadron from 3rd July 1942 – 16th September 1943. During his service with the RAAF, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. NAA A9300, Ulrich RY, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/R1565350> Accessed 5th September 2024

⁸¹ Owen Stanley Ranges are situated in Papua New Guinea. The Kokoda trail passes through the range. PDG's older brother, John was serving with the 2nd/27th Battalion in PNG.

I got two letters the other day. One from Aunt Marjory posted July 3rd to the ED and the other from Bet posted Aug 7th. Those are the only two letters I've had so far. The boys from the eastern and western states have had letters but neither Arthur or myself have had any. I think the SA mail must miss out in the convoys. I hope there's some soon as I'm anxious to hear how everything is at home with the remanants (*remnants*) and what John and Tony are up to.

I had some things sent over from a shop in Cairo, I hope they arrived alright.

Well that's all for now Nance
Lots of love to Mum and Dad
Cheerio
Babe.

20/11/42

Dear Tony

How are you old boy? It seems a hell of a long time since we were enjoying the privilege of using the flat. I got a letter from Bet about a month ago and she said that you had finished down at Flinders, so didn't expect to see you at the flat again. It was certainly great to be able to go there whenever we liked.

Well it's a long time since I wrote to you last, so I thought I'd send you a few lines. At the moment I'm sitting in the mess, a tent in the middle of the desert. It's becoming bloody cold now and you need about ten blankets on your camp stretcher. Yes I've managed to get myself a stretcher and am now jolly comfortable.

I'm getting a bit ahead of myself so I'll start from before I got to the squadron.

We spent about five weeks in transit camps, sitting on our bums as usual. At last I was sent off to do my conversion course onto the Kitty Hawk. For the first two hours dual which was on Harvards, I was bloody hopeless but finally settled down and went off solo. I did two hours solo then went off in the Kitty. The first take off I nearly had an accident, not with the plane. After a couple of hours I felt fairly confident and got up about 10 hours on them.

Four of us went back to the transit camp we had been in and from there were posted to the squadron via a more advanced transit camp. We set off in a truck and arrived to find that the camp had moved further up. The driver had orders to take us back again but we weren't going back 60 miles for anyone so hopped off with all our gear and stayed the night at the halfway house between Cairo and Alex. Next morning we set off and reached the camp about three that afternoon.

We slept there that night and started hitchhiking to the squadron. What a day that was. It took the four of us seven trucks to reach the approx. position of the squadron. One of the trucks was detoured off the main road for about three or four miles. It was one of these very dusty roads and by the time we got back onto the main road we all looked like clowns out of Wirth's Circus⁸². To add to our misery we were very hungry as we had had nothing since breakfast.

That night we slept out in the bundu with an Artillery unit. The chaps were very good to us, feeding us on bully, salmon, biscuits and jam. None of us slept much that night as we only had two blankets each and it was bloody cold.

Next morning we set out to find the squadron. I think we must have walked ten miles before we came across the squadron. We were certainly glad to get here.

⁸² Wirth's Circus was the most well known circus in Australia from the 1880s to the 1960s.

<https://collections.artscentremelbourne.com.au/#browse=enarratives.1654> Accessed 12th September 2024

It's great in the squadron no bullshit at all, a pilots mess, officers and sergeants all in together which is a damn good idea as we all get to know each other and can cooperate much better that way.

We've been moving up pretty fast and I've travelled each time by car. There's a hell of a lot of Jerry and Itie stuff smashed up along the way. The CO has got an ME 109⁸³ which was left behind at one of the drones and is as happy as Larry. I've been into Bardia and Tobruk which are pretty well bashed about but would be pretty little places otherwise.

The church at Tobruk is still mainly standing. There were three or four very nice statues in there, one had bullet holes through both eyes, probably Jerries work, but the others were quite untouched.

Three days ago I went out on my first sortie and got lost. We were out straffing and I missed the squadron and tagged onto another one intending to follow them home but lost them in a rainstorm. I then thought very hard about finding my way home. I found the main coast road and followed it back but the juice got very low, so I put it down about thirty miles from our drome. I got back to find out I had been posted missing. Not bad for a first effort.

Well that's all for now I have to write another letter or two.

So Cheerio old boy.

Pete

PS let's know what you're doing these days PDG

⁸³ ME 109 or the Messerschmitt Me 109 was the foundation aircraft of the German Luftwaffe 1939-1945

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

28/11/42

Dear Dad

Thanks a lot for your letter dated Sept 5. I also got another from Mum 13th and from Nance Aug 31st. I think they had been at the Squadron for a while before I got them. I also got one from Clair, Aunt Marjorie and the Jamiesons. It was great getting those letters, it was the biggest mail I had got.

I don't know why you hadn't had any letters from me. I posted one airmail at Fremantle which you should have got. Also when we were in Ceylon I posted four which should have got home pretty soon.

It was nice having Tony home for so long. I'm glad he got through his exams OK. I'd like to see him in his uniform. He ought to look very well in it. He seems to be having a very gay time with all his parties.

In the letter from the Jamiesons, Judy said that she hadn't heard from John for two weeks, so supposed he was on the move. When you're writing wish him all the best from me. I wrote to both John and Tony the other day and addressed them home as I didn't know their correct address.

The old home must have been quite noisy again and bright what with Margaret's wedding then Tony's farewell party⁸⁴. It sounds as if it was the biggest party that's ever been held in the Ancestral Mansion.

Since I wrote telling about my forced landing, one of the boys crashed on landing but was unhurt. Consequently, three of us have to go back and do ten or more hours flying. It's bad luck but won't do us any harm. We won't be missing anything as the Squadron is out on a rest. Half the boys are on leave now, the rest go in a couple of days. I'll miss out on that but perhaps flying is more important.

The other afternoon one of the Jerry's recco aircraft came over and our ack-ack boys threw up a hell of a lot of stuff but got nowhere. That night about half-past nine we were in bed and a plane flew over. You can tell the Jerry aircraft by the uneven beat. We heard it start to dive and we hit the floor pretty smartly, then came the whistle and crack. It seemed pretty close but was really about 500 yards away. He dropped six bombs but they didn't go off properly which I really didn't mind at all.

I've been able to see Derna⁸⁵ which is a very pretty little place, especially the approach to it. There are seven or eight hairpin bends on the way down the escarpment and you get a perfect view of the town nestling on the water's edge. I was damned annoyed because I had no film for my camera. There is a high wall surrounding the town itself which must have been there for years. I was hoping to get a 35mm camera from the wogs but they wanted some enormous price or 10 kilos of tea but I had no tea so was out of luck.

⁸⁴ Tony was posted to HMAS Gawler as Acting Sub Lieutenant in November 1942

⁸⁵ Derna is a port city in eastern Libya

It's cold and wet today, a real winter's day. We've been issued with leather jackets lined with fur, you've probably seen the Yanks wearing them. They're very warm and just the thing for Winter here.

Well, Dad, that's all for now
Love to you all
Peter

14/12/42

Darling Mum

It's again a bit over two weeks since I wrote last but I haven't had much chance as I've been moving around quite a lot.

I told you that three of us had to go back and get some more hours up. Well we set off in a truck to a drome about thirty miles east to get a plane down to Cairo. When we arrived there we found everything had moved up to the drome we had just left. Of course no-one knew anything about it. Luckily we saw a Lockheed just about to take off and dashed across and managed to hop aboard. We were very lucky as it was going to within ten miles of where we were to do our flying. We rang up for a truck which arrived in due course and got to our destination about 8pm. We were there until Thursday midday and did about six and a half hours flying.

The trip in the Lockheed was quite pleasant taking about three hours. We flew down the coast a fair way then inland over the Nile Delta. It looks beautifully fertile, the green of the crops and the dark brown of the soil making a kind of patchwork pattern. Then all of a sudden it stops and the desert starts again.

We got up to Cairo about six o'clock on the Thursday night and went to find out when we could get a plane back to the Squadron. We were told not for two or three days, so drew a few quid and checked in at a Services Club. We had Friday, Sat and Sunday in Cairo and had quite a good time and spent a lot of money. It's amazing where it all goes. Once you've broken a pound it just goes in a flash.

The plane left on the Monday morning and we were up at 5:30 to get out to the drome by 6:30. However the plane did not leave till after 8 o'clock. We went to a drome past ours where we had lunch. There were a lot of Jerry planes there, all smashed up, from the last time and from this time. We made our drome sometime in the afternoon.

Next morning the whole wing moved. We were going up to a drome well past Benghazi. As usual I went up by road. This time it really was a very pleasant trip taking three days. We left about eight one morning and after a while got into really lovely country. It was all up hill and down dale, covered with grass and trees, just like the country at home. It was all like that up to Benghazi, then it started to get rocky and bare again.

The first day the convoy only made seventy odd miles and that night camped just off the road. An early start next morning and we made Barce (*Barca*) by lunchtime. Barce is quite a large place but very scattered. The farm houses are all white and of square design. We carried on and the next thing we came too (to) was Tocra Pass. This is very pretty, more so than Derna. The road winds round the hills, disappearing then coming into sight. That night we camped about seven miles from Benghazi in amongst a wog camp. One of the old native women was baking bread at the time. They have a clay oven and they stick the mixture around the walls then peel it off.

Next morning we got to Benghazi and Danny Boardman⁸⁶, my flight commander who was leading the convoy took us right in and round the harbour. There was an oil tanker burning there which had been going for three weeks. The town itself is in an awful mess as you can imagine.

That afternoon we reached the drome about 5 o'clock. It's just the same as what we had left, rocky, sandy and only stubby scrub bushes. The only thing I was sorry about was that I didn't have my camera.

The day before yesterday, Bob Ulrich and myself were over at a hospital about two miles from the drome, seeing one of the boys who had cracked his neck in a crash. We were chatting away when suddenly a machine gun or guns opened up. I said "Oh, there's someone shooting". Then the ack-ack opened up. We were out of the tent like a shot, in time to see a JU88⁸⁷ scarping along just below the clouds with ack-ack bursting all round him. He went up into the clouds then came down again on fire and plunged into the deck. It was a fine sight from a distance but from all accounts not very nice from up close as the chaps in it were badly smashed about.

I'm now at Wing Base with four of the others. There were too many pilots so we were sent down. We'll probably go back in two or three weeks time. We came down in a Heinkel which one of the squadrons now owns, so I can say I have flown in a German aircraft.

Have had no mail for a fair time. Some is expected in very soon though.

Must stop now.
Lots of love to you all.
Peter

⁸⁶ Flight Lieutenant Lloyd Lindsay Boardman, 1919 – 1990, RAAF 402787, served with No 3 Squadron, awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1040965&c=WW2> Accessed 5th September 2024; NAA A9300, Boardman LL

⁸⁷ The Junkers Ju 88 was a German World War II Luftwaffe twin-engine multirole combat aircraft

TELEGRAM

Received 15 December 1942 from Egypt

Efm Mrs H Gilbert 26 Lefevre Tce

Letter and telegram received

Many thanks all well

And safe love

Peter Gilbert

TELEGRAM

Sent 21 December; received 13 January 1943)

EFM D H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTHADELAIDE

LOVE AND BEST WISHES FOR CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW YEAR TO ALL AT

HOME ALL WELL

PETER GILBERT.

28/12/42

Dear Nance

I think its your turn for a letter, so here goes. Since I wrote last the great festive season has come and gone and we're now almost into 1943. Here's hoping that next year may see the war well on its way to an end.

I'll carry on from where I left off last time at the wing Base at Gazala⁸⁸. With four other chaps I ferried aircraft up to the squadron. It was quite a good trip but I made an awful muck of it trying to land. I was last in and the first time failed to get onto the runway. The second time I got on alright but was drifting off it as fast as I was getting on. I tried again, all unsuccessful so for the fourth time I tried the other runway and was at last successful. A pretty poor effort I can tell you.

We stayed there for two or three days and caught up on some good food. We flew back to a drome near Benghazi where the wing Base had moved up to. From there we flew back to Gazala, spent the night there and flew more aircraft up to the drome near Benghazi. That was about the 19th of Dec.

We stayed there for two days which were very boring as there was absolutely nothing to do and also the food wasn't much chop.

About four days before Xmas Day, one of the boys flew down from the Squadron to ask for five more aircraft as they had had a bad day and lost four aircraft and two pilots. One of the boys, a SA, Rex Bailey⁸⁹ (*correct spelling Bayly*), was shot up but managed to crash land. The Boss (*Squadron Leader Gibbes*) saw him and landed. Rex had to run about a mile or so to him. They both discarded their chutes, the Boss sat on Rex's knees and they flew back to safety. All this happened about a mile from the Jerry drome they had just been strafing.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Gazala is situated near the coast in the north east region of Libya, west of Benghazi and about 60 kilometres west of Tobruk. The Battle of Gazala took place in May/June 1942.

⁸⁹ Flight Lieutenant Rex Bayly, 1918-1984, RAAF 407416 <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1040247&c=WW2> (Accessed 5th September 2024) served with No 3 Squadron; NAA A9300, BAYLY RH Pages 1-130; *3 Squadron at War, Pages 94, 237*, Awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

⁹⁰ Robert Gibbes (Bobby) " joined No.3 Squadron in North Africa in May 1941 and there became a double ace - and later the longest-serving commander of the squadron. *"Two actions sum up the man. On December 21, 1942, he landed his Kittyhawk in difficult terrain in the North African desert to rescue Rex Bayly, a squadron colleague who had been shot down. Gibbes got rid of his belly fuel tank to reduce weight and tossed out his parachute to make room for the other pilot in the cockpit before losing his port wheel during the rough, hair-raising take-off - which meant an eventful one-wheel landing when they got back to their base."* (Sydney Morning Herald, April 14th, 2007 – article about Bobby Gibbes' life.

Five of us flew up to the Squadron and I am now flying up with them thank goodness. This drome we're on now was very heavily mined. The sappers dug up 700 hundred of the ruddy things but not before five of our ground staff lads had been blown up. These sappers line up in line and move slowly forward over the ground prodding it with their bayonets, probing for the mines. I don't envy them their job.

Next comes Xmas Day. Actually we started the festive season at 2 o'clock the day before Xmas. We had quite a good supply of the amber liquid and by evening we were pretty happy. Xmas Day dawned just as any other day in the desert. I had a spot of toothache the day before but it stopped for Xmas Day. The whole Squadron had a community dinner out in the open. It was a sight worth seeing. All the boys chewing at turkey legs. Yes, we had turkeys which they had brought up from Alexandria, and were they any good. We had roast potatoes and peas and beans with them. For sweets, there was peaches in jelly, plum pudding and those meat pies (*mince pies??*). It certainly was a magnificent feast for out in the desert. The only thing wrong with the day was that I wasn't home with you Remnants. I received your Xmas cable the day before. Thank you very much. It was very good timing.

In the last two days, I've had a couple of practice flips, doing battle formation and shadow firing, that is one aircraft flies a long at about five hundred feet and another fires at his shadow. It's very good for teaching deflection shooting.

Well that's all for now.
Lots of love to you all
Babe

PS No mail for a long time. Some expected soon. PDG

F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

2/1/43

Dear John

Thanks for your letter old boy. I only got it today. It had been held in the orderly room as they didn't know I was here. It must have been there for at least six weeks, as I got six letters when I got to the Squadron and they were dated September. I've got it now so that's all what matters.

What the hell are you up in New Guinea for, it's bloody dangerous there, isn't it? This place isn't so bad at all now. It has been far worse of course but now we've got the upper hand, things are pretty comfortable. I'm quite certain I wouldn't like to be sent to New Guinea, even for us it would be bloody crook.

We had Xmas out in the bundu and it was a pretty good Xmas too except for the lack of familiar faces. We had turkey, spuds, peas and beans and for sweets jellied peaches, plum pudding and mince pies. It was bloody amazing eating turkey and all those good things out in the middle of nowhere. There was a plentiful supply of beer and everyone was very merry, including myself.

I have been doing a spot of flying but have only done one operation on which I was a bit wet and got lost as I think I told you. I've done a few practice flips lately but haven't flown in the last couple of days. Since I've been out here I've got more truck hours than flying hours as every move we've made I've gone by truck. Admittedly I've been able to see Tobruk, Derna, Barce and Bengasi which has been very interesting. When reading about them in the paper I never dreamt I'd actually see them.

As yet I haven't been properly bombed. One night Jerry dropped a few about five hundred yards away which I reckon is quite near enough. He has been over other nights but has only dropped flares which hurt nobody.

There's no flying today for us, so I took the time to write a few lines to you.

The chap has just come to take the mail so I'll close now.

Cheerio and lots of luck
Pete



This map sourced online from Nations Online Project:

<https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/libya-political-map.htm>

4/1/42 **43**

Darling Mum

Just received your letter dated Nov 1. It was grand getting another letter from you after about two months. I can't understand why you haven't got any letters from me. I can't say I've written every week, more like every two weeks but all the same you should have at least ten by now. No doubt the mail system's ruddy terrible but it shouldn't be that bad. I also got two letters from Clair, Oct 29th and Nov 4th. She said she had just got two letters from me, you should have also got two.

I had a letter from John a few days ago which had been here for weeks. I was surprised to see that he was in New Guinea. It must be a terrible country to fight over. He said he had a bad tummy for quite a while but was getting over it. He told me that Tony had got his Sub Lieuy⁹¹, nice work isn't it. I'm glad he is getting on with his fellow officers and likes his job.

It's a coincidence about John Shierlaw⁹² because I came across a chap down in Cairo who had met a tall fair haired chap who knew me, in Malta but couldn't remember his name. It must have been John.

You all seem to be working very hard at home. I'm glad to Dad is still going strong. I think he's been working harder now than before he resigned at the Kids.⁹³

What's this about Bet having a long time of sickness. Poor old Bet, what's been wrong with her? I've had a couple of letters from her early in the piece but not for a long time now.

Now about this beaut cake you mention, I'm afraid I haven't set eyes on it yet worse luck, but it might turn up, here's hoping.

So Billy⁹⁴ is now in the airforce and also got a motorbike, the lucky young devil. He ought to like the life as it's really jolly good and a great chance to meet a lot of decent chaps.

Well we're now in 1943. Here's hoping it proves a happier year than '42. I didn't stay up to see the new year in but went to bed about 10.30.

The last two days have been rotten. A terrific wind and thick dust which gets everywhere. Visibility yesterday was practically zero for some of the time but cleared up towards evening. It has been the same today.

⁹¹ Tony promoted to Sub Lieutenant in January 1943, NAA A6769, GILBERT W A, Page 2 of 2, Accessed 10th September 2024

⁹² Warrant Officer John Shierlaw, 1921-1943, RAAF 416107 RAAF, was machine gunned by Allied Aircraft while on a POW march in Germany (now Lithuania) <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/515337>, Accessed August 2024

⁹³ Adelaide Children's Hospital, known as "the Kids"; renamed the Women's and Children's Hospital in 1994

⁹⁴ William Browne Gilbert (known as Bill or Billy) 1924-1999; RAAF 429945 enlisted in 1942. PDG's cousin, the son of William Gilbert (1887-1967, (Henry Gilbert's brother) and Catherine Pauline Browne 1897-1984.

This morning the Wing Dentist came around and had a look at our teeth. Mine were quite OK which is pretty good as I haven't had them looked at for months.

Well that's about all for now
Hoping to hear again from you soon.
Lots of love to you all
Peter

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

5/1/43

Dear Dad

Just received three letters from home. One from you, Mum and Tony. They were all from Aug 17th – 26th and had caught up with me from Ceylon. Thanks a lot.

As yet none of your letters have acknowledged any letters from me. The mail is lousy.

You make me very envious with your description of your Sunday supper by the fireside. I could do with a few of those suppers just now.

I'm very glad to hear that Tony has now got his commission. He certainly got it the hard way. He ought to look pretty good in a Sub Lieuy's uniform, he's just the shape to carry a smart uniform.

Good old Budgie, always on the job⁹⁵. Has he been fertilising your hair lately? I suppose Chips⁹⁶ would be a bit on the big side now as he was well on the way to being fairly lumpy before I left.

Gosh you certainly are unlucky with your surgeons at the Kids. It makes you work damn hard I bet, and added to that you say you have to examine the age groups. You must be working harder than before the war.

Today has been really nice after the two dusty days. As yet I haven't had time to have a clean up and I have still large amounts of dust in my hair and ears but I'm used to being dirty by now.

I'm glad to hear all the animals are still going strong, and that Mum is still mothering Chips and the budgies.

Well this is a very short letter as I wrote yesterday.

Lots of love to you all.

Cheerio

Peter

⁹⁵ The family pet bird

⁹⁶ The family pet dog

10/1/43

Darling Mum

I received the beaut cake with Xmas card inside the day before yesterday. Thanks awfully. It's kept beautifully and is really delicious. More of the same will be thankfully received.

Believe it or not we had a picture show here a few nights ago. There was a short first, featuring a pretty good dance band, then Marlene Dietrich in Seven Sinners. I didn't think it was very good. It was a real open air picture show. They rigged up a screen and all the trucks parked round in a semi-circle round it. It was a bit of change from the usual evening program which was the main thing.

I've been doing quite a bit of flying in the last few days. Actually five hours in three days. One day four of us escorted the AOC up to our advanced landing ground. It was a very nice job, as he was in a very slow plane, and it wasn't at all comfortable flying at 140mph in the old Kittyhawk.

The next day I was up at 6.45 which is really 5.45, but no-one has given the order to put back the clocks. If I ever find the gent whose (*who's*) responsible, it will go hard for him as its mighty cold and dark at that time.

Our job was to patrol over our ALG⁹⁷. When we got there, the CO who I was flying behind turned right. Little me followed him quite happily until, ahead, I saw a plane with a black and white cross on it, white wing tips and white propeller boss. It was an ME109. I'm not quite sure what my feelings were. I don't think I was very scared, probably because I couldn't quite believe it was the real thing. There were 15 all together but only six or so stopped to fight. It was pretty safe as there were twelve of us. I fired three bursts at one kite but missed him I think. I was very annoyed as it was a dead easy shot and a great opportunity missed. However better luck next time.

The last few days have still been pretty bad. A very cold wind and plenty of dust everywhere. It's a wonder the aircraft ever go again after all the muck that must blow through them.

I haven't had a decent wash for days, the water being a bit scarce. I don't think my hair will ever be the same again after all the desert that's deposited in it. I'm attempting another moustache which I think will be an improvement on the other. We will see in due course.

Well that's all for now.
Lots of love to you all.
Love
Peter

PS These photos where (*were*) not all my work. Mine are the crook ones. PDG

⁹⁷ Advanced Landing Ground ???

23/1/43

Dear Remanants

I'll make this a joint letter as I received 5 letters from you a few days ago. Two from you Mum, two from you Dad and the big one with the photos from you Nance. Thanks a lot. They were dated from 5th Oct, 6th, 13th, 26th and Nov 4th. There's a correction there wasn't one from Nance, the one with the photos was from Mum.

I made a resolution to write a few lines every week, even if there wasn't any news, but I'm afraid I broke it very quickly. However I've got a very good excuse. For the last six days we've been on the move and we've been without a mess until now. For a few nights we were very hard done by, as we were minus beds and had to sleep out in the open. It was really nice though, as the nights were very fine and beautifully starry. It was a bit dewy but not enough to make things unpleasant.

It's a great day today Tripoli has fallen and everyone is very happy about it. The first we knew of it, was when everyone started firing off Verey⁹⁸ lights all over the drome. It's really a very great day, as today we have achieved what we've been fighting for for so long.

The day before yesterday a big number of parcels arrived and I got four. A lovely one from you, everything was very acceptable. I don't think you need my advice as to what to put in a parcel, after that. Also from the Gilbert aunts⁹⁹, Clair and Mrs Fowler¹⁰⁰. A lovely cake from Mrs Fowler with pink icing and Good Luck written on it. It was terribly nice of her. I sent you a cable saying I had received the parcels, so I hope you got it alright.

We've been working pretty hard these last few days, picking at the Hun as he retreats from Tripoli. I've been flying on an average about 3 hours a day and I certainly feel pretty tired at the end of each day. It certainly is a difference from about this time last year when I wasn't flying at all. I've now got about 30 Op hours up which is a start. I don't know if you know, but we do about 200 hours altogether on operations. Counting all flying, I've now done over 50 hours on Kittyhawks which isn't too bad. However I've still got a great deal to learn.

Lately we've been flying over some very nice country. It looks very fertile from the air. There are also quite a few very presentable houses. This country is all along the coast from Misurata on past Tripoli. The old Tripoli looks quite a nice town. We flew just off it yesterday. I hope it's not smashed about, as we will probably be spending leave there.

Poor old John must have had a very tough time of it. I'm so glad that the battalion got back OK. I would like to see old John with 12 days' beard.

⁹⁸ Verey lights are flares fired from pistols, used in both world wars for signalling and lighting. They come in different colours <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/A03263>

⁹⁹ Dorothy (Dolly) Gilbert 1885-1973, Marjory Gilbert 1888-1985 and Emily (Emmie) Gilbert, 1892-1974, younger sisters of PDG's father, Henry Gilbert. The three sisters were unmarried and lived together for their whole lives, at Pewsey Vale, Medindie and latterly in Stirling,

¹⁰⁰ "Chook" Fowler's mother

I was very sorry to hear that Bet had been so ill. Has there been an epidemic of measles or was Bet's just an isolated case? They must have had a difficult time of it in the little flat. I must write to Bet very soon.

The photos of Tony and yourselves were very good, but the one of you Mum doesn't do you credit. Tony looks well in his uniform.

Well that's all for now and I'll try and write a few lines every week from now on.

Lots of love to you all

Peter

PS Please thank Bin for her letter. I'll write to her soon.
Other letters received from Clair and Aunt M.

TELEGRAM

Received 25 January 1943

EFM Miss Nancy Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce North Adelaide

Birthday greetings good
luck love
Peter Gilbert

29/1/43

Dear Dad

Here I am again and this time I'm writing in an Itie¹⁰¹ house which we have got up for a mess. There are actually two buildings, one we use for sleeping quarters has three rooms and a main sort of hall which we use to sleep in too. Each room has a window, now minus the panes owing to our bombing, with swinging shutters, so we're very cosy. The other rooms in the second building are dining room, sitting room and bar. We've got electric light fixed up and the whole set up is pretty good I can tell you.

When we first arrived here, it was such a change from the desert that everyone knocked off work, forgot about the war and stood around in amazement. I assure you it was a great sight to see green grass, studded with yellow and blue nature flowers and trees everywhere instead of sand, stones and camel thorns.

The day we arrived was beautifully sunny and we just lay on the grass in the sun and didn't give a damn about the war. But now we're settled in and used to the new surroundings and the war is going on per usual.

I got four more letters a few days ago, one from Mum, Bin, Clair and Jean¹⁰². Thanks Mum. The mail question seems to be improving somewhat. I suppose it's because I'm sort of established now out here.

I'm glad the papers and photo arrived quite safely. I hope the parcel I sent has arrived safely and that you liked the contents. I'm afraid Dad that the cufflinks were a pretty poor effort on my part but really I couldn't think of anything special you would like. Anyhow, they'll keep a cuff or two together. Yes, I got your Xmas card in the parcel, it was a jolly good one.

Thanks Mum for writing to Mrs Steele and Mrs Riley. I was terribly sorry to hear that Mick¹⁰³ had also been killed. It must be a very sad time for Mrs Riley.

Fancy meeting old Joanne. Those dancing lessons were certainly a long time ago. She's produced an infant now has she, good show.¹⁰⁴

Well things are pretty slack now but this month we've been going pretty strong and I've done thirty three hours this month which isn't bad going. I've now nearly forty hours Ops.

Tripoli looks quite a nice place and I've flown over it a couple of times. As yet it's not properly open but when everything gets going should be a good spot.

¹⁰¹ Slang for Italian

¹⁰² Jean Dawkins, Arthur's wife and sister of Clair.

¹⁰³ Michael Nugent Riley 1920-1942, AIF SX8113; enlisted in 1940 and was killed in action in Egypt on 31 October 1942. He was Guy Riley's older brother <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/R1699742> ; NAA B883, SX8113

¹⁰⁴ Most probably referring to Joanne (Joanna) Priest 1910-1997, a well known dancer and teacher in Adelaide who ran ballroom dancing and ballet classes in the late 1930s when PDG would have been of the age to attend. Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed 5th September 2024.

Yesterday I had a letter from John Shierlaw who is now out here with 458 Squadron. I was very surprised to hear from him as I thought he was in Malta.

Well Dad that's all for now. I'm pretty fit except for a bit of a cold still and a slight attach of Gypo¹⁰⁵ gut.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

¹⁰⁵ Gypo gut – slang for Egyptian –and slang for a gastro-intestinal complaint eg Bali Belly

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

30/1/43

Dear Nance

I'm afraid this will be very short as I wrote yesterday.

I said yesterday that the mail had improved, well I was right because yesterday I received three from you folks, dated from the 12th – 16th Nov, one from each of you plus your Xmas card. Thank you very much. I also received a card from Bet and one from Mil. Please thank them and say I'll write soon.

I forgot to tell you yesterday that we had had fresh meat for the first time for ages. The free French who are near us got a cow from somewhere and gave us part of it. We had steak for lunch and a beaut curry for dinner. It certainly was good after all the tinned stuff we've been getting. I hope we can get some more.

There is some prospect of us getting some leave shortly. It's about three months since I had any actual leave so I'm certainly looking forward to it.

The last few days have been bitterly cold and wet. It rained pretty solidly on and off for three days so it does rain here at times.

Today is really beautiful. It was a bit cold when we first got up but now it's beautifully sunny. I am writing in our Operations truck and as I look out the door it's quite a picture with the white tents dotted over the green grass and the trees in the back ground.

Well I can't think of anymore.
Lots of love to you all
Babe.

7/2/43

Darling Mum

How are you all at home. I bet you're a lot warmer than I am right now, for it's miserable today, raining and freezing cold. I've got my wooly jacket on, so am pretty warm on the top half but the bottom half is jolly cold. The weather has been beautiful up to today, real swimming days.

Since I wrote last, I've been to two pictures and in a real cinema, too which is a short distance from where we are. It's a typical Italian building of white stone. The seats were a bit hard but not too bad. The first picture was Helzapoppin which I thought was very good with plenty of laughs. It was on in Adelaide in November, wasn't it? The other picture was Dad & Dave Go to Town. It was a very weak show but had a few laughs. The main thing was, it was entertainment.

About four days ago a few of us were able to go to Tripoli. I didn't think much of the place but as yet it hasn't had time to get going. The people are rather afraid of us still and keep indoors but I think they will soon get over that. One thing they have started there is the discrimination between officers and other ranks, as we were asked to leave one of the hotels, or rather the Hotel, owing to it being officers only. It'd rock you, wouldn't it.

There are a few small shops open, including a barber shop which I took advantage of, as I was beginning to look like a musician or something. It was quite a good shop, all marble basins and so on, and they gave me a very good cut. That's about all on Tripoli, its not much of a place now but should improve in time.

I've at last seen old Winnie.¹⁰⁶ He arrived a few days ago and stayed with one of the Generals. All the Squadron were lined up for his inspection. We waited for him for fifty minutes and finally he drove past preceded by a few armoured cars. Each Squadron gave him three hearties and the old boy gave us the V for Victory sign. I thought he looked very old and white. He's about seventy two, so I don't suppose all the worries he has had would make him look any younger. However he did look the typical old bulldog.

We've had a padre ¹⁰⁷with us for two or three weeks and last Sunday we had a nice little service. He gave the shortest and best sermon I think I've ever heard. It really made me think.

Well that's all for now
I'm fit as a fiddle

¹⁰⁶ Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister visited troops in Libya in February 1943, addressing the British 8th Army battalion <https://winstonchurchill.hillisdale.edu/churchill-travels/> Accessed 20th August 2024; *3 Squadron at War*, Pages 110-111

¹⁰⁷ There were three padres who ministered to the troops in the Middle East. S/Ldr Bob Davies (Church of England), Sqn/Ldr Fred McKay (Presbyterian) and Sqn/Ldr Johnny McNamara (Catholic). They were known as "The Terrible Three". <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/MEA1892> Accessed 10th September 2024. Thanks to James Oglethorpe of 3 Squadron Association, we are pretty certain that PDG is referring to Bob Davies who was with No 3 Squadron at the time that this letter was written. <https://www.3sqnraafasn.net/subpages/AWMDDavies.htm> Accessed 11th September 2024

Lots of love to you all

Peter

TELEGRAM

Sent 12th February (?); Received 14th February 1943

LC DR GILBERT LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

PETER WELL AND SAFE. DAWKINS

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

16/2/43

Dear Dad

How are you all at home these days? I suppose you're still very busy with the Kids and the Army work.

There's been very little doing here for the last few days. Everyone just regaining their breath before the final push. I think it may be quite a struggle before the Hun is pushed out of Africa. They're certainly putting up a stiff resistance against the First army¹⁰⁸ but its probably only a flash in the pan. On the whole though he's getting a good bashing on all fronts.

We're once again in the desert and in tents. Our last place spoilt us for the desert as we had a very soft time of it there. Anyhow it was a fairly good rest.

I'm sorry to say I missed out on the leave. Twelve blokes went down to Cairo in lots of four but then they went and cancelled any further leave. Some of us might have got a few days in Tripoli but that's out now I think. It wouldn't have been too bad either, as the town is beginning to open up quite a lot and they've got a couple of Service Clubs going.

The other day we found a lot of electricity globes and had a jolly little fight with them, plus a few empty wine bottles. Very childish I admit but it all keeps us happy.

17th. I had to stop yesterday as we went on a job. When we got back we found that we had to move our mess and tents to some other part of the bundu so my writing was put off till this morning.

This morning we were to have got up at 6.30 but the job was cancelled so we didn't get up till 8.30 which was a good show as it's pretty cold these mornings.

For the first time for ages we had eggs for breakfast or at least I should say one egg, plus bacon and tomatoes. It was jolly good for a change and I could do with a few more.

Although we're in tents again I think we're really just as comfortable as when we were in the houses. In fact our Mess of two Jerry tents is more roomy than the house.

For over two weeks now it's been terribly cold and raining off and on. We've had a couple of thunder storms and the thunder was the loudest I've ever heard. As a matter of fact I thought it was bombs dropping. It's very overcast today and looks very much like rain. I hope not, as we'd all be bogged.

Well that's all for now
Lots of love to you all
Peter

¹⁰⁸ Allied 1st Army?

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

5/3/43

Dear Dad

I received nine letters yesterday. One each from you and Nance dated Nov 29th & Dec 7th with one from Mum enclosed. I did not get the letter Mum mentions having written two days before. That'll probably arrive in the future. I'm glad the parcel arrived OK. I do hope you didn't have to pay any duty on it. I got letters from Aunt M, Aunt Aga, Auntie, Mrs Popham, Hendy¹⁰⁹ and two from Clair. A jolly good haul, I reckon.

I did manage to get a few days leave that's why I haven't written for so long. Well I'll tell you all about it.

The Squadron has a two engine Italian plane called a Caproni Ghibli¹¹⁰ and five of us went down to Alex in it. It was a two day trip as the plane is very slow. The trip was rather rough on the way down and one of the blokes was sick, but apart from that it was quite a good trip.

We arrived at Alex at about midday. Two of us stayed in Alex all the time, the other three went onto Cairo for a day and a half then came back to Alex.

We stayed at the Leroy Hotel with is very nice. Murray Knox¹¹¹ and I had a very nice double room. You've no idea how good the sheets and soft bed were. The first thing we did was to have a shave in lovely hot water and then a beaut hot bath. Oh Boy, was it any good.

The meals were extra good and we did justice to everything they put before us. Breakfast was a sort of informal meal. You roll up any old time and they bring your order in on a tray. It was very good for us as we never got up very early.

For the first two days we were finding our way about the place, after that it was easy. It's a much nicer place than Cairo and there don't seem to be so many wogs about the street to annoy you for Backsheesh.

I did quite a lot of shopping for myself and for other boys in the Squadron. I even bought some girls underwear for one of the boys, scanties and so forth. I got through thirty quid myself, eight of which went to the hotel, numerous quid on clothes, shirts, sox etc. We had a few merry evenings with boys from a couple of other Aussie Squadrons. It was great seeing all the boys in the good old blue uniform.

¹⁰⁹ Nancy Henderson, a family friend who became engaged to and later married Henry Rischbieth in 1945. Henry enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy in 1944. He became a well-known and well respected Adelaide paediatrician.
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/502718> Accessed 20th August 2024

¹¹⁰ The Caproni Ghibli aircraft had been left behind by the Italians and was commandeered by 3 Squadron when they were stationed at Castel Benito, occupied after the fall of Tripoli
Reference: *3 Squadron at War*, Pages 109-111

¹¹¹ Flight Lieutenant Thomas Murray Knox, 1921-2011; RAAF 405742. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1053635&c=WW2> Accessed 20th August 2024

One of the chaps I met was Phil Longbottom, Bob's¹¹² brother. He told me he had had Xmas dinner, I think it was, with Bob. He was very lucky to have seen Bob before he left.

We had five and a half days clear in Alex and altogether were away from the Squadron for nine days, arriving back yesterday when I got the letters.

About the pre-paid cable you sent Arthur, he answered it he tells me. I'm very sorry I never cabled when we got to Egypt and gave you all that worry. It was very thoughtless of me. I just sent off a cable to you today letting you know I had received your letters.

I was very sorry to hear that John had to have an operation. What was the trouble? Apparently the letter telling me what was wrong with him has been waylaid somewhere and will arrive in due course.

It's nice to hear that Murray¹¹³ is still going strong and that he is getting a chance to obtain his commission.

It's nice to know that you're getting letters so quickly from Tony. I got a telegram from him with a bunch of letters thanking me for a letter.

The good old Kids fete always seems to come good. It was great making over £1200. I think it's amazing where the money comes from these days.

There's nothing much been doing here so I didn't miss out on many Ops whilst I was on leave which I'm very pleased about as the quicker you get your hours up the quicker you finish out here. I suppose that soon we'll be going hell for leather and then the hours will pile up.

Well that's all for now.
Thank you for all your letters
Lots of love to you all
Cheerio
Peter

¹¹² Captain Robert Eagland (Bob) Longbottom 1916-1990; AIF SX9065 served with the 2/45th Battalion <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=672538&c=WW2> Accessed 20th August 2024

Flight Lieutenant William Phillip Gibson (Phil) Longbottom 1914-1972 ; RAAF 416347 <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1054667&c=WW2#R> Accessed 20th August 2024

¹¹³ Murray Burchell

TELEGRAM

Sent 7th March; received 11th March 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TCE
NORTH ADELAIDE

LETTERS RECEIVED MANY THANKS AM WELL AND FIT ALL MY LOVE
PETER GILBERT

12/3/43

Darling Mum

No more letters since I wrote last but I had a cable from Nance yesterday, sent on March 4th, thanking for the letters and parcels. I can't quite make it out, because I haven't sent another parcel since the first one, and I've had four letters thanking for that. Perhaps Nance sent the wrong number. Anyhow thank her very much for it.

The best news since I wrote is that I've had a bath. I got some petrol, poured it on the ground, set it alight and heated up some water in a Jerry petrol can of which there are hundreds round the place. I don't know if you've seen these canvas baths, but they're about three feet by two and make a very good tub. Do you remember the time I came back from Woodside and my feet smelt, well they smelt worse yesterday before I had my bath but now they're quite sweet. I'm afraid they won't stay sweet for very long though. I'll have to get a photograph of myself next time which will be in the near future and send it to you.

For a change we've got plenty of water. There is a well about a hundred yards from our Mess. I suppose it must have been there for at least hundreds of years, probably thousands. It is over sixty feet deep and must have been dug by hand. It has been very well bricked and has lasted very well and will last for hundreds of more years. All round the edge there are deep cuts worn by the ropes pulling up the water. I can just imagine the old Arabs standing just as I stood drawing their water.

We've now got an electric wireless which was bought in Tripoli for five pounds. The other sets we've had have been battery sets. This one, we run off a mobile electric plant and we get very good reception, much better than any of the others we've had. It's funny but the best music comes from Berlin so we still get something good from Germany. Another programme we get from Berlin are two characters, Pete and Sally.¹¹⁴ They have American voices and appeal to the American forces to give up the fight and come and join them. They put on some good dance music and are quite funny to listen to, so we put up with them. Probably they'd lived in the USA before the war and had gone to the Fuhrer's call or should I say answered his call.

We've got a beach camp¹¹⁵ going about fifty miles from our present drome. The idea is for several pilots to go down there every two days and in that way everyone gets a bit of rest. The first chaps went down a few days ago and got everything set up. By the way, the majority of the population is French and are all for us. Apparently the Jerries treated them very roughly and just took anything they wanted.

¹¹⁴ Axis Sally was the nickname given to women radio presenters who broadcast propaganda to the Allies troops, American and English. This could have been Mildred Elizabeth Gillars, an American broadcaster employed by Nazi Germany to disseminate Axis propaganda during World War II. Following her capture in post-war Berlin, she became the first woman to be convicted of treason against the United States. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mildred_Gillars (Accessed 21st August, 2024)

¹¹⁵ The beach camp was on a small island off the coast called Djerba. *3 Squadron at War, Page 216*

The boys fixed up rooms in the hotel which is very comfortable, water laid on, only cold. However it's possible to have a hot bath, as one of our cooks is up there and it only takes a jiffy to heat some water. The sea is only a stone's throw from the hotel. so I hope it is hot when my turn to go comes.

For a while I thought the summer was well on the way but for the last two days it's been raining on and off and blowing like hell. There was quite a thunderstorm the other night but I was sound asleep and never heard a thing.

We've had a few games of baseball in the last few days. There is no proper bat as it was broken the first game we played, so we use a bit of tent pole which is a bit heavy [but serves the purpose]. No one knows the proper rules so you can imagine the arguments that go on. Anyhow it relieves the monotony and is jolly good exercise.

Well that's all for now. Hope to hear from you soon.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter.]¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ This original text of this section of the letter was written on the reverse side of the first page of the letter dated 19/3/43



Map sourced from Nations Online Project:

<https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/tunisia-political-map.htm>

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

19/3/43

Darling Mum

Here I am again. Another week's up and there is very little news. Some mail came in, not very much though. A couple of Express and journals from you, a parcel from the Gilbert Aunts and some papers from Clair, but no letters. Some of the boys had letters dated the 26th Jan, so there is all the latter part of December and most of Jan to come. It is all in the country but hasn't arrived up here yet. It should arrive any old day now.

There is still a very slack period on and we're getting heartily sick of doing nothing. Most of the papers in the mess have been read twice by everyone, so at the moment reading matter is a problem. The gramophone is a great blessing and it is going from morning till night. We've got a stack of records, some really good ones amongst them, mostly Jazz ones though.

The summer is on the way now, though it is still a bit nippy at night. The days are really beautiful and are quite warm enough to go round in shorts and shirt only. I wish we were close to the Med as we have been sometimes, then we could have a few good swims. I've only had one dip in the Blue Mediterranean and I think I told you about that. But this time of the year it would be extra good.

The other morning I came into the mess and wanted a drink of water so I filled a glass up with what I thought was water and took a mouthful. It was kerosene, some silly so and so had poured kero into the drinking water and I copped the lot. From then on I felt a pain growing all the way up my right side and finishing in my shoulder. I felt miserable all day, saw the doc a couple of times but he couldn't make out what was up. I didn't associate the kero with it, so didn't tell him about my drink. I had rather a bad night. Next morning I told him and that solved the problem straightaway. Apparently kero or any oily liquid affect some part of your innards on the right side and cause a pain up that side. Anyhow I'm quite okay again now.

That's all for now. Hope to hear from you soon.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter.

PS Remember me to Flo and James¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Possibly the housekeeper and the gardener/handyman employed by the Gilbert family at that time

26/3/43

Dear Nance

It's your turn for a letter I think so here goes. A big batch of mail arrived a few days ago which caused great excitement. I received six from you folks, thank you a lot. There were three from Mum, dated Dec 13th, 26th & Jan 2nd, two from Dad, Dec 28th & Jan 8th and one from you Dec 19th. I also got two from Clair. It's great getting all the news from home. When I read your letters I can see the old house as plainly as anything, Dad working away in the vegetable garden or in the workshop, Mum playing with Chips on the tennis court and you messing about giving oil to a sick kitten. I can tell you it's the best thing out here, receiving letters.

Things are looking up a bit here. We are doing a bit more flying than previously but still not enough. I've just got sixty hours up now so you can see how little time we've been doing. Things should break soon though. Anyhow I hope they do as I've just about had this sitting round doing nothing. We're up fairly close to the front and can plainly hear the artillery duels that go on from time to time. There have been a few Jerries overhead at night but they have done no damage. The barrage our ack-ack boys put up is very pretty on account of the tracer but it is also very noisy and I think more frightening than Jerry himself.

As yet I haven't been to the beach camp. I suppose when I go they'll start flying about three jobs a day and I'll miss out which (will) be most annoying. All the same I want to get down there as all the boys who've been down say it's an extra nice place.

The night the mail arrived they put on a picture show for us at Wing HQ. There were two very good news reels on, concerning this part of the war, a very old travel short on New Zealand and a main picture with James Cagney also very old. The weather was against us though and it started to rain like hell just after the main picture started so they shut up shop. We returned to the mess to find the letters waiting our attention.

I was very sorry to read in your letter about the 27th lads, especially Paul Robbie¹¹⁸, I thought he was a great chap though I only saw him a couple of times. I hope Gordon wasn't wounded too badly. You don't mention Jock MacDonald¹¹⁹, how is he getting on? It looks as though John was lucky being in hospital or he might have got lead poisoning as he so aptly puts it. I suppose by now he is well back with the old battalion.

¹¹⁸ Sargeant Paul Robertson 1912-1942; AIF SX3943 served with John Gilbert in the 2nd/27th Infantry Battalion and was killed in action in New Guinea in 1942. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=667510&c=WW2> (Accessed 21st August, 2024)

¹¹⁹ Lieutenant John Hugh Macdonald 1919-2004; AIF SX4253 also served with 2nd/27th Infantry Battalion. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=667814&c=WW2>. He was an old scholar of St Peter's College and probably a school friend of John Gilbert's. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=4> Accessed 11th September 2024

You certainly had an Army Xmas as Pop describes it. But apart from the lack of presents, it sounds just the same old Xmas Day. It was certainly bad not having ice cream at Bickham¹²⁰ but the spread sounds as good as usual. I'm afraid I don't remember Arch personally but I would probably know his face if I saw him.

I'm sorry to hear that Billy was scrubbed from being a pilot. It must have been terribly disappointing for him. I know I would have just about cried with disappointment if it had happened to me as I set my heart on being a pilot. It was bad enough when I had that eye trouble at the end of my course.

Darling Mum, I'm sorry I told you about myself getting lost, if it caused you to worry. It was thoughtless of me. I was perfectly safe, Mum and still am so don't worry. I know that's easy for me to say but I mean it.

Today the weather is pretty lousy, wind and lots of dust and sand in the air. For the last few days, its been pretty warm and the boys are beginning to get round in shorts and shirt, though it's still nippy at night.

Well that's all for now.
Lots of love to you all.
Babe.

¹²⁰ Bickham Grange was the name of the Short family home where PDG's mother had grown up. It is located in the current suburb of Paradise/Dernancourt in Adelaide, South Australia.

TELEGRAM

30th March 1943

Letters received Many thanks
Am well and fit all my love
Peter Gilbert

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

2/4/43

Dear Dad

How is everything at home, still going strong I hope. We've had news of more mail arriving in the country so I'm looking forward to having more news of the doings at home. I received your cable telling of John and Judy's¹²¹ engagement. It was great news and I thought it would eventually happen. I'm very pleased about it as Judy is such a nice lass and the rest of the family are so nice. I haven't been able to send them a cable yet as the EFM doesn't cater for it, and they haven't any other forms to send a plain cable at the Squadron at present.

Since I wrote last I've been down to the beach camp. I wasn't terribly keen to go as I thought I'd miss out on some flying. However when I got down there I was very glad I went as it's a really lovely spot. The camp itself is on an island which stands about two miles off the mainland. We crossed from the mainland to the island by ferry which is run by wogs. The ferry is a pretty small affair but the wogs have placed several boards about 18" across and two" thick across the ferry and can thus carry a truck. It's quite a job driving a truck aboard. One day someone is going to go right across and finish up nose first in the water and I'd like to be there to see it. Well to get on with the story.

We made the crossing safely and were met on the other side by the camp truck. The first thing the driver said to us was "It's a pity you didn't get here earlier as we had lunch of turkey, roast spuds and green peas". After recovering from that reception, we set off for the other end of the island which was about twelve miles.

That drive was the prettiest I've had in this country. The whole of the island seems to be cultivated. The different plots of ground are separated by high mud banks on which grow cacti and even prickly pear. There are gum trees and orchards of olive trees all over the place. The prettiest thing of the lot is the patches of poppies which you can see everywhere along the road.

The architecture of the houses is French and the whole population speaks French, the wogs included. The hotel we stay at is called the Grand Hotel De LO.T.U.s. It is run by a middle aged couple who are very nice and who do all they can to make us comfortable. The hotel is very comfortable, soft beds and sheets. There is no hot water but cold water is laid on. We use our own rations plus eggs and fish which can be got on the island.

There are quite a number of very nice young lasses on the island but they are rather scared of us. I think because of the treatment they received from the Jerries, who as you know, are not above using force to get their way.

I was there for one whole day and two half days and I think they were the two best days I've spent in the ME. The first day I had a jolly good swim and got some of the dust off me. The Med seems to be much more salty than the water at home, and is very easy to swim in.

¹²¹ John Gilbert and Judy Jamieson became engaged. TODAY'S NEWS FOR WOMEN (1943, July 9). *News (Adelaide, SA : 1923 - 1954)*, p. 5. Retrieved August 21, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article127321732> (Couldn't find an engagement notice JIG)

Next morning four of us had a swim before breakfast. It's the best waking up method I know and gives you a marvellous appetite for breakfast. During the morning we wandered round the markets and had a most interesting morning, though we were rather handicapped by our lack of French. I could make myself understood now and then but couldn't understand them when they answered me. You remember Dad when we went thro' the Valley Woolen Mills and saw and heard all those automated looms, well I saw them making rugs and material with hand looms. They were exactly the same as the others but everything was done by hand and amazingly quickly too.

In the afternoon we went sailing. There are plenty of boats in the little harbour and no one to guard them, so we helped ourselves. There were five of us and we had a boat each. We staged a little regatta and had a lot of fun. Altogether we were in the boats for about four hours. It was a most enjoyable afternoon.

Next day we returned to the Squadron and I was very sorry to leave. I'll be going down again in two or three weeks time.

There's a bit of a lull in the war over here at the present. After the cracking of the Mareth line¹²² we're having a bit of a breather. I think the Jerries time in Africa is just about up and everything will be cleared up in the near future. I hope so anyway.

Lots of Love to you all.
Peter

PS Remember me to Flo and James PDG

¹²² The Battle of Medenine took place in Tunisia. The German attack was repelled and the Mareth line was taken by the Allied troops. https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Battle_of_Medenine Accessed 21st August 2024

10/4/43

Darling Mum

Here I am, another week gone and time for me to write to you again.

I've just got back from the beach camp and found two cables for me, one from Nance and one from Tony, thanking me for letters. You probably think that there is very little doing over here, as I've been back to the Beach Camp so soon. Actually eight of us are going down now every three days, so the time comes round very quickly. We're now staying away for two whole days at the camp which is much better than before when we only had one day.

We've had a move since I last wrote and have now got a two and a half hour drive before we get to the ferry. On the way we go thro' the Mareth line and it's very interesting seeing all the dug in positions. Apparently Jerry defended the houses because they're very bashed about. We were very bashed about too by the time we got to the ferry as the road is very rough. This time we had quite a long wait as the ferry was over at the island.

Next afternoon the CO came over and we had a couple of women with their husbands and children into afternoon tea. None of us could speak French except a few words, but with the help of a dictionary the CO got on quite well. There were however some awkward silences. There were three children, lovely little kids, a girl of seven, a boy of five and a baby of fourteen months. The kids created quite a lot of diversions and so saved the day.

Before they arrived we went sailing. There was a jolly good breeze and we skimmed along pretty well. Old Arthur had a boat on his own and disaster overtook him. He let his sail go and was attempting to grab and reached too far. He finished up in the drink fully clothed with cap as well. He looked a very sad object. A couple of wogs rowed out and rescued him. He arrived back at the hotel very wet and very cold.

The French people stayed to dinner and spent the evening. It was again rather a strain but the kiddies kept things going. The CO stayed the night and went back the next morning.

The same morning five of us went sailing, three in one boat and two in another. It was a jolly good day to be on the water and we had a jolly good time. Needless to say Arthur was not one of the five.

We have been doing quite a lot of work lately, four and five jobs a day. I got up at quarter past four one morning which I didn't appreciate at all. It wasn't very cold though which was a good thing.

The news is great out here, isn't it. There are now only two more objectives to be taken, Sousse and Tunis. It is just a matter of time now before its all over. How long that will be I have no idea. Here's hoping it's over quick smart.

We've just heard that there is to be a picture show at Wing tonight, all on the fighting out here which should be pretty good.

As yet the mail we're expecting has not arrived. It's between Alexandria and here, so should reach here shortly.

That's all for now
Lots of love to you all
Peter

TELEGRAM

Sent 9th April; Received 14th April 1943

Parcel received. Many thanks. Good show. Keep it up. Love to all the family. Peter Gilbert.

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

18/4/43

Dear Nance

Here I am again a bit over the week but writing just the same. The last week has been quite busy for a change.

The night I wrote to you last a picture show was turned on for us at Wing by the Royal Artillery. There were two sessions, one at half past seven and the other at half past nine. The film was Desert Victory showing the whole of the campaign out here from Alemein to Tripoli. It was an excellent show and very well photographed. The chap who did it must have had plenty of guts for there were lots of shots of the troops going over the top. He was probably advancing with them. The only trouble with the whole show was, that I had to stand on tip-toe and crane my neck to see anything at all.

The last time we had pictures, we returned to the mess to find lots of mail waiting for us, but not so this time, worse luck. We've been expecting a bunch of mail now for quite a time but it hasn't arrived. There is a story going about that it was sunk coming from Mersa Metruh (*Mersa Matruh*) to Tripoli but that's probably a lavatory wire.

A few days ago a number of us went for a swim in the beaut Mediterranean. It was a lovely day and after a few minutes drive we arrived at the coast. A few of the boys had trunks but most of us went into the Med in the nuddy. It was really lovely in, quite warm and very different from the time I braved it at Marble Arch. We stayed in for quite a while, then had a good sunbake on the beach. It reminded me of some of the days I've spent on the beaches at home, plus trunks of course. After a good bake, a couple of us went in again to wash some of the sand and sandfleas off.

The next item on the programme was a look at a few POWs who were in a cage a few miles up the road. There were a number of Ities and a few Jerries. The wops were a poor looking collection and didn't seem to have much go in them at all. The Jerries were a different proposition. They were all big fellows and very well built. We got a few nasty looks from them and they didn't look very pleased with their lot. It was very interesting seeing them as they were the first I had seen so close.

We've now got cricketing crazy in the mess. There was a bit of a knock up the other evening and I distinguished myself by being bowled seven times in five minutes, not bad eh. I did get one wicket though. It was quite good fun and I hope they keep it up.

The Padre is still with us and we had a nice little service last night. His services are really good, a short sermon and plenty of singing. He is in our tent and is really a bonzer chap, just the sort of man for a padre out here.

Well I think that's all for now
Lots of love to you all
Babe

22/4/43

Darling Mum

Great news, the mail has arrived or at least some of it. Three bags arrived just at lunch time yesterday and there was much noise while the names were called out. But very soon there was silence only broken by the tearing open of envelopes. I got eight, two from you, one from Pop, thanks a lot, one each from John and Tony, Bet and Aunt Marjorie and only one from Clair which was very poor. Your letters were dated Jan 12 & 23, Dad's was Feb 9th and that was the latest I've received. There is yet more to come, so the Post bloke reckons.

At the moment I am at the Beach Camp and am spending the evening writing. Six of us were flown down in the Ghibli, that Itie plane I told you about, at seven o'clock this morning. I think we are the last bunch to come down as circumstances make it rather hard to get us here and back. I won't be sorry as I've just about had the place. I like(d) it very much the first couple of times but we're not really doing enough work to really appreciate a rest.

Last night there was great doings in the Squadron. Our CO Bobbie Gibbes¹²³ was given a farewell dinner. He has at last been taken off Ops after an amazing record. He flew 470 operational hours without a rest and is without a doubt the most experienced Fighter Pilot in the ME and probably in the whole outfit. The mess was jolly well done up, all the furniture was painted blue and yellow, there were bowls of poppies and daisies on the table which was in the shape of a U with a centre prong. Sixty odd sat down to the meal which was jolly good, soup, lamb and a very nice sweet. There were about twenty five guests including one Group Captain, and three Wing Commanders, Sqn/Ldrs were cheap. As a matter of fact it was quite refreshing to be a sergeant. Everyone got very merry and a good time was had by all. I'm sorry to see him go but a lot of the chaps don't like him as he is a very heartless chap. However he was a marvellous leader in the air and even the chaps who don't like him would follow him anywhere in the air.

Near our last drome there was a Colisseum which had been built in the third century by a queen of the Berbers, they are the race of Arabs up this way, as a strong hold. It is in a very bad state but what remains looks just like the pictures I've seen of Colisseums. There is an oval court in the centre, surrounded by a fifteen foot wall and from this tiers of seats rose to about seventy feet, capable of seating sixty thousand. I will try and get some photos of it and send them over to you. I can't take any myself as some rotten so and so pinched my camera a fair time ago.

I'm glad old John and for that matter the remains of the Btn are getting some leave. It will be great for you too Mum. Is old Gordon alright? You haven't mentioned him in any of your letters.

That's all for now
Lots of love to you all
Pete

¹²³ For more information about CO/S LDR Bobby Gibbes, please refer to *3 Squadron at War*. There are also many references to his service career online.

F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

23/4/43

Dear John

How are you old boy? I was very sorry to hear that you had been in hospital. I hope you are quite okay again.

Some mail has just come in, to be correct two days ago. I got eight including one from you dated Jan 22nd, thanks a lot old son. I'm terribly sorry about the terrible bashing the Battalion received¹²⁴, especially on Paul Robbie's (*Paul Robertson*) account. I think he was a great chap though I only saw him a couple of times. It makes the war a terribly personal matter when you lose your coppers.

I'm glad to hear you are getting some leave. You all certainly deserve it. It will be great thing for Mum to have you home again for a while. By the way, congratulations on the engagement, may you both be very happy. Judy is an extra nice lass and so are the other members of the family.

At the moment I am at the beach camp we've got going. It is on an island a couple of miles off the mainland and is mostly French populated. It is quite a pleasant spot. We've taken over a small hotel which stands about a hundred yards from the sea. It is meant to be a rest camp but we're not doing enough work to really appreciate it. As a matter of fact we who are down here now are the last bunch, as the distance makes it rather difficult to get here.

There are plenty of wog boats just down from the pub which we help ourselves too and so we do a fair bit of sailing which is jolly good sport. Our main diet here is eggs and fish which are very good dishes.

A couple of nights ago our old CO S/LDR Bobbie Gibbes was given a farewell dinner, as he has at last, after flying 470 operational hours without a rest, been grounded. He was a marvellous leader in the air but was inclined to be tactless and boorish at times in his everyday life. However, I think any of the boys would follow him anywhere in the air, I know I would. Our new CO is a very nice chap who has been five years in the R.A.A.F and was once a Wing Commander so should make an excellent CO.

I've now been nearly six months with the Squadron and have got about eighty hours Ops. It doesn't look as though I will finish my tour out here as there's hopes of the show being over in a couple of months. There is great speculation as to where we'll be going after the show here is cleaned up. Some think we'll be going home, others think we'll go to England and another school have decided we'll be going up through Turkey. All we can do is wait until it is over and then see. Personally I'd like to go home and get stuck into some of those yellow bastards.

Well that's all for now
Good Luck and all the best
Peter

¹²⁴ Probably referring to the ongoing battles – Buna, Gona and Sanananda in PNG in which the 2nd/27th took part
<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/battle-beachheads-1942-1943> Accessed 21st August 2024

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

2/5/43

Dear Dad

I am now back at the Squadron after four days at the beach camp. It was quite nice but rather boring.

We returned by car and had quite an interesting trip, taking two days all together. We saw Gabes and Sfax which have been bashed about a fair bit. We spent the night at an army transit camp and I slept on the ground for the first time for months. It was a lovely night and quite warm.

Next morning we went into Sfax to try and buy some wine for the mess. We had a big flask about ten gallons capacity which we hoped to fill but were out of luck, it took us about two and a half hours seeing different officials and messing about in general. After all that we managed to get only fifteen bottles of some sort of vermouth. However, in that time, we saw quite a number of pretty French girls which made up for a bit of the wasted time. We arrived back at the Squadron about three o'clock just in time for a cup of tea.

We're on an old salt pan in between a few hills and as you can probably imagine there are quite a few mosquitoes and other insects hanging about. It's supposed to be malaria country round here, so I hope I don't cop it.

The weather now is getting pretty hot and very sticky. I came down yesterday from a job and I was just about wet through from sweat. It has been trying to rain for the last couple of days without success. It has spotted a bit, but nothing more than goodness as we'd all probably be washed out or bogged.

Last month was quite a good one for flying in comparison with the last couple as most of us got about fifteen hours flying. With yesterday's flip, I've now got eighty hours. I think I'll get my hundred before the end of this campaign and then do a hundred more hours in the next sphere wherever that may be. There are a lot of rumours and bursts as to where we'll be going but nobody knows except probably the higher ups.

Well that's the lost for now
Lots of love to you all
Peter

PS Remember me to Flo and James. PDG

TELEGRAM

Sen 4th May; Received 5th May

LETTERS RECEIVED MANY THANKS ALL WELL AND SAFE

MY LOVE AND GREETINGS ON MOTHERS DAY PETER GILBERT

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

May 11th 1943

Dear Nance

In the last few days two big events have taken place. The fall of Tunis and my twenty-first. Tunis is a different place, as far as not having any Jerries in it, but I don't feel any different, although I am supposed to be a man. I received your cable on the seventh and Mum's and Dad's on the eighth. Thank you all ever so much. Last night got about eight more cables, from the Gilbert and Short aunts, Bin, John, Tony, Jean Dawkins and the Jamiesons. It was very good of them.

A few nights ago there was a picture show on at Wing. It was *The Fleets In*, quite a good show with plenty of laughs. We got there rather late so had to park our truck right on the side. I had quite a comfortable seat on the bonnet of a truck but the figures were terribly distorted so rather spoiled the show.

The other night we had a heavy rain storm with plenty of thunder and lighting (*Lightning*). Gosh it did come down, the heaviest rain I've experienced out here. The place was just a mud puddle and the drome was U.S.¹²⁵ for quite a time. Luckily our tent was on a level bit of ground and all our stuff stayed dry. The storm sounded just like an artillery duel, first one would see the flashes then the rumble of the thunder.

This month has been pretty good, so far for flying, as I've got up ten hours odd in eleven days. However, I'm afraid it won't last more than a few days, so it looks as though I won't crack my hundred hours before it's all over. I had hoped to be lucky enough to shoot down a Jerry on the eighth, it would have been a jolly good birthday present. However, on the ninth I did more damage I think because I strafed a long trailer with drums of petrol on it and the lot blew up. It was a beautiful fire, you could see the black smoke for thirty odd miles. I felt very elated.

Last night we had another picture show at Wing. This time it was *Torrid Zone* with James Cagney and Ann Sheridan. We got there early for a change and had a good view of the screen. It wasn't a bad movie, plenty of action and some good wise-cracks.

Well, I'm afraid that's the lot for now.
Lots of love to you all.
Babe

¹²⁵ Possibly "unsafe"

TELEGRAMS

Sent 12th May; Received 17th May

EFM MRS GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TCE NORTH ADELAIDE

MANY THANKS FOR TELEGRAM AM FIT AND WELL LOVE
P GILBERT

EFM MISS GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TCE NORTH ADELAIDE

TELEGRAM RECEIVED MANY THANKS GOOD SHOW KEEP IT UP
LOVE
P GILBERT

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

18/5/43

Dear Nance

Thanks a lot for your letter dated Feb 3rd which I got last night along with one from Mum, Feb 8th
Thanks you Mum. I got four only, the other two from Clair.

Since I wrote last there have been great goings on. First of all the campaign was over¹²⁶, so that called for celebration. Each squadron in the Wing turned on a party, ours was last night and a jolly good show it was. There must have been a hundred and fifty chaps in the mess at one stage of the game. Supper was turned on at ten and it was a really marvellous spread. There were curried eggs, asparagus, sausage rolls, scones, sandwiches and cheese straws. A pretty good assortment, don't you think? It was all done by our own cooks, too.

We've now got a marvellous collection of Jerry and Itie cars in the Squadron which have come into our hands by various means.¹²⁷ The old CO got himself a lovely Alfa Romeo sedan. He saw an Itie general driving himself to the cage so he stops him and drives him to the cage and then drives off. It was as easy as that. One of the other boys got a Mercedes Benz off an Itie Colonel by stopping him and sticking him in another car. It's a really amazing sight to see the different types of cars and battle buggies that are tearing about the Squadron. Old Arthur has a colossal battle buggy which holds four comfortably and gives a very comfortable ride.

A couple of days ago eleven of us went to Tunis in Arthur's job, six of our chaps and five Kiwis who we picked up on the road. It was about a three hour run on a beautiful road and through lovely country. It is very fertile up around the Tunis area. There are lots of orchards and vineyards, very similar to the country at home, not as good though.

There had been very little damage done to Tunis by bombs. I only saw four or five places really smashed. It's really a very pretty town. Down the middle of the main street is an avenue of trees which make one long rectangle of green as you look from the house tops. The pubs and everything like that are working but you can't get any food, you have to take you own rations. We got there about one o'clock, stayed the night and returned to the Squadron about three the next day. It was a really worthwhile trip.

During our time there we drove out and had a look at Carthage. There are a few ruins of the old Carthage but they are not very impressive. However the present Carthage is a very pretty spot. It is built on the side of a hill and goes right down to the water's edge. A good spot for a holiday.

At the moment, the war is over for us and we are going back a bit, probably to do some training and perhaps a spot of leave. What will happen after that I couldn't say but its pretty certain we won't be coming home.

¹²⁶ The fall of Tunis and the end to the campaign in North Africa with the Allies forces winning the campaign. *3 Squadron at War, Chapter XVII, Tunis Falls – The "Desert Stakes" are won; May 1943, Pages 136 – 152.*

¹²⁷ This is referenced in *3 Squadron at War*, Pages 149, 150.

It's been a horrible day today, blowing like hell and raining. It's the worst day we've had for quite a time.

Well that's the issue for now

Lots of love to you all

Babe

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

3/6/43

Darling Mum

I should have written this two or three days ago but it has been so damned hot that I just haven't felt like writing.

Three days ago a lot of mail came in. I got fourteen letters altogether, including two from Dad Mar 3rd & 23rd, one each from you, Nance & John. Yours Feb 28th, the other two early March. I also got five from Clair, one each from Mrs J, Aunt M, Aga & Murray. It was the best haul I've ever had. There was also one Exp & Journal. As yet I haven't received any parcels.

Since I last wrote I have had three days in Tripoli. The night before we went down we had a ration of two bottles of beer. I drank them both and the next morning I had the worst attack of Gypo Gutz I ever want to have. I was ill all the way down and when we arrived I just lay down on my bed in the Airforce Club and died. I came good about five o'clock the same day and have been right ever since.

This Club used to be a posh Hotel before the war and is very comfortable. Brian Harris¹²⁸ and I shared a very nice room with bathroom attached. Nearly every room has a bathroom. The food was good and nicely served u but there was not over much of it. However it did me. One dinner time we actually had fresh asparagus, the first I've had since I left home. It was quite nice but nowhere as good as Pop grows it. The whole board and lodging cost only 2/6 a day which was amazing.

Since I was there last, three months ago, the town has been well cleaned up and is now quite nice. I bought some post cards which I will send you. During the day there are three picture shows on and also a concert party but there is nothing at night which isn't so good as the nights are the hardest to fill in. Altogether I had quite an enjoyable time.

As I said at the beginning it has been damned hot the last week or so and, but for the nearness of the sea, the place would be unbearable. We generally fly early in the morning and late in the evening and so can spend most of the day in the water if we want to. I can tell you that most of us want to.

Yesterday I went down to the water at 12.30 and was in and out all the time till quarter to four. I suffered a bit for it, as I got rather burnt round the tummy and hips being in the nuddy all the time.

There are sixteen of us getting leave down to Alex and I think I'm one of them. We're going in bunches of four and the first lot went a couple of days ago so it will be at least ten days before I go. As I know I'm not in the second bunch.

¹²⁸ Flight Lieutenant Brian Guy Harris 1919-1999; RAAF 416333; enlisted in 1941 and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1050044&c=WW2#R> (Accessed 21st August, 2024)

A couple of letters ago I mentioned about some cars that had been acquired and I shouldn't have, so please don't let it go beyond you¹²⁹.

Well that's the lot for now.
Thanks very much for the letters.
Lots of love to you all.
Pete

¹²⁹This embargo on the information obviously lifted over time as there is a great write up of "The Grand Prix of Kairouan" – a race open only to captured German or Italian cars held in May 1943 on Pages 149, 150 of *3 Squadron at War*

TELEGRAM

Sent 1st June, Received 8th June 1943

EGM Mrs H Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce
North Adelaide

Letters received many thanks
Am well and fit love
Peter Gilbert

TELEGRAM

Sent 9th June, Received 14 June 1943

EFM H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TCE NORTH ADELAIDE

PARCELS RECEIVED MANY THANKS
AM WELL AND FIT LOVE
PETER GILBERT

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

14/6/43

Dear Nance

It is some time since I wrote last, about eleven days I think. I've been on four days leave down in Alex and of course down there was not in the mood for writing.

Five from our squadron went down and there were several from the other squadrons. We were all flown down in Lockheeds. The trip took about six and a half hours but was not what you could call an extremely comfortable one, as the only place to sit was the floor. We can't growl though as we were very lucky to be flown down at all. We left at seven and with five stops made Alex by quarter past four.

We all, that is our five, stayed at the Roy Hotel where I stayed last time. It was a comfortable as ever and we were very well looked after.

The meals were extra good and I made a pig of myself at every meal. It was certainly good to be able to order anything you wished and we all took advantage of it at every meal.

There is an excellent Club there called the Alex Sporting Club which we went to quite a few times. It comprises a golf course, tennis courts, swimming pool, beautiful dining room and terrace outside with tables dotted here and there. Surrounding all that is a very nice little race course.

We spent all our time at the swimming pool which has grass at one end and side whilst on the other side is a concrete terrace with tables and umbrellas where you can get tea or drinks. We arrived there in a delapidated taxi and were almost struck blind by the dazzling brilliance of many beautiful cars parked at the entrance.

It's amazing but everyone in Alex seems to have a beautiful car. There must be a great deal of cash in Alex.

I went to one picture whilst there called Ten Men from West Point. It was all about the founding of that Military Academy and the hardships the first ten cadets had to put up with. It was a jolly good show.

There are some very good cabarets which we went to but unless you take a girl along you haven't much chance of dancing as the majority of girls are escorted.

I got a few things at Petrarki Bros. which they're sending home for me. I hope they arrive quite safely. One of the chaps who was in the Squadron early in the piece, Woof Arthur¹³⁰ married Monsieur Petrarki's daughter. Four of us went out to lunch at their flat on the last day of leave. Madame Petrarki is a very nice woman and gave us (a) beautiful lunch, the biggest I have ever eaten. We started with a

¹³⁰ Wilfred Stanley Arthur, 1919-2000; RAAF 565; <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1039404&c=WW2#R>
Was awarded both the Companion of the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Flying Cross
<https://www.tracesofwar.com/persons/41721/Arthur-Wilfred-Stanley.htm> (Accessed 21st August, 2024)

large plate of spaget, (*spaghetti*) enough for a meal, then two pieces of chicken with lovely little marrows about the size of gherkins, next was salad, tomatoes, cucumber etc and to finish off fruit salad, apricots, pears, strawberries and bananas. I just managed to amble out into the sitting room and flop in a chair where I had a delicious cup of coffee. It was very nice to be able to go to a private home.

The trip back was done in a Lockheed again and was a pretty quick trip. I had lot of fun and spent a lot of money and wasn't at all pleased to have to return.

Well, that's all for now.

Love to you all.

Babe.

PS I brought these in Tripoli and I thought you might like them PDG

TELEGRAM

Dates sent and received illegible – but placed between the two letters dated 14th and 21st June 1943

EFM DR H Gilbert 26 Lefevre Tce North Adelaide

Letters received many thanks am well and fit love
Peter Gilbert

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
No 3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

21/6/43

Darling Mum

Some more mail came in yesterday. Two from you, one from Nance and Aunt Greta¹³¹. The mail has been very good for the last few weeks and I hope it continues to be. The dates were round the middle of March.

A couple of days ago we had a couple of swimming carnivals which were jolly good fun. The first was in still water. We rigged up a pool fifty yards long in the harbour. There were about nine events and everything was well organised with starters and judges etc. Three of the squadrons took part and we won by two points from 450 Squadron which is comprised of mostly Aussies. I swam in the novelty race, shirt, shorts and socks were worn, and managed to get third place which was alright for me. Since we've been here my swimming has improved no end.

The next day we had the surf carnival. We were well beaten by 450 this time but we all had a lot of fun. I tried a surf race for the first time. The distance was three hundred yards, and although I finished the course eighth out of about twenty four, it certainly was strenuous, too strenuous for me.

I haven't been doing any flying in the last few days and things are getting very boring. I think we're all looking forward to when we can get on the job again. John Shierlaw knows the part we are going to but after that no one knows.

I forgot to tell you in my last letter that Tony is around these parts. When I was in Alex, I met a couple of Aussie sailors who told me that several tubs were in including the one he's on. However it had left a couple of days before. Apparently it was on its way to Tripoli, as one of our boys who was down there said he saw it and another. Maybe I'll come across him one of these fine days.

Well that's all for now
Lots of love to you all
Peter.

PS The photos of John and the remanants are very good. PDG

¹³¹ Constance Margaret (Greta) 1901-1993 married to Frank Piers Short, Eva Winifred Gilbert nee Short's brother; Frank and Greta were PDG's uncle and aunt.

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

2/7/43

Dear Dad

Have been expecting some mail for the last couple of days and have held off writing in case it arrived but we're out of luck as it hasn't turned up yet.

I've got some very good news for you. I was down in Tripoli for a few days and whilst there I came across Peter Wells¹³². He told me that Tony was down the coast a bit but a few hours later Tony's ship steamed in and everything was fixed up for us to dine together on board Peter's tub. But as luck would have it, I arrived on board to hear that Tony had to pull out straight away. He was just across the harbour and I could see him through the glasses on the bridge. I was able to have a message sent across to him by Aldis Lamp¹³³ to the effect that I was very sorry to miss him and wished him luck. He sent back Better luck next time. It was awfully bad luck missing him by so little.

However I had a jolly good time with Peter who is looking very well and I also met a couple of N.Z. boys who were on the same ship going over to Ceylon with me. They were very pleased as they had got a draft onto an Australian ship instead of a Pongo¹³⁴ one.

We're still doing nothing and gosh everyone is properly browned off. We're still having our daily swim which is the saving grace of each day. I think everyone would be snapping each other's heads off if we didn't have the swim to look forward to each day.

Its well in the middle of summer now and it surely is hot, each day the same. At the moment I'm having a battle with flies to see whether I'll write this letter or not. They ('re) doing a very good job but I think I've got their measure. This is about the worst place we've had for flies and it's really up to you whether you eat your food or the flies have it. That's a bit far fetched of course but you know what I mean.

I had a short flip yesterday evening from about seven till seven thirty just to test my kite. I wasn't too pleased with it as she seemed pretty slow. The boys will probably work on it a bit and I'll give her another try out in a couple of days.

¹³² Lieutenant Peter Bayford Wells 1922-1993 served in the Royal Australian Navy. In July 1943 Tony Gilbert was Sub Lieutenant on HMAS Gawler which was on active service in the Mediterranean. Peter Wells was serving on HMAS Marlborough, also on active service in the Mediterranean in July 1943 <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/502631> (Accessed 21st August 2024)

¹³³ An Aldis Lamp is another name for a signal lamp or morse lamp

¹³⁴ Slang for British soldier but in this case I think PDG just using the term to mean British when referring to the vessel

The Squadron's been rather on the ill list lately. The CO has gone down with Dyptheria¹³⁵, one of the Flight Commanders has an abscess on his bottom and one of the other boys has an abscess on his prostate gland. The final touch was added by another of the boys turning his car over and tearing a lot of ligaments and things round the hips and he'll probably be out for six months or so, so you can see we've been rather depleted.

Well that's about the lot, so I'll give in to these bloody flies.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

¹³⁵ "On 20th June, S/Ldr Eaton, Officer Commanding 3 Squadron, relinquished his command as a consequence of becoming non-effective sick", 3 Squadron at War, Page 156

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

15/7/43

Dear Dad

It's about a fortnight since I wrote last as things have been pretty busy since then. I can't tell you the nature of things that have been going on but you've probably read what's going on in the papers and we're taking part¹³⁶. John Shierlaw was where we are now.

I've received four letters and the School Mag. in the last few days, two from you, one from Mum and one from Aunt Marjory. One from you was late March, the other three were May. So far I've had none of April's mail which I can't understand but I never could understand the mail system out here.

We've at last got away from the sand and the conditions are now much better in every way. The dromes we are operating from are really very good. Living conditions are good, no more tents at the moment. The only crook thing is that we're up against the Pommy Red Tape and the Officers and N.C.Os share separate Messes. Our Mess isn't too bad except that the stretchers are plentifully supplied with bugs. The first night I had about an hours sleep, the majority of the time I spent being bitten by the confounded bugs. Last night was much better and I slept just about all the night.

I just knocked off to go and get some lunch. While on the job we are at the drome all day and have our lunch in what they call the Air-Crew Operational Mess which gives us a pretty good meal. We're waited on by some quite pretty lasses which is very novel after what we have been used too.

The boys went out on a job just before lunch and had quite a merry time as they met up with eighteen Me109s, twelve one time and six more afterwards. I was not on the job which was bad luck as I haven't had a stoush for ages. I'm on the next gaggle and am writing this in the Ops. Room whilst waiting for a job which we might or might not get.

I left off writing this three or four days ago, as there was absolutely no news and censorship was very strict where we have just been. There is now a bit more to tell you. I don't think I can tell you where we have been but I think you can guess, as I mentioned that John Shierlaw had been there.

Well since I started this I've had a short sea trip which was quite an experience after being on land and in the air for so long. It was quite a good trip which we did at night, starting after dark and arriving next morning.

The work so far has not been very strenuous contrary to what I expected. There hasn't' been a great deal of opposition in the air, except on a couple of occasions when we had two blokes shot down who are now back with us again. One of the boys tried to pick on four Macci (*Macchi*) 202s which are very good kites tho' they are Italian made and came off very second best. The other chap was jumped by six and was shot down. It was great having them back again.

¹³⁶ Allied forces began the advance on Sicily 3 Squadron at War, Pages 155-157

For the first time, I slept in a bivy tent the night before last. There is just room for two . It was also the first time I had bedded down on mother earth for some time. Yesterday we moved into a house and as our stretchers had arrived, we settled in pretty comfortably. There was a bit of a disaster cleaning out the place, as they did it by burning petrol in the rooms. Unluckily a tin of petrol blew up and two chaps were rather badly burnt but I believe they will be alright.

The country here is a great change from what we have seen lately. There are vineyards, tomato vines, almond and olive trees all over the place. The country is very rolling about here and is very much like some of the country around the Mt Lofty foothills.

There are supposed to be plenty of diseases in this place, malaria the easiest to catch, so we are dosed with quinine daily.

That's about the lot so I'll finish off.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

PS Remember me to Flo and James PDG

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

28/7/43

Darling Mum

After taking a lot of trouble in my last letter trying to hint at where I was and where I had been, we're now allowed to tell you all.

Well as you might have guessed we were on Malta for a short while and I can tell you it was really very interesting to see the Island Fortress. It hasn't got that name for nothing. On one side it goes sheer down into the water and slopes down to a reasonable height on the other side.

When we arrived there we all landed on the wrong drome, so we had to take off immediately and move off to another drome. This time we were O.K. and started to settle in. We were billeted in the town of Rabat which is quite a nice little town built on the top of a hill. As I told you before N.C.O.s and Officers separated. Our billet was quite comfortable and the food was reasonably good.

The CO of the Station was a Group Captain and (a) very good fellow. He couldn't do enough for us and went out of his way to make us comfortable during the time we were on the drome. For instance, he came into the Ops Room one day and saw us lying about on the floor, so immediately arranged to have some stretchers brought in for us. He rode a motor bike and it wasn't below his dignity to stop and give our grounds staff a lift wherever they were going.

After a short time we moved from there to another drome where the C.O. wasn't so cooperative but it wasn't too bad. From here we were billeted in Sliema which is across the harbour from Valletta. Our billet this time wasn't so good, as we had to climb four flights of stairs and the beds were bug-ridden. The food was about the same as before, but we didn't have many meals there as we were at the drome for most meals.

Sliema and Valetta are fairly big towns, as I said before, on either sides of Valletta Harbour. Most things are very expensive, especially drinks, such as gin and whiskey which cost 2/6 and 3/- respectively per drink. There is a locally made beer which is pretty horrible and cost 1/- a bottle. All food is rationed and is not procurable in restaurants.

One evening four of us went across to Valetta by boat which resembled a gondolier (*gondola*). The trip took about ten minutes and was very pleasant. We had a look round the cabarets of which there are many and varied. On the whole they're a petty poor class of place. Everything closes down at ten so you can see there isn't very much night life. One thing that was very noticeable was that the whole population including the youngest children remain up very late. I suppose the result of spending so much time below ground. That's the lot on Malta.

At the moment of writing this, I'm sitting in a Sicilian's house somewhere in Sicily and what a difference after Malta which was a mass of rocks.

This house is a nice little place with seven rooms of various sizes plus a bath room. In the front there is a balcony of about 12 feet x 12 feet which overlooks a sweeping vineyard and also the end of the runway so we're able to sit out there and criticise the landings of the aircraft.

We're very lucky in having water laid on. It makes the living very easy when you can have a cold bathe every day, washing of clothes is also made much easier.

It's really great to see all the trees and vineyards about the place. The grapes are just ripening but they're mostly wine grapes and very small compared to the beaut eating grapes we have at home.

Well the game is nearly over here except for the strong resistance of the Jerry troops around Cartania¹³⁷ but shouldn't think they could hold out much longer. What is to come after this remains to be seen. I suppose it depends on whether Italy throws it in or not. Old Musso's abdication¹³⁸ came as a very pleasant surprise and I bet it made bold head-lines in the papers at home.

Well that's all for now
Lots of love to you all.
Peter

¹³⁷ *3 Squadron at War*, Chapter XIII, The Sicilian Campaign, June-August 1943, Pages 155-166

¹³⁸ Benito Mussolini, Prime Minister of Italy from 1922 until he was removed from power on 25th July 1943
<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mussolini-falls-from-power> Accessed 5th September 2024

TELEGRAM

Sent 2nd August (?); Received 11 August 1943

EFM Mrs H Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce
North Adelaide

Am well and fit writing
Love
Peter Gilbert

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

10/8/43

Dear Nance

Thanks for your letter of April 28th which I received a couple of days ago, along with an airgraph and one other letter from Mum. Thanks a lot Mum for the Airgraph July 5th and letter May 8th.

Since I wrote last we have had another move. Whether it's for better or for worse I'm not sure, as it's a highly malarial area and the mosquitoes are pretty bad. On the other hand the drome's excellent. A beautifully smooth surface but only wide enough for two to take off or land at the same time. The drome is only about five hundred yards from the sea.

As usual old 3 Squadron got a house for a mess which was only about two miles from the drome. There was a lovely well quite handy to the house with beautiful water. It was icy cold and beautiful for bathing or drinking.

However we weren't in the house for very long as the Group Captain in charge of the Wing decided that all Squadrons would have to move from around the drome and go to a less mosquito infested place. Now we're camped in a stubble paddock with nary a tree in sight. It's not too bad though, as we're on top of a hill overlooking the sea and within five to ten minutes there is a long stone trough filled by beautiful spring water. As a matter of fact we just came back from having a much needed bath in it. It was great but rather spoilt by the walk back which is all uphill. I also washed a few clothes, not before time.

This camp site is rather inconveniently placed as the only access to it is through a tunnel and up a very narrow road which twists and turns round the hill. They have to have a timetable for up and down traffic as it's impossible to pass on the road. We're much better off than the other Squadrons, as they're perched along the side of the road like mountain goats whereas our hill has a fairly gentle slope.

We have been doing a fair bit of work for the first two weeks and have had rather a sticky time of it with ack-ack but no enemy fighters. I got rather shot up the other day, not myself but my kite, two fairly big holes in the tail. I had my photo taken beside it by Laurie LeGuay who is a press photographer out here. He mentioned that it would come out in *Man* so you might see it¹³⁹. I'll probably send you one anyhow as some of the other boys took snaps of it. I'm getting on towards the 120 hour mark now, so it won't be many more months before I'm on a boat heading for home.

¹³⁹ Sydney adman Ken G. Murray launched the magazine in 1936, following the format of America's Esquire. After a slow start, it began to flourish during the war period, when MAN was unofficially adopted as the magazine of choice of the armed forces. *War's other bombshells, Sydney Morning Herald, published 24th November 2010. (Accessed 21st August 2024)*

Laurance Craddock Le Guay 1916-1990 was a well-known fashion photographer; he enlisted in the RAAF in 1940 and served as an official war photographer in the Mediterranean (1941-1943) and the Middle East (1943-1945).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laurence_Le_Guay Accessed 21st August 2024

The war all round looks pretty good at the moment. Sicily just about ended, the Russians going as strong as ever and things looking allright over your side of the world, though I haven't heard the news for a few days. There is a rumour going about, which seems to be correct as it came from the A.O.C., that if Italy capitulates, the Wing breaks up and we head east. Of course east seems very vague and could be anywhere, India, Burma or any old place.

Old John seems to be having a bad time of it with his malaria. I think one in the family with malaria is quite enough, so I hope I don't get it. I reckon we'll be pretty right as we have quinine every day.

That's about the lot Nance
So Cheerio and Lots of love to you all, Peter.



This is the photo taken by Laurie Le Guay. The original is in the collection of the Australian War Memorial

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C302897>

Description

Sicily, Italy. 1943. Flight Sergeant Peter Gilbert, No. 3 (Kittyhawk) Squadron RAAF, of Adelaide, SA looks at the damage caused by a German anti-aircraft gun on the tail assembly of his aircraft. The damage was received during operations over the Catania area.

A416168 F/SGT Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Abroad

Darling Mum

Thank you very much for the airgraph you sent me on July 5th. It certainly is a quicker way of getting news across. The only thing wrong with them is that you can't put much on them.

Since I wrote last, quite a swag of mail came in. I received twelve letters which was jolly good. I've now got all April and May letters from you. Next day sixty bags of parcels and papers arrived. I got a parcel which I think was from you as it included a roll of the right paper. There were also several Expresses. By the way would you cut out the Express¹⁴¹, and send the Women's Weekly, as that's got a bit of gossip in it whereas it's been cut out of the Express.

We're still plodding along harassing the Hun when we get the chance. The other night they harassed us a bit in exchange and put on quite a good show for us. They came off second best as four or five of them were shot down by Beaufighters.¹⁴²

Well it looks like I'm out of paper
So must stop. Lots of love.
Peter.

¹⁴⁰ For information about airgraphs <https://www.phototimetunnel.com/before-email-there-was-v-mail> (accessed 22nd August, 2024)

¹⁴¹ A newspaper published in Adelaide "The Express and Journal". There are many articles on the Trove website which mention this publication. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/title/968> (Accessed 22nd August 2024)

¹⁴² This event is referenced in *3 Squadron at War, Pages 158, 159*

23/8/43

A416168 F/SGT Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Abroad

Dear Dad

I received a screed from Elder's a few days ago about my account. I am in complete agreement with their suggestions and wrote to them accordingly. I also received a letter from Mum and one from John dated June 17th. Yesterday I got three airgraphs, from Mum, Hendy and Clair, 22nd, 24th, & 28th July. Thanks Mum.

A few days ago one of the other boys and I with ten of the troops went up to Catania¹⁴³. We dropped the boys in the town, then went on further north looking for one of our kites which was shot down up that way. We couldn't find that kite but had a very interesting look around. The country up that way is extremely hilly as it's right along the east foot of Mt Etna. All the ground is terraced and each little bit of land is made useful.

About four days ago by a stroke of luck we were able to buy 70 odd cases of Jerry beer. It's a lovely beer, very light but a beaut taste to it. It's the first beer we've had for ages and we're doing justice to it.

At the moment things are very slack, just doing an odd job now and then. Maybe I might tour Italy, you never know your luck.

Papers run out so must stop.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

¹⁴³ Catania, Sicily

A416168
F/SGT Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
Abroad

30/8/43

Dear Mum

Here I am again and this time with a little more news than usual, as I've just returned from a four day tour round Sicily.

Six of us set out in a small utility truck plus bed rolls and rations. We left our drome about ten o'clock and started off up the east coast road. Our first stop was at a place called Giardini where we had bombed railway yards. Well it was a pleasing sight, for we certainly did plenty of damage. The place was practically a shambles.

From there we went up the side of Mt. Etna to a place called Taormini (*Taormina*). The road up consisted of a series of hairpin bends which ended when we reached the town. The scenery was really beautiful, mostly trees and the odd flowering bush. Once the town was reached we had a wonderful view of Catania and also the surrounding slopes of Etna. It needs someone with better descriptive powers than yours truly to describe the scenery.

We left there and went on up the coast road, stopping at about one o'clock for lunch. It was a real picnic lunch except for the absence of hard boiled eggs. All the way up to Messina we passed through small villages which are very close together. It's very heavily populated all up the east coast. Jerry did a pretty good job of demolishing bridges as he was pushed further and further north and caused us to take quite a number of diversions.

As we got further up towards Messina we were stopped by M.P.s who told us that Jerry was in the habit of shelling the road up to Messina, so we put on the pace a bit and got to Messina without mishap.

Messina is a town of the dead. There is not a soul to be seen in the streets and there's not one building that's come through without being hit. I should say that the whole place will have to be pulled down and an entirely new city built. Rather a funny episode occurred in Messina. One of the boys with us found an Italian hand grenade and threw it in the main street. It exploded with a terrific bang and echoed up and down the smashed buildings. About a minute after, our guns opened up on the toe of Italy. They must have thought that the Jerrys had started shelling Messina, so opened up in reply. After a short look round the town we headed off for the north coast road.

The road across from the east to the north coast goes right over a pretty high range of mountains. The road was perfect and it was getting on towards evening with a nip in the mountain air. Here again the scenery was really beautiful and it was a beautiful drive. We hit the north coast about seven o'clock and continued on a few miles then pulled off the road onto the beach for the night. We had a beaut swim and the water was amazingly warm for that time of the evening. After the swim we cooked up a good meal which we washed down with a beaut cup of tea. Everyone was in bed pretty early as we had had a pretty long day.

Next morning we were up fairly early and had a swim while the billy was boiling. After breakfast we got mobile. Our first stop was at Cape Melazzo (*Milazzo*) where we had also done a bit of damage, mostly in the harbour. After that we kept going east, only stopping once for lunch before reaching Palermo.

We hit Palermo about six o'clock and settled down in the Hotel Excelsior which was quite a nice pub. It cost us nothing to sleep there as it had been taken over by the Yanks but there was a restaurant attached which charge(d) us terrific prices for meals. It cost 16/- each for dinner that night with a couple of bottles of wine included. The dinner wasn't anything marvellous at that.

Next morning we had a wander round the town and bought some clothes off the Yanks which we needed rather badly as a lot of our stuff is still in Africa.

Palermo has been knocked about a bit but nowhere near the scale of Messina. It is full of Yanks who have got the town pretty well tee-ed up. There are not many shops open and what were haven't got much to sell. We had a horrible lunch back at the pub and stooged round the town until about four o'clock when we set out for home.

After about two hours travel we pulled up for the night in a nice little clearing by a bit of a stream. We brewed up the tea and heated up some rations and made a very good meal. Into bed pretty early, up early and off on our last stage of the trip. The country on the way home wasn't nearly as pretty as on the way up. We were home about five after a really interesting trip.

We were very busy all day yesterday improving our mess. We put up another big tent and built on to that a thatch hut, made out of bamboos. The boys got stuck in and made tables and a bar. It's really a pretty posh place now.

Yesterday it rained for the first time for months. It was a really good thunderstorm, the best I've had for a very long (*time*) It didn't hinder the work much as the boys just kept on working. I had a bath in the heaviest shower so made good use of the rain.

Work is very spasmodic, maybe doing one job every three or four days. I don't know how long we're going to be slack for but I hope not too long as it always begins to bore after a while.

Well I think that's all for now.

Lots of love to you all

Peter.

TELEGRAM

Sent 31st August; received 9th September 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

LETTER AND TELEGRAM RECEIVED MANY THANKS WRITING LOVE
P GILBERT

AIRGRAPH

Sept 6th, 1943

A416168 F/SGT Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Abroad

Dear Nance

Have received five letters from home in the last week. Two from you, two from Dad and one from Mum, all round about June, one July I think. I also had a nice long letter from Hendy, she does a very good job on the letters. Last but by no means least I had five from Clair.

Since I wrote last there hasn't been very much doing, except of course the invasion of Italy and we haven't been taking a very active part in that. We have done the odd job but have been hardly worked off our feet. I've had a good look at the bottom part of Italy. It's very mountainous and definitely not the spot for forced landings. I never had any idea I'd be seeing Italy and it looks as though I might be seeing quite a lot of it.

The Squadron has acquired a Macchi 202 which is an Italian fighter and also a small bi-plane, something like a Tiger Moth. I flew the latter yesterday and it was great after the old Kitty. Several of the boys have flown the Macchi and reckon it's the goods. Hope to fly it in the near future.

Today I'm going away for three days up the slope of Etna where the Wing has a chalet. It's for pilots where they can go for a bit of a change.

Must needs stop now. Lots of love to you all.

Peter

AIRGRAPH

11/9/43

A416168 F/SGT Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F

Dear Dad

It's about your turn for a letter I think. There hasn't been much doing so I reckoned an airgraph was the shot.

I told Nance in my airgraph to her that I was going up to the Chalet for a few days. Well I've been and returned and had a great time. It's an extra nice hotel and commands an excellent view of the Catania plane (*plain*). Apart from the rooms which are very comfortable, there is a big lounge plus bar, a nice dining room, a card room and writing room. There are not many pubs at home that'd better it.

There was very little to do there, except go for walks or sit around in the sun. It was nice and restful though, which it was intended to be.

I suppose everyone is very excited about Italy having capitulated, our gallant allies now? It certainly will make the war move fairly swiftly now and maybe mean the ending of the war far quicker than everyone thinks.

No more letters lately and no more paper, so must stop.

Love to all at home
Peter

A416168 F/SGT Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F

Dear Dad

Here I am again with another airgraph to thank you for a letter I got from you last night started on July 8th and finished on the 19th. A fairly big bunch came in last night but I only got the one from you.

I'm sorry to hear that you've been down with the flu and hope that you're quite 100% now. Mum and Nance have had a bad spell too. I hope they're quite well again. I've been very lucky out here as far as illness goes, I hope to hell my luck keeps good as I have no desire to be in hospital out here.

I told you about the Macchi that we've got in one of my last letters, well I flew it yesterday morning. It's a lovely machine to fly and fairly hurtles off the deck. I was up for thirty minutes and enjoyed every minute of it. However I mucked up the landing which was ruddy annoying.

For the first time in a couple of weeks I went for a swim in the old Med yesterday. It was good and removed some of the accumulated dirt off me.

It looks as though the paper's had it, so must stop.

Lots of love to you all
Peter

TELEGRAM

Sent 5th September (?); Received 14th September 1943

EFM Dr Henry Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce, North Adelaide

Letter received many thanks writing love
Peter Gilbert

21/9/43

Darling Mum

How are you all at home? I've had no news for about three weeks from you. Dad's last letter mentioned that you all had nasty colds which I was very sorry to hear. Of course, by the time I got the letter you were probably hale and hearty again.

Since I wrote last we have had a move but I can't say where to or how far for censorship reasons. The drome we're on now isn't too good at all as it's very dusty. There have been several accidents through the dust obscuring all vision. A few days there has been very little wind and the dust just hangs over the drome like a blanket.

A few nights ago I had my first accident but did not hurt myself. We went out on a job, the first from the drome, at about 6.15. I got split up from the gaggle and started to make my way home but steared to (*steered too*) far north. I hit the coast as it was getting dark and then had a fair idea of where I was but had to find the drome in the dark. Finally I found the drome much to my relief. There was a flare path out but I had to wait for the O.K. to land. I enjoyed myself flying round up top and made quite a good approach on the flare path. I was feeling quite happy about my first night flying in Kitties until the ground came up and hit me. I had failed to check enough and flew straight into the ground. Hell I was annoyed and I swore very luridly. However I don't suppose I could go for ever without an accident of some kind. Don't worry when you read this, as I didn't even get a scratch.

You will have noticed from the address that I've now reached the amazingly high rank of Warrant Officer. I'm practically up among the brass hats now. I get a total increase in pay of 1/6 a day which is pretty good. However we're now on sterling ranks of pay, so don't get as much as on Aussie rates.

We've been doing a fair amount of work lately and I have now got 156 hours so two more months should see me through. There is now no guarantee that I will be posted home after two hundred hours, as I believe that that policy is now changed. However, I may be lucky enough to crack it.

I saw a bit in a Women's Weekly about Judy recuperating at the house of Dr and Mrs Gilbert after a tonsil operation and that John Gilbert her fiancé, had leave occasionally (*occasionally*).

Well Mum that's all for now.
Lots of love to you all
Pete

PS Please remember me to Jim and Florence. PDG

¹⁴⁴ CMF: Central Mediterranean Forces

TELEGRAM

Sent 29th September; Received 6th October 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT
26 LE FEVERETERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

PARCEL RECEIVED MANY THANKS AM WELL AND FIT LOVE
PETER

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Cent Med Forces

Darling Mum

Thanks so much for the photos of John and Judy and yourself. They're very nice especially the group one. Thank you also for your letter with the announcement of Dick's engagement. I received both last night. It was no surprise to me about Dick and Ann¹⁴⁵, it was just a matter of course. I see that Dick is now a Flt/Lieut. That's pretty good work. How is old Steve? I haven't heard a word of him for months. I suppose he was on leave when you saw him.

At the moment we're a bit slack and have been able to get into a town which is nearby. It's the nicest town we've been in since we left Alex. Luckily it has escaped all bombing and is just its normal peace time self. There are plenty of lovely shops with a very nice collection of things. I took the opportunity of doing my Xmas shopping, as did all the other boys. I will be sending you a parcel in a couple of days. I hope it gets there. My securing is terrible as you will see when it arrives. I bought myself quite a nice camera which I was lucky enough to find in one of the shops. So now I will be able to send a few snaps home.

The rainy season has just started and we've had a couple of very heavy showers at night. We're still having beautiful sunny days.

Must stop now, the paper's had it.

Lots of love to you all
Peter

¹⁴⁵ The engagement of Richard (Dick) Wallman and Anne Barritt, Heard Round Town Today (1945, September 7). *News (Adelaide, SA : 1923 - 1954)*, p. 7. Retrieved August 22, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article130233772>

TELEGRAM

Sent 17th October; received 23 October 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

AM WELL AND FIT WRITING LOVE PETER GILBERY (*error on telegram text*)

25/10/43

Darling Mum

It seems a very long time since I wrote to you, but I've had a poisoned finger for the last three weeks and have been unable to hold a pen. I had a few days in hospital and it is now just about right again, though there is still a fair sized hole in it. However enough of that, now for some news.

In my previous letters I've been unable to say where we've been but you probably guessed that we were in Italy. Little did I dream when I left old Aussie that I'd be seeing all these interesting places.

At our first drome in the country, I had my crash which I told you about. After that first effort I always found my way home, rest assured about that. We were fairly comfortable in our tents and the mess was pretty good. We used a long wooden hut for Ops. room, parachutes, Adjutant's office and stores. It was the first time that everything had been in one spot. On this drome there were several Italian aircraft which took off now and then and did a bit of shooting up. It was strange seeing them flying round without evil designs on our aircraft. We did quite a few jobs from there over the Naples area and I saw Vesuvius for the first time. It looked very quite (*quiet*), with only a thin spiral of white smoke rising a few thousand feet in the air. Whilst there I had a chance to see Taranto which was Italy's naval base. The town was mainly full of Italian sailors. It seemed quite a nice place but was very dead. It has a lovely big harbour, consisting of a main harbour and two fairly big lakes. It was a good land mark for us to find our drome.

We were at our first drome for several days then moved up. At our next drome we were very lucky to get a fair sized house for our mess. It was a two storied place with six or seven rooms, a kitchen and a large flat roof where some of the boys slept. They were rather unlucky a couple of times, as it rained pretty heavily and they had to move inside in the middle of the night. Apart from that we were very comfortable. The drome itself wasn't the best, as it was rather short and had telephone wires at either end, but we managed alright. Whilst at this drome I was able to have a few days in a town called Bari. It was really a beautiful town and untouched by any bombing. There were plenty of shops and plenty to buy. We were very lucky to be able to get into the town before any other troops, as we had the pick of everything at the lowest prices. We were getting four hundred lira to the pound, so you can see how well off we were, before they woke up, and shot the prices up. I told you in an airgraph that I had sent off a parcel to you, so I hope it arrives safely. Our main drink there was champagne at 5/- a bottle and Italian beer at 5pence a bottle. The beer was very nice but very weak. Our food was very good, eggs for breakfast quite often and sometimes steak. It was towards the end of our stay there that I burnt my finger with bit of phosphorus off a match and the rotten thing turned septic. I was off flying for three weeks and missed quite a few Op hours. I started flying again two days ago.

We're now at our third drome in Italy and have been here sometime. Once again we were lucky and managed to secure a house for the mess, in fact it is a block of flats, three stories high with six flats in all. We occupy the lot, about four in each room. The ground floor is taken up with the dining room, bar and sitting room. The dining room has two tables and can seat nineteen. There are also two sideboards. The bar is also very well set up, with little stools to sit up to the bar and two or three chromium steel chairs, also a wireless. The sitting room has six easy chairs and two lounges. So you can see we are extremely comfortable. You wouldn't think there was a war on, would you.

As a matter of fact there has been very little doing in our line for the last week or so. We have been lucky if we get one job for a day. The two jobs I've done since I started flying again have been long and uneventful, each being over two hours. Yesterday we went to Yugoslavia, expecting all sorts of nasty things, but nothing happened except we bombed a ship quite successfully. The most exciting part of the trip was when we were taxiing up to take off. A Liberator, landing, swerved and ran off the runway narrowly missing several of our chaps.

Down at the last drome, I received an airgraph from you, John and Clair, and two days ago another one from you 25th Sept, also one from Nance several days ago. Thanks a lot Mum, it's a pretty good service and I think I've had all the ones you've sent me.

Well that's the lot for now
Lots of love to you all
Pete

PS Am fit apart from the finger. PDG

3/11/43

Darling Mum

Good news tonight, I received a letter and an airgraph each from you and Pop. Thanks a lot. The letters were 16th & 14th of Aug and the airgraphs both Oct 11th. It took only three weeks for the airgraphs to arrive which was jolly good. I sent off a cable today to let you know that I am still going strong. My finger is pretty well O.K. now, there is only a slight hollow in it now, covered by a scab.

In Dad's letter he mentions frosts and so forth, well we're experiencing that now. Gosh it's cold at night and early in the morning. We're very thankful for our Irvine Jackets, which are leather, lined with fur of some description. I've had mine practically since I joined the Squadron which will be 12 months on the 10th of this month. It certainly seems a long time ago but it's gone fairly quickly I suppose. I can hardly believe it's almost eighteen months since I left home, and it looks as though it will be a lot more months before I set eyes on the old home again. Maybe I'll get a look at what they call the old country. I won't mind much but I'd rather go home for a while after I've finished my tour, even if I do eventually go up New Guinea way.

I'm glad Dad is having a few chin wags with Brian's father. Brian¹⁴⁶ is a jolly fine chap and did a very solid job in the Squadron.

About that merry-faced business, don't mention it. That was received with much disgust in the squadron and if the bloke who wrote it, could have heard what was said, his ears would have burnt off. Publicity is alright but that sort of thing gives us the willies.¹⁴⁷

In your airgraph, Mum, of the 11th you had received two or three letters from me which must have been written about August. They certainly still take a long time to reach home. So old Steve and Murray are still going strong. I haven't heard from them for ages. I've written to Chook¹⁴⁸ a couple of times c/- R.P.O. London but have had no reply. I hear from Hendy that he is ferrying, so I'm glad to hear that he is O.K.

Dad you were wanting to know our position out here. Well, we're completely R.A.A.F in a RAF Wing and are really under the rule of Airboard, Melbourne. Until recently Airboard controlled our postings, now I think these are controlled from Air Ministry, London, and our hope of going home is very slim. I'm afraid, Dad, I can't give you the number of Squadrons to a Wing etc as the censor would probably drop on me, although Jerry, I should think, already knows anyhow.

¹⁴⁶ Flight Lieutenant Brian Guy Harris, 1919-1999, RAAF 416333, served with No 3 Squadron from July 1942-September 1943 (NAAA9300 HARRIS BG, Page 25 of 54, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1943. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1050044&c=WW2#R> Accessed 11th September 2024;

¹⁴⁷ This refers to an article that appeared in the Bunyip Gawler, quoting F/O Arthur Dawkins. Social and Personal (1943, July 30). *Bunyip (Gawler, SA : 1863 - 1954)*, p. 2. Retrieved September 10, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article96863367>

¹⁴⁸ David Murray (Chook) Fowler was serving with the No 242 RAF Squadron. He was wounded by enemy gunfire on 19th August 1942. Following his recovery from his injuries, his medical category was reassigned as non-operational. He was posted to Air Delivery Flight of No. 11 Group where he served until 1945. (NAA: A9300, Fowler DM, Page 10 of 220 and Pages 1-14 of 14 pages., accessed 24th August, 2024)

No, Dad, I haven't got any screamers on my kite but a number of the other chaps have. Every aircraft has a crew of two, fitter and rigger, this is the crew they probably referred to in the paper. Yes, Dad, I felt it but wasn't too sure what it was. I knew soon enough when I got home though. I wouldn't be too certain it will be in Man but Laurie Le Guay thought it might. He's the official photographer.

Last night and the night before we had picture shows. The first, Road to Singapore which was very funny and the other Tin Pan Alley which I had seen before but was still good entertainment. It was the first pictures I had seen for quite a long time and it was jolly good.

Winter has really got a good hold here and it certainly is cold, especially at night and early in the morning, I had to get up at 5.30 this morning and gosh I nearly froze. The last few days have been really fine and so far I've done three jobs this month which is jolly good.

I may be going over to Naples and the Isle of Capri for a few days. I'm not over keen to go, except for the chance to see the great Capri which I've heard so much about. However I've had three weeks off through my finger, so I don't feel like missing anymore for a while. You know my cough, Mum, well I've got it back with a bit of a sniffle but I'm not too bad.

Well, Mum, its getting a bit late and pretty cold so I'll stop.

Much love to all.

Peter

AIRGRAPH

4/11/43

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Cent Med Forces

Dear John

Received an airgraph from you a few days ago. Thanks a lot. Congratulations on the Commission old son¹⁴⁹. Bet you look pretty good in the new uniform. The CO has recommended me for a commission but I yet have to see the Air Officer Commanding which will be rather an ordeal. I hope I get through alright.

We have now been in Italy for some time and are getting acclimatised. The winter has really got a hold here and it certainly is cold, especially at night and early morning. We've had a fair bit of rain, too and as we're on a very flat bit of country things get very muddy. For a couple of days we were unable to operate because of the heavy ground. The last couple of jobs we've done we've been able to see snow on the mountain tops. It's the first time I've ever seen snow and it looked pretty good.

My hours are slowly coming up and would be higher still if I hadn't missed three weeks flying through having a poisoned finger. I've got thirty to do as yet which will take a couple of months.

In the last four days we've had a couple of picture shows, 'Road to Singapore' and "Tin pan Alley", both jolly good shows. It was a long time since I had seen a picture, so they were all the more enjoyable. Met a chap last night who knew Mick Woodham¹⁵⁰ in Kenya. He said that most of those chaps had come up to Squadrons but he hadn't seen Mick.

Must stop now as the paper's had it. Cheerio and all the best.

Pete.

¹⁴⁹ PDG's older brother John Henry Gilbert was promoted to Lieutenant on 1st August 1943. (NAA: B883, SX4520 Page 5 of 25, accessed 24th August 2024)

¹⁵⁰ Flight Lieutenant Francis Michael Beresford (Mick) Woodham, 1918-1999, RAAF O4976 (407089) <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/502156> Accessed 24th August 2024 and an old scholar of St Peter's College [Virtual War Memorial | Hackney St Peter's College WW2 Honour Roll, \(vwma.org.au\)](#) Accessed 11th September 2024

TELEGRAM

Sent 4th November; Received 14th November 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TERRACE
NORTH ADELAIDE SA

LETTERS RECEIVED MANY THANKS AM WELL AND FIT LOVE
PETER GILBERT

12/11/43

Dear Dad

I've just returned from a marvellous trip to Naples and the Isle of Capri. We're very lucky in this sphere, as the weather is holding the army up, and as we're mainly army co-op now, there is very little work for us. So you can see how we're able to get away on these trips.

This time seven of us set off. It took us four & half to five hours travelling to reach Naples. I don't think you could find a prettier drive anywhere. As you know, the centre of Italy is very mountainous and the road wound round and up and down these mountains. The lower slopes are covered with trees of all descriptions and the higher peaks stick bare and jagged into the sky. The day we went, there was a thick layer of cloud lying along the tops of the mountains and it was a really lovely sight.

There are many little towns on the way across. Some perched on the top or sides of hills and others in the valleys. You would be driving along and whiz round a corner, and there would be a little village, nestling against the sides of the road. The scenery was really magnificent and I enjoyed every minute of the drive.

Naples finally loomed up but by the time we settled into a pub, it was too late to see much of the city. The next day was Sunday, so we decided to get down to Serrento (*Sorrento*) and across to Capri. This again was a lovely drive, except that it rained a great deal of the time. However we were unlucky, as no ferry went to Capri on Sunday. We returned to Naples via Pompei but it was raining so hard we didn't see the ruins, which was rather a pity.

Next day we set out for Serrento again in time to catch the 1.30pm ferry. We arrived to find the ferry gone, but were lucky enough to get another one. The trip across took an hour, and hell was it rough. Several times I thought the bottom boards were going to be smashed out. I thought my time had come but we eventually made the little harbour of Capri.

In the distance Capri looks very barren but the nearer you get, the more signs of habitation appear. The town of Capri is built up the slopes above the harbour, with other villas perched here and there all over the slopes. To reach the town square, you can go by funicular or a very winding road, we went up by road.

The pub we stayed at was called La Palma or The Palms. It was a very comfortable place. The seven of us had a room each, and very nice they were, too. We supplied our own rations such as tea, milk, margarine, sugar as none of those things are procurable on the island. They supplied spaghetti, vegetables and meat. It's funny but the spaghetti out here isn't nearly as nice as we get at home.

There are only a couple of roads that can take cars, the rest of the thoroughfares are paths, varying from three to one yard. A lot of the pathways are lined with trees and are extremely pretty. The place is practically honeycombed with these paths and you could stay a fortnight and go for a different walk each day.

There are people of all nationalities on the island, Ities, Russians, Americans, a few Germans and one Australian woman. She is about sixty and a typical little old lady, white haired and dressed in black. Her husband, an Italian professor died a year ago, and now she wants to get home to Sydney. We also met

a Russian girl, home town Kiev, whose brother is in the army over in Aussie. It was certainly interesting meeting these people.

I took three rolls of snaps while on the trip but the weather was not the best, so I'm not too sure about the results.

We went to San Michele where Dr Axel Munthe¹⁵¹ lived and saw all his antiques, it was quite interesting but nothing out of the ordinary. It was too rough to see the Blue Grotto which was a great pity as I believe it's very pretty. The opening is from the sea and only large enough to get through by row boat, then expands out into huge caverns. I've sent four postcards with one of the Blue Grotto, so you'll be able to see what it looks like. The morning of the day we left, we all went for a ride on the funicular. There is a single line, and as one car starts from the top, the other starts from the bottom, and halfway they pass each other on a branch in the line. The distance you travel is about half a mile up a very steep gradient. It would be too bad if a cable broke.

Well I can't enthuse enough over Capri. I would have liked to stay for two or three weeks. It's the ideal place for a honeymoon if only you had enough money.

Here I am back at camp and very cold it is too. I've got my old cough back which is a damn nuisance, otherwise I'm fit as a fiddle.

That's all for now. Lots of love to you all
Pete

¹⁵¹ Dr Alex Munthe was a Swedish doctor and author who spent much of his adult life in Italy
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axel_Munthe (Accessed 24th August 2024)

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Cent Med Forces

Darling Mum

Thanks very much for the airgraph Oct 18th which I received yesterday. I think it's a very good service but I would like a longer letter now and then.

A few days ago three of us went out mushrooming and were very successful. We filled a large bucket and a bit over. Though the natives round here say they are 'non buona' and will not eat them. We have found them very delicious and have had no ill effects.

Yesterday there was a concert in a nearby town which some of us went to. It was an orchestra with the odd dancing item and was pretty good. The compere put over some pretty rude jokes which went over very well, as you can imagine, with the audience that was present.

It is still very cold and for the last couple of days it has been raining pretty solidly. There has been very little work and we have been keeping the chairs in the mess warm. I've still got twenty nine hours to do before I complete my tour and it looks to me as though its going to take some considerable time before I'm finished.

Today is quite pleasant and warm for a change and it looks like we'll be getting a job shortly.

Well Mum this should reach you about Xmas so I wish you Remanants a Merry Xmas and a brighter New Year.

Lots of love.
Peter.

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Cent Med Forces

Darling Mum

I just received two airgraphs from you Oct 28th and 31st and a cable from Nance Nov 16th. The airgraphs took not even three weeks to get here which is extra good time. I sent one to you four or five days ago, so these might arrive about the same time.

It is still very wet and cold here. We have had rain for three days now and from all reports it will keep up for some time yet. The country is fairly flat all round us but there are a number of hills in the vicinity, so we will eventually get the drainings from these. We have been unable to fly for quite a few days now, owing to the sticky mud which makes it rather difficult to taxi. Also the drome would be terribly cut up and made completely useless, after a few kites had landed and taken off in its present waterlogged condition.

Since I wrote a few days ago, I have seen another concert. It was put on by a South African troupe and was really excellent, the best I have seen anywhere in these parts.

Food has been very good lately. We have had pork and are now enjoying the odd bit of steak. Xmas is fast approaching and we have eleven turkeys fattening up for the great day.

Well must stop. Lots of love to you all.
Peter.

TELEGRAM

Sent 23rd November; Received 29th November 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

AM WELL AND FIT WRITING LOVE PETER GILBERT

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Central Med Forces

Dear Nance

Received an air graph from you and two from Mum, thanks a lot. Yours and one of Mum's were dated Sept. The service can't have been running to *(too)* well then which would account for them taking so long. Mum's other one was the 8th Nov which was jolly good.

It's still very cold here and the other morning there was ice on the wash bowls. There was a fall of snow on some hills which are about fifteen miles away. It was a grand sight. We're very lucky as far as weather goes, as it has been remarkably fine for the last four or five days and we have been able to get quite a few jobs done with excellent results.

Our main hobby these days is playing Liar Dice. Have you ever heard of it? It's a pretty good game. I managed to win five bob tonight so I'm in a pretty good mood. A couple of days ago we all received a Christmas parcel from the Comforts Fund¹⁵² and a jolly good one it was too, with chocolate, cake, plum pud, writing material and smokes.

Tomorrow is a big day for me as I'm going for an interview with the AOC Air Vice Marshal Broadhurst¹⁵³ to see whether I'm fit to hold a commission. Wish me luck. I'll have to be up at 6 and also have a shave which I never do these days. It's worth it though.

Well must stop. Lots of love to you all.
Peter

¹⁵² The Australian Comforts Fund sent items to "fit" fighting personnel which included items not always supplied by the services. Items included singlets, socks, pyjamas, cigarettes and tobacco, razor blades, soap, toothbrush, toothpaste and reading material (newspapers and magazines). The Fund was first established during WW 1 and then reconstituted in 1940. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/10608> Accessed 24th August, 2024

¹⁵³ Sir Harry Broadhurst served in the British RAF and took command of the Commander Desert Air Force from January 1943. He was the youngest officer to be promoted to the rank of Air Vice Marshall. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Broadhurst Accessed 24th August 2024

TELEGRAM

Sent 5th December; Received 12 December 1943

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFREVRE TCE NORTH ADELAIDE SA

AIRGRAPH LETTER RECEIVED MANY THANKS BEST WISHES FOR
XMAS AND NEW YEAR LOVE TO ALL THE FAMILY
PETER GILBERT

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Central Med Forces

Dear Dad

Good news today as I at last received some surface mail from you all today. There were two letters from you Aug 25th and Sept 8th also one airgraph Nov 11th, also a letter back from Mum and Nance Aug 31st and 3rd (*Sept?*). It was great to get a good long account of home doings, though I have nothing against the A.G. (*airgraph*) I'm afraid I'm getting into the habit of only writing A.G. but it is much better when there isn't a great deal of news.

Our good weather broke a couple of days (*ago?*) and our drome has been U/S, so there has been no flying. It was a nice warm day today and should have dried up the drome, so will probably be on the job again tomorrow which will be a good thing.

Two days ago, I had an enforced swim in the Adriatic and hell was it cold. The old Kitty got a spot of shrapnel in it and conked out, so I had to land in the water about hundred yards from the shore. It seemed quite a long swim with all my clothes on but I made it alright. A couple of Canadian camarmen (*airmen? cameramen?*) put me up for the night and treated me very well.¹⁵⁴ We were just in front of our artillery which persisted in shooting off through the night. Not being used to gunfire so close, I didn't sleep too well, though my bed was very comfortable. I got back to the squadron today to find the letters waiting for me which was a nice surprise.

I'm writing this and listening to the wireless at the same time. We've only had the wireless in the tent for a few days, but have it on every night for the music and the news at 9 o'clock. It certainly makes the tent a lot more cheery. There are only three of us in the tent now, Ted Hankey¹⁵⁵ has finished and left us for Africa. So we have quite a roomy little home.

Well Dad that's the lot for now. Lots of love to you all.

Pete

PS Give my regards to Jim, and tell him I won't need my bike for a while yet.

¹⁵⁴ This event is referenced in *3 Squadron at War*, Page 179 and in PDG's Flying Log held in the SLSA archives PRG 266/92. Also NAA A9186,9 Page 93 Of 773: "W/O Gilbert's aircraft was hit by A/A and force landed at C3514 in shallow water – he got out and waved to his No 2"

¹⁵⁵ Flying Officer Edward Hankey 1922-??; RAAF 411022 served with No 3 Squadron from 13th November 1942 – 30th November 1943 (NAA: A9300, Hankey E, Page 51 of 57. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (*3 Squadron at War*, Page 238), and <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/1683904>; NAA A9300 HANKEY E

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Central Med Forces

Darling Mum

Your airgraph of Nov 28th arrived a couple of days ago and again in only three weeks. Some of the boys have had them in as little as sixteen days which is extra good. I hope you are getting mine as quickly as I get yours.

Today we have been very slack, not even one job so we spent the day reading and playing cards. We play all sorts of card games from Bridge to even Beggar My Neighbour. There is a library on the Squadron which has some quite good books now and then. I read one a few days ago by Denis (Dennis) Wheatly, *The Sword of Fate*. It's about the early part of this war and most interesting. That's the only really good book I've got from the library, the rest have been just average.

You mention the Women's Weekly Mum, well I'm afraid I haven't received one yet. As a matter of fact we haven't had any papers in for a long time so I'm not the only one who has missed out. We may get a bunch in any day now.

It's been fairly fine for the last couple of days but it is sprinkling a bit tonight. It hasn't been quite so cold either for the last few days. Anyhow we haven't had to break the ice on the wash bowls anymore.

I'm glad you did so well at the Kids' fete. Isn't it amazing where the money comes from. The old cakes must have gone like wildfire. I wonder if there were any of those with the toffee on top. I wouldn't mind a peace (*piece*) right now.

What has Pop been doing to his finger, whatever it was I hope its O.K. again

Lots of love to you all
Peter.

29/12/43

Dear Nance

Here we are with Xmas gone and the New Year approaching. I received both the family cable and yours, just before the great day. Thank you all very much. The weather was bad all over the Xmas period so we did no flying which was a good thing. Xmas day dawned and by a great effort I was out of bed in time to go to eleven o'clock service which was held in one of our ordinary sleeping tents. It was quite a squash as there were over twenty chaps present. It was a nice little service and I thought of you all at Christ Church and wished I could have been there.

We had a community dinner with all the troops, the same as last year. It was a great feed, with lots of turkey, ham, roast spuds and vegy. For sweets we had plum pud and cream with tinned peaches, very good too. We washed the meal down with beer, of which we had an issue of four bottles. It wasn't Aussie beer, but all the same was very nice.

In the evening we had a party to which a couple of the other squadrons came. For the party we erected a small marque (e) which was amazingly well decorated. There were tables all round the sides on which the food sat. Xmas trees covered the poles and there were streamers and balloons hanging from the top and sides of the tent. It was a masterpiece of decorating and certainly gave you the Xmas spirit. It was really a very jolly day and I think the one wish, the boys had, was that next year we'd all be home.

Two days ago I received an airgraph from Mum written on Dec 5th, the day I went up before the A.O.C. about my commission which I have great hopes of getting, as three chaps who went up with me, heard a week or so ago that they had been scrubbed, and so far I have heard nothing. The majority of my airgraphs are taking just the three weeks to reach me which is very good. I also received a surface letter from Dad, dated Oct 31st, a few days before Mum's airgraph. Thank you both very much. Dad as regards the W/O the rank is still N.C.O. with a 6 (pence) sterling increase a day and a shilling allowance I think, though I'm not sure. The W/O's uniform is the same as an officer's, but with the W/O badge instead of commission rings. As to Bruno's villa, it was the other Australian Squadron known as the Desert Harrassers¹⁵⁶. They're a jolly good crowd and I know several of the chaps very well.

For the last two days we've had a terrific wind blowing. In fact, yesterday morning we had to get out of bed to hold the tent down. After being hit in the ear by flying ropes a few times, we managed to get it under control. About seven o'clock last night we were sitting in the mess when Dawk¹⁵⁷ came in and called out "If you want to save your tent from burning down, you'd better come out and see to it". We rushed out and got over to the tent but everything was under control. We had left an electric light bulb lying alight on a bit of canvas. The heat from the bulb set it on fire. We were very lucky that Dawk happened to see it and pulled it out of the tent before any worse damage could be done.

A few days before Xmas we went to a picture show in town. It was 'My Sister Eileen' with Ros Russell, Janet Blair and Brian Aherne. I think it was quite a good show but a bit wet in places. You might have seen it as I saw it in one of the papers that it was on.

¹⁵⁶ No. 450 Squadron known as the Desert Harassers moved into a villa that had once been occupied by Bruno Mussolini. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C13950>; <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U59435> Accessed 25th August, 2024

¹⁵⁷ Arthur Dawkins.

I've now got 190 hrs, with only ten to go. As the weather is now, it looks as if it will take at least three weeks before I finish. What happens then is in the lap of the gods, maybe back to the delta, maybe to England, but I'm afraid, not to Australia.

Well Nance, that's all for now.

So will say Cheerio.

Lots of love to you all

Pete.

TELEGRAM

Sent 27th December 1943; Received 6 January 1944

Efm Mrs H Gilbert 26 Lefevre Tce North Adelaide

Airgraph letter received

Many Thanks very happy to hear from you Dearest

Am fit and well love

Peter Gilbert

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F Cent Med Forces

Darling Mum

Received four airgraphs from the Remanants yesterday. Two from you, and one each from Dad and Nance. Yours were dated 12th and 16th, Dad's and Nance's 17th and 19th. I'm very glad the parcel arrived quite safely, as it is sometimes a gamble whether they arrive or not. I tried to register it, but I think it might have been too heavy.

I have now finished my tour. They kicked me off before I had got my two hundred. I finished up with 190. I was rather disappointed at not getting the 200, but I'm really quite content as it is. The CO put in for me to go to England for my rest period, but it just depends whether those in charge of postings agree. As soon as I get to my new destination, I will cable you the address

I am quite fit except for a bit of (*a*) snuffle. There's not much news in this but I'll write a longer letter tomorrow.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

416168 W/O Gilbert PD
3 Squadron
R.A.A.F
C.M.F

January 8th 1944

Dear Dad

Received three more airgraphs, one from each of you last night. Also just got a cake from the Post Office. The A.Gs were missing ones, early November.

The New Year dawned very badly for us. Rain started in about six o'clock, helped along by a gale. We were supposed to move but, owing to the day, didn't. We only had one E.P.I. tent for a mess, as the main mess had moved. Despite the elements the cooks did a great job and fixed breakfast for us. As a matter of fact, one of the stewards held up the centre pole of the cook house whilst the cook fried the eggs. We ate, hunched round a couple of kero heaters with the tent flapping away for all it was worth. After brekker some of the boys went back to bed, but I decided it would be a very defenceless position if the tent blew down, so stayed around the heaters. The wind and rain stopped just after lunch, so we did a bit of repair work on the mess tent and made it a bit more ship-shape. Altogether it was a very miserable beginning for 1944.

Next day there was very little doing, but the day after Dawk and I took a couple of kites down to our Wing training flight which is south of Bari. From there we had to go back to Bari and pick up two other kites. When we got there, we found that the kites were not the right ones, so we fixed it, to pick the right ones up next morning between eleven and twelve and hitch hiked to Bari to stay the night. A branch of the New Zealand Club is in Bari, so we tried to get in there. We were out of luck as a big draft of Kiwis had just come down from the front for a spell and all the beds were full. However we got into a pub elsewhere and went to the pictures. It was called The Seven Sweethearts, and was a jolly good show.

Next morning, after a clean up, we got a lift out to the drome and this is where my trouble started. Reaching the drome, we were just in time to see one of the kites running, and with a pilot in the seat. I rushed over and smartly hauled him out, to be told that the other kite had already left. You can imagine we were b-----y annoyed. It was all caused by the fine organisation of the drome. I let Dawk take the kite remaining. One thing, the Sq/Ldr in charge did everything he could to get me a lift back. Finally, I was flown back by their test pilot in an old Hart, a bi-plane very like a Demon. I flew it up to our drome, and it was good fun in an open cockpit after so long inside a glass house. Well we arrived at the drome to find everyone gone, except a few of the flight boys with whom I stayed the night.

As luck would have it, another New Year's Day started and by nine the next morning, there was six inches of mud in the tent. After a very cold and dreary morning, I left by truck for our new site. It was a fairly long drive but quite warm in the cab of the truck. I arrived about eight and after a couple of drinks, hit the hay very thankfully.

We're fairly close to the sea, and we have substituted sand for mud which is an improvement. Our tent is very roomy with only the three of us in it, but to make it more so, we put up a small eighty pounder tent and connected them both up, so we now have an annexe.

Today has been really lovely, sunny and warm. I was in shirt sleeves for the first time for ages. Taking advantage of the sun, I had (a) good warm bath this afternoon, and got the sand out of my hair and grime off the bod.

A couple of days ago it was very cold and we had a fall of snow. It wasn't very heavy but it was the first fall I had ever seen, so I thought it was pretty good. It soon melted as we're practically right on the coast.

Today I got back a couple of films one of the boys was developing for me. They were the ones I had taken at Capri. Sad to say they were under exposed which I had been frightened of, as it wasn't good weather for photos when I was there. However I'll get them printed and see how they turn out.

Well Dad that's the lot for now.

Lots of love to you all

Peter.

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F

Darling Mum

Have received several A/Gs and letters from you all. Dates Oct and up to middle of Nov, among them being your Christmas card. I think it's a jolly good card, especially the two little verses inside it. Your seamail letters have caught up with me at last which is a good thing. An A/G from Dad was dated Jan 1st taking only 17 days to arrive, that's extra good. However your Christmas parcel has not yet put in an appearance, but as I received a couple of Christmas parcels today, yours should be around somewhere. A/G from John yesterday seems very happy.

I heard tonight that I would be leaving the squadron in two or three days, so I wouldn't address any more mail to 3 Squadron. I will let you know in a couple of weeks or thereabouts what my new address is.

Today I went down to a drome a few miles south with a couple of the boys, to pick one of our kites up that had landed there shot up. The boys had to put in a couple of new cables and whilst I waited I slowly froze as there was a very cold wind blowing. However they didn't take very long and I was on my way back here. The weather was pretty crook so I didn't stay up longer than was necessary.

We're pretty warm at the moment, as we've got the CO's kerosene heater in our tent, owing to him being away on leave. When the cats away the mice play. What!

Well Mum there is very little news in this effort. Will try to do better next time. Lots of love to you all.

Peter

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD 3 Squadron R.A.A.F B.P.O. Cairo

Darling Mum

A few lines to let you know my present whereabouts. I left the Squadron with another chap on the 20th, travelled a short way by truck, then by plane to Tunis. On the way we dropped in at our old drome on Malta. Everything is looking very green there now compared to when we were there last. I am now in a transit camp where I'll be for several days until I'm posted. I found out that I'm pretty certain to be going down to the M.E. The camp is not too bad.

There is a cinema here, and there are pictures every night, as well as other shows in Tunis. We are only 30 minutes walk from Tunis. George¹⁵⁸ and I have just got back after seeing a show this afternoon. Loretta Young and Brian Aherne in A Night to Remember which was very funny. There's a show on in camp tonight, it looks like a western, from the title, so there will probably be bags of shooting and fast riding.

It's not as cold here as in Italy but it's quite parky¹⁵⁹ as dad would say. Yesterday we had a bit of rain but it soon cleared up.

Must stop. Will probably be writing from here again. Lots of love to you all.

Peter

¹⁵⁸ Flying Officer Leo George Hardiman – George 1922-1944, RAAF 411321 <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1049910&c=WW2> Accessed 27th August 2024. George served with No 3 Squadron from 15/11/1942-13/02/1944. (NAA: AA9300, HARDIMAN, LG Page 20 of 32.) He was killed in a flying accident near Casablanca on 30/11/1944. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/631031> Accessed 27th August, 2024

¹⁵⁹ Parky – an informal adjective meaning “quite cold” originally from the UK

TELEGRAM

Sent 19th January (?); received 25 January 1944

Efm Mrs H Gilbert
26 Lefevre Tce
North Adelaide

Letters and parcels received
Many thanks many happy
returns Love Peter Gilbert

AIRGRAPH

16/2/44

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD [REDACTED] (*word blacked out*) Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Darling Mum

I'm sorry it has been so long since I last wrote, but I have been on fourteen days leave in Alex and didn't sort of get round to writing. However, I sent you a cable from Alex to let you know all was well with me. I received two letters and an airgraph from you when I returned to Cairo. Letters Dec 22nd and Xmas Day, airgraph Jan 9th. Thanks very much Mum.

I left Tunis two days after I wrote that airgraph to you, went to Cairo, was given a fortnight's leave, which was jolly good fun, and am now, as you can see from the address at [REDACTED] (*word blacked out*). I'll be here for about six months doing instructor work which shouldn't be too bad. It's a permanent station and pretty comfortable. There are billets, with two to each room, each room having electric light which is a good thing. The mess is quite nice, that is the N.C.O.s mess and the food is really good.

I saw Dawk in Cairo, and he told me that my commission was through up at the Squadron. So far I haven't heard anything about it down here but will probably do so pretty soon.

Must stop now.
Lots of love to you all.
Peter

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD RAF Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Dear Dad

Just finished the day's work, so I'm taking the opportunity to drop you a line, before getting the grime off. I'm pretty well settled I'm here now thank goodness. Since I wrote last I've got quite a few hours flying in, mostly practice for when I start taking pupils up. A new course comes in next week and then work will start with a vengeance. Probably be flying four and five hours a day for the first few days of the course and I can see myself being properly fagged out.

The last couple of nights we've had beer in the mess which wasn't hard to take. I had two bottles last night and one the night before, so you can see I'm not overdoing it. Anyway it doesn't pay when you're flying a lot.

The only thing to do here at night is go to the pictures, and I've been every night. By the time I have left this place I'll probably never want to see another picture as long as I live.

So far I've heard no more about my commission, but it should be through soon.

Well Dad that's the lot for now.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD RAF Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Dear Nance

It's about your turn for an airgraph so here goes. I'm afraid there's very little news, but I'll do the best I can.

It's Saturday night here, I don't know whether I've got the right date at the top but that's neither here nor there. Tonight for a change, I didn't go to the pictures. Instead I had a couple of bottles of beer in the mess, then came over here to do a spot of writing. Today a parcel arrived from the 'Remnants'. Thank you very much. I don't think it was the Xmas parcel, as there were no smokes from old James. I don't know where the Xmas parcel could have got to, unless the boys at the squadron helped themselves. I do hope it turns up eventually.

Since I wrote last, I found out that I am going to do an instructors' course which will take one month to complete. When I finish there, I'll really be able to fly. Where I'm going to do it, is only about fifty miles from here, so it's not worth giving a new address. Any mail arriving here will be sent on. Arthur is about twenty miles from here, doing an air firing course. I'm going to try and get a kite so as I can fly over and say howdy to him.

Well Nance must stop. Lots of love to you all.

Peter

TELEGRAM

Sent 28th February; Received 4th March 1944

EFM MRS E GILBERT 26 LEFEVRETCE NORTHADELAIDE

LOVING BIRTHDAY GREETINGS BEST WISHES AND GOOD HEALTH

LOVE

PETER GILBERT

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Darling Mum

Here I am once again writing from another station. It is the one I told you I was going to for the instructors course. I arrived here yesterday. Another SA, Frank Sanders¹⁶⁰, who was with me at Mt Breckan¹⁶¹ also came down. Two of the O.T.U. pupils flew us down in the morning. As luck would have it, a sandstorm blew up soon after we arrived, so you can imagine we were pretty browned off.

We're not so comfortable as at Abu Sueir, but the food is good, and as we're only here for a month it's not so bad. There is a cinema on the camp and I saw Hitler's Children last night which was rather morbid but very well done.

Two days ago I had an air graph from you, Feb 6th. In it you mentioned about a write up of George and myself¹⁶². I had managed to keep out of anything like that for a long time. I wonder who was responsible.

By the way that parcel I said I had received arrived very quickly, the date on the card was 11/1/44. Thanks again Mum.

Must stop a space is getting short.
Lots of love to you all.
Peter

¹⁶⁰ Flight Sergeant Frank Maxwell Sanders 1907-1991, RAAF 27175 enlisted in 1940 and was discharged from 24 Air Stores Park in 1945. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=877095&c=WW2> Accessed 26th August 2024.

¹⁶¹ Mount Breckan is a property located in Victor Harbor, South Australia. According to Wikipedia and other internet sites, the house was used by the RAAF as a training centre from 1940 – 1944 – RAAF Initial Training School No 4

¹⁶² Fine Middle East Record Of Young Pilots (1944, February 1). *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954)*, p. 4. Retrieved August 27, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article48783478>

9/3/44

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Shellufa (*Shallufa*) M.E.F.

Dear Dad

A few more lines to let you know that all is well with me. Since I wrote last I've been working like a nigger, well harder than I have for a very long time. We have to do lectures here, the same lectures that I did at Elementary School, and I found out that I've forgotten just about everything. I'm afraid the old grey matter is very stagnant. As for flying, well I've done more hours in four days than I would in a fortnight on the Squadron. This morning I did three flips of an hour each, one after the other. When you're not used to it it's quite tiring.

I received an A/G from Mum the day before yesterday dated Feb 17th. Thanks a lot Mum. You had just received mine from Tunis. Mail takes a couple of days longer to reach me down here, as it has to go back to Cairo from Abu Sueir and then down here.

I saw quite a good film last night, *The Night before the Divorce*, a romantic comedy. It was far better than the usual type of film shown at these places.

Well that must stop. Hoping you are all well.

Lots of love

Peter

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Shallufa M.E.F.

Dear Nance

I think it's about time I dropped you a line, so here goes. It's about a week since I wrote last but there isn't a great deal of news. However I'll do my best. I've been to the flicks just about every night and I've seen good and bad films. I saw Hold Back the Dawn last night. I suppose it was good acting but that bloke Boyer gives me the willies.

The course here is about halfway through now, so I'll be back at Abu Sueir in a couple of weeks time. I've been doing bags of flying, generally three trips a day. I've just come down from the first trip which started at 7:30. I've got a break now and fly again at 10, then again this afternoon.

The flight commander here is called Fowler and was in Adelaide just before the war. I think I remember a cousin of the Murray Fowlers being there at that time. I must have a talk with him and see if he's the same bloke.

The mail situation has been poor lately. I haven't had a letter for about five weeks which is a bad thing.

Must need stop. Lots of love to you all. Peter

The following letter was inserted in the compendium of Dad's letters. It is from his cousin, Bill Gilbert to his Aunt Win (PDG's Mother)

AIRGRAPH

AUS429945 Sgt Gilbert WB R.A.A.F AUSPO LONDON

15/3/44

Dear Aunt Win

I have been having a day of letter writing, so I thought I would drop you a note. I suppose you heard from Mum what has been happening to me so will not bore you with that.

I have been trying to find Peter. I wrote to Air Force Headquarters about him & last time I was in London (I) left a note at the "Boomerang" Club, that is a place to which all Australians eventually go so he should find it in time.

At the moment I am doing a refresher flying course which is good fun but we get far too much time off.

Would you remember me to Uncle Henry & Nancy. Love Bill.

AIRGRAPH

24/3/44

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Shallufa M.E.F.

Darling Mum

A few more lines to let you know that all is going well with your youngest brat. Nothing exciting has happened since I last wrote, just the usual humdrum existence. This last week I've been doing a lot of flying and have just about finished my fifty hours. I completed my night flying last night, much to my pleasure as I'm not over fond of this flying by night. There is just one more week to go then the course is finished. Our exams will start in three or four days and I can tell you I'm not looking forward to them. I'm keeping my fingers crossed so maybe I'll pass them. Here's hoping anyway

Last night I missed out on the flicks, but the two nights before I saw two jolly good films, Pastor Hall and The Perfect Snob. I had seen the first one sometime ago but enjoyed it very much again. Charlie Ruggles was in the other so you can imagine that there were quite a lot of laughs in it

No mail for about three weeks, so I'm expecting some pretty soon. As yet I've had no more word about my commission but I suppose time will tell.

Well Mum there isn't any more news at the moment so will stop. Lots of love to you all.

Peter

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Shallufa M.E.F.

Darling Mum

The month is just about up and it's our last day here. There's nothing doing this afternoon so I'm getting in a spot of letter writing. I must try and write a sea mail letter soon, but it seems a waste of envelopes, as I'm sure I couldn't fill two pages even.

Last Monday I had my flying test. It was a pretty awful day, very bumpy and no horizon but as the test wasn't very exacting, I managed to pass OK. The exams were the next trouble, however I got through those OK so now I'm a qualified flying instructor.

Instead of the pictures last night we went to a play put on by the dramatic society. It was a comedy thriller and jolly well done. I enjoyed it very much. Jim Fowler was in it and was quite good. He was the villain of the piece.

The weather has been terrible for about three days now, blowing hard and bags of sand with it. Luckily being in a Nissan Hut, we escaped the worst of it.

Received your telegram of the 7th Mum, thank you very much.

Must needs stop.
Lots of love to you all.
Peter

A416168 W/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Dear Dad

Received an Airgraph from you and one from Mum. Thank you both very much. They arrived at the beginning of the week. At the moment I'm staying at the New Zealand Club as I've got some leave once again. I came up from Abu Sueir a couple of days ago and have got until next Tuesday. I'm with another SA, Frank Sanders¹⁶³ from Jamestown. Dawk is also here and will be returning to the Squadron sometime next week.

You were wondering about my job at Abu Sueir. I'll be doing a hell of a lot more flying than at the Squadron. We have a couple of pupils each and have to do seven to ten hours dual with them. Apart from that we have to take up pupil formations. Altogether it adds up to fifty hours or so a month. So we're not really very idle. We can get leave about every six weeks or two months.

The other day I busted my watch again, and at first they wanted 150 piastres to fix it, but a chap in charge of a Services shop beat them down to 90 piastres which only goes to show how the chaps in the forces are taken down in this wog town

There is still no word about my commission at Abu Sueir but I suppose they'll wake up to themselves soon.

Hope Nance's cold is better. Lots of love to you all
Peter

¹⁶³ Flight Sergeant Frank Maxwell Sanders 1907-1991, RAAF 27175 enlisted in 1940 and was discharged from 24 Air Stores Park in 1945. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=877095&c=WW2> Accessed 26th August 2024.

15/4/44

Darling Mum

I wrote Dad an airgraph about a week ago whilst I was on leave, just to let you know what I was up to. Frank Sanders and yours truly went up to Cairo together. We have rather a good scheme here for getting up to Cairo or Alex on leave. The idea is we take a pupil on a X country in which one of the stopping places is Heliopolis. We hop out there with our little bag and he flies back here by himself. It saves a very boring three hours in the train.

The Kiwi Club was our home for the week. It's really very nice. The rooms are nice and airy with four beds in each, hot and cold water, and in fact every mod con. It only costs ten piastres a night (2/6) which is very reasonable. There is a big lounge where you can get tea, coffee, soft drinks and milk shakes. The reading and writing room is very nice, I wrote my airgraph to Dad there. The last part of the club is the eating room where you can get quite a good meal for 10 piastres.

Across the road from the club is a bar called Mannerings and there you will find all the Aussies in the Middle East if you stay long enough. It really is a veritable Aussie strong-hold. The beer is good, I think that's what attracts us. There are quite a few A.I.F. over here at the moment. They belong to what is called a Grave Battalion. They're out here to tend to all our war graves. Not what you'd call a happy job.

The second night we were there, I had just got to bed and who should walk in but Dawk. I was very surprised to see him, as I imagined he was back at the Squadron ages ago. Not him, he'd been having a few days French Leave with the 451 Squadron whose present C.O. was with us for a while. A marvellous chap, called Ed Kirkham¹⁶⁵. Dawk was with us for the rest of our week but should have gone back by now.

I went down to the Bazaars a couple of times but I'm afraid I came away empty handed. Just before I come home whenever that may be, I'll get stuck into the shopping.

I saw three flicks whilst in Cairo. Watch on the Rhine with Bette Davis and Paul Lukas which was a very good show indeed, White Cargo with Hedy Lemar which wasn't much good at all and Sahara with Humphrey Bogart which, though dramatized, was jolly good entertainment.

We arrived back here last Tuesday night at 9.30, after a stinking trip in the train. Sandy and I went into the dining car for dinner and some beer. It was like a so and so oven. There was a fan in the roof, but, being Egyptian Railways, it wasn't working. I'd drink a glass of beer and almost at once it would run out of me as sweat.

¹⁶⁵ Squadron Leader Edgar Exley Kirkham 1917-1996, RAAF 402365 enlisted in 1940 and was mentioned in dispatches in 1942. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1053520&c=WW2> Accessed 10th September 2024; NAA: A9300 KIRKHAM EE Page 15 of 47

I found when I returned that I had been attached to another flight to help them out as they were short of instructors. On the Wednesday, I did two and a half hours flying and was I tired that night. Thursday and Friday I did three hours and today I've done nothing all day

(There seems to be a page missing of this letter as there are no farewell statements.)

20/4/44

A416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Dear Dad

Here I am again with a few more lines to keep you abreast of the times. Last night I received your cable with the news about the new arrival.¹⁶⁶ I was very pleased to hear that it is a boy, a jolly good show, what! As a matter of fact I got quite merry in the mess last night to celebrate it. The mess is really pukka, built in the shape of a Π upside down. The central part is the lounge, dart room and bathroom, one end is the dining rooms, the other is an extension of the lounge. The food is very good and you can get plenty of it. P/Os pay 20 1/2 piastres a day messing which includes washing and batman (wog) so if you consider those things, 5/- a day isn't as much as it sounds.

Haven't been doing quite so much flying lately as the pupils have finished their dual instruction. Since I wrote last I've flown a Spitfire for the first time, rather strange after the Kitty but very nice all the same.

No more room. Must stop.
Lots of love to you all
Peter

¹⁶⁶ Christopher John Gilbert, born 18th April 1944, first born son of John and Judy Gilbert (nee Jamieson), and first grandson and nephew for the family of Henry and Winifred Gilbert

TELEGRAM

Sent 22nd April; Received 25th April 1944

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVERETCE NORTH ADELAIDE

TELEGRAM RECEIVED MANY THANKS HOPE CHILDREN ALL WELL LOVE

PETER GILBERT

R.A.A.F. LIAISON OFFICE

HEADQUARTERS

MIDDLE EAST.

26. 4. 44


Dear Mr Gilbert.

It is my great pleasure to be able to write you this short note to tell you that during my recent visit to Air Force Units in this part of the world I have made the acquaintance of your son Peter.

I fully realise your feelings to these loved ones of yours particularly so far away from home and I am sure that you will appreciate a note of this kind especially from one who has made personal contact with him.

I can assure you that he is very well, and fit, and desires to send his love best wishes to yourself and his relatives and friends at home. His thoughts are ever with you, and craves a continuance of your prayers for his safety and speedy return to Australia.

Yours sincerely.


Catholic Chaplain,
R.A.A.F. MIDDLE EAST.

This letter was inserted in the compendium of PDG's correspondence. It is from one of "The Terrible Three" – the three padres who served with the RAAF in the Middle East. Johnny McNamara was a Catholic priest who ministered to the forces together with Padre Bob Davies and Padre Fred McKay. The three padres all wrote a foreword to the publication *3 Squadron at War*.

AIRGRAPH

28/4/44

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Darling Mum

I'm sorry I can't start off by thanking you for letters received, as I haven't had any for quite some time. I really can't understand it, unless a boat has been sunk. However I live in hope.

The heat has arrived a month too early and it sure has been hot for the last week. We still fly in the afternoon, and it's like sitting in an oven even up fairly high.

A few days ago, I nearly went up to Benghazi on an instructing job but was pulled off at the last minute. It would have been for about a fortnight but I wasn't very keen, so I didn't mind being taken off. Still doing a lot of flying here, averaging 3 hours a day for the last week.

Last Sunday went for my first swim of this season. A crowd of us went into Ish¹⁶⁷ and swam in one of the clubs there. It was in the lake but was jolly good. I think I'll be going again this weekend.

That's all for now. Hope to hear from you soon.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

¹⁶⁷ Ismailia ??– near the Abu Sueir Air Base)

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Darling Mum

Once more a few lines to let you know that I'm doing well and am as fit as usual. Since I wrote last, life has been going on much as usual. A new course arrived a few days ago, and so flying times are going up.

Much to my annoyance I've an Egyptian for my pupil. He can't understand a word I say when we are in the air, so I have to tell him all over again on the ground. I get as mad as hell with him in the air but, as he doesn't understand me, it doesn't do much good.

This morning eight of us did some naval co-op in Spitfires. It was my fourth trip in a Spit and it was jolly good fun.

This afternoon a sandstorm blew up, so flying was stopped. Some of us went to the flicks which were on this afternoon owing to a free flick being shown tonight which is 'Design for Living', one of Noel Coward's.

Still no mail from you but I hope for some soon. Gotta stop. Lots of love to you all.

Peter.

10/5/44

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.F. Abu Sueir M.E.F.

Darling Mum

At last I've solved the mail problem. Today I went into our Liasion (*liaison?*) and found quite a pile. Several A/Gs from you, Dad and Nance, also a sea mail letter from Dad and you each. The post office here was to blame, they sent any mail that came down here for me back with not known written on it.

This is the last letter that I will be writing from here. I can't say what my new address will be. I may see the Tarbats on the way, however. Anyhow don't write until you hear further from me.

You seemed to have done a good job on the flat. I think it's a great idea as that part of the house has been out of use for a long time now.

I did no work at all today, as I flew up to Cairo in the Fairchild this morning and didn't get back till about quarter to five.

There is very little news so will close. Lots of love to you all.

Peter

The following letter was inserted in the compendium of Dad's letters. It is a second letter from his cousin, Bill Gilbert to his Aunt Win (Dad's Mother)

AIRGRAPH

AUS429945 Sgt Gilbert WB R.A.A.F AUSPO LONDON

15/5/44

Dear Aunt Win

Thank you very much for an airgraph which came a couple of days ago, it was good to hear about the boys and where they are. I pity John, being where he is now. So far I have had no answer to any of my letters which I wrote to Peter soon after arriving in England, I am glad he is happy in his job but can't imagine him liking instructing very much.

I must congratulate you on being a grandmother, I wonder if they wanted a son or not, shouldn't think they would mind very much. You said you had seen Dick Colley¹⁶⁸ while he was on leave from Flinders, I must write to him. I promised him I would but so far I have not yet got round to it.

We are still sitting down doing practically nothing but flying will be starting very soon now. Would you give my love to the rest of your family. In your next letter to Peter would you give him my address. My letters may not of found him.

Love Bill

¹⁶⁸ Able Seaman Richard Lister (Dick) Colley 1924-1975, RAN PA4521 served in the Royal Australian Navy 1943-1946. <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1100097&c=WW2#R> and was an old scholar of St Peter's College <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/14038/people?page=2> Accessed 11th September 2024

20/5/44

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.A.F. Liaison M.E.

PS Just received your Xmas parcel. Thank you all very much. Very pleased to get photo.

Dear Dad

Received the cable for my birthday yesterday. Thank you very much. The reason it arrived so late is because of my change of address. However, better late than never I always say.

It's a little over a week since I last wrote and since then there has been very little doing. At the moment I'm just killing time.

My quarters are not too bad. I've got a pretty comfortable camp bed and then in a bullet. The food is pretty good, so I've really nothing to grumble about. Every day for the last week I have been swimming. It's the first exercise I've had for a very long time and the open air life is doing me a world of good. I've got a pretty good tan up and feel in the pink. I've just this moment got back from today's swim. Three of us went down before lunch and had a jolly good day.

The night before last we had a free picture show on the camp. It was an American effort and very good. There were two pictures, The First of the Few which I liked very much and Sonja Henie in Winter Time which was also very good.

Time drags in the evenings here, but there is a very nice club not far from here, where there is a dance now and then, and a few jugs of beer. There is a dance tonight and a few of us are going along.

Cheerio for now. Love to all.

Peter

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.A.F. Liaison M.E.

Darling Mum

Just a few more lines to let you know how things are with me. Yesterday I received two airgraphs, one from you and one from dad. They had chased me about a bit but it was very good to hear from you. Also in the last couple of days, I've had two cakes from you and two cables. Thank you all very much.

Last Friday I managed to get a couple of days leave. Two of us went up to Cairo. We hitchhiked up there and of course a sandstorm would blow up just the day we decide to go. It was a really good one, too. At its height we couldn't see more than twenty yards in front of us.

The weather in Cairo was surprisingly pleasant for this time of the year. I did a spot of shopping, had some good meals and the odd beer or two. Saw three pictures, two of which were terrible, the other being just average.

There is very little to do in this place except play Shove ha'penny¹⁶⁹ and table tennis. That is besides swimming.

I had a letter from Dawk the other day, saying that he had also finished his tour but was still in Italy.

Well must stop. Lots of love to all.
Peter.

PS please thank James for the cigs.

¹⁶⁹ A board game between two players using a coins

TELGRAM

Sent 6th June; Received 12th June 1944

EFM D-R H GILBERT

26 LEFEVRE TERRACE NORTH ADELAIDE

MANY HAPPY RETURNS GOOD LUCK LOVE TO ALL THE FAMILY

PETER GILBERT

TELEGRAM

Sent 10th June; Received 18th June 1944

EFM MRS H GILBERT

26 LEFEVRE TCE NORTH ADELAIDE

AIRGRAPH LETTER RECEIVED MANY THANKS AM WELL AND FIT

LOVE

PETER GILBERT

TELEGRAM

Sent 20th June; Received 25th June 1944

EFM MRS H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TCE NORTH ADELAIDE SA

AIRGRAPH LETTER RECEIVED MANY THANKS AM WELL AND FIT LOVE

PETER GILBERT

22/6/44

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.A.F. Liaison M.E.

Dear Nance

It's about time I wrote you a few lines, so here goes. I haven't written for a week or so but I sent Mum a cable about three or four days ago, to let you know that I was still going strong.

Life has become terribly boring here after six weeks of doing absolutely nothing. I'm even sick of swimming and haven't been in the water for nearly two weeks. I still go to the flicks every evening which helps to pass the time away. I've been playing a lot of cards, mostly Pontoon (21) with the odd game of poker. I've been fairly lucky and I'm in a winning position.

Tomorrow, to relieve the monotony, three of us are going to Cairo for forty eight hours leave. I did not think I would see Cairo again and was hoping not to do so but I must get out of this place for a while.

There is really no news, so will stop.

Lots of love to all.

Pete

AUS416168 P/O Gilbert PD R.A.A.F. Liaison M.E.F.

Darling Mum

A few more lines to let you know that I'm still around the same spot and becoming more and more browned off as the days go by. I'm still hoping that something will happen soon. Your cable arrived yesterday and I was very pleased to receive it.

Life goes on here the same as usual, nothing to do except read, eat and sleep. I haven't been swimming for over 2 weeks now - just haven't got the energy. Luckily the library here has a few good books which help to pass the time. I have just finished one called The Leaf in the Storm, a novel about the Chinese hardships in the present war, most interesting.

Last weekend four of us went up to Cairo, spent three days there. We had a fair sort of time but there was something lacking. It was, I think, the realisation that it would have been so much more fun at home.

Not quite so hot for the last few days, cool breeze at night making it quite pleasant.

Lots of love to you all.

Peter

AUS416168
P/O Gilbert PD
R.A.A.F. Liaison
M.E.F

10/7/44

Dear Dad

Thanks very much for the nice long letters from you and Mum which I received a few days ago. They were both written in early May. I also received two cakes the day before yesterday, thanks once again.

Life goes on the same as usual in this dump. Yesterday four of us spent the day at the Officers & Sisters swimming club and I got a bit touched up by old man Sun. However I had a pretty good background of tan so I am not at all sore this morning. We're going down again today, about eleven o'clock after I've got some pay. The weather has been very pleasant lately, not too hot, just hot enough for a really good day in the water.

The other night I saw 'Mrs Miniver' which was a really excellent picture. Quite a change to the usual rubbish we see. Generally they are third rate shows but sometimes they come good. Last night there was a super War Pictorial of a daylight fortress raid on Hun-Land. There were several shots of Jerry aircraft being clobbered by the Yank Thunderbolts. Really superb photography.

As yet there is still nothing in the wind as to our leaving. I feel now as though I was posted here for the duration. However I suppose something will eventually turn up. It does rather douse one's enthusiasm as you can imagine.

You were asking about the different in pay of W/O and P/O. It is a whole fivepence in daily rate of pay, but officers out here get an allowance of ten pounds a month for hard living or something. However it's not to be sneezed at. As to what I was instructing on, it was Harvards which are very similar to the old Wirraways.

Would you do something for me Dad. I remitted sixty pounds home to the Commonwealth Bank, King William Street, and wrote an airgraph to the Manager. So far I've had no acknowledgment of the A/G. Would you find out if it was received and let me know. It takes some time for the money to pass through all the Service channels but the A/G should have arrived a long time ago.

Glad to hear everything is doing well at home and that the flatites¹⁷⁰ are proving good neighbours.

Well there's no more news for now, so will say Cheerio.
Peter

¹⁷⁰ Family living in the converted flat in the Gilbert family home at 26 Le Fevre Terrace, North Adelaide.

TELEGRAM

Sent 10th July; Received 15 July 1944

EFM DR H GILBERT 26 LEFEVRE TERRACE
NORTH ADELAIDE

LETTERS RECEIVED MANY THANKS AM WELL AND FIT LOVE
PETER GILBERT

AUS416168 F/O Gilbert PD R.A.A.F. Liaison. M.E.F.

PS My F/O came through three days ago. PDG

Darling Mum

Still here and more than fed up. Had two air graphs yesterday, one from John and one from Aunt Marjory. They were only posted on the 17th of this month, so arrived very quickly. John still seems to be having tummy trouble which is not so good. However he seems very pleased with young Chris.

Pictures have been the main entertainment here and I think you'll have to relinquish your position as chief picture goer of the family, as I have seen over sixty picture shows in the last three months. Last Saturday night there was a big party at 73 O.T.U. Four of us who were instructors there went up to it and had a lot of fun.

About three days ago I sent £48 pounds (sterling) home to Dad. It may arrive before I do, if so would Dad please stick it in the bank for me. Things have been looking a little more hopeful the last few days and maybe a good sign.

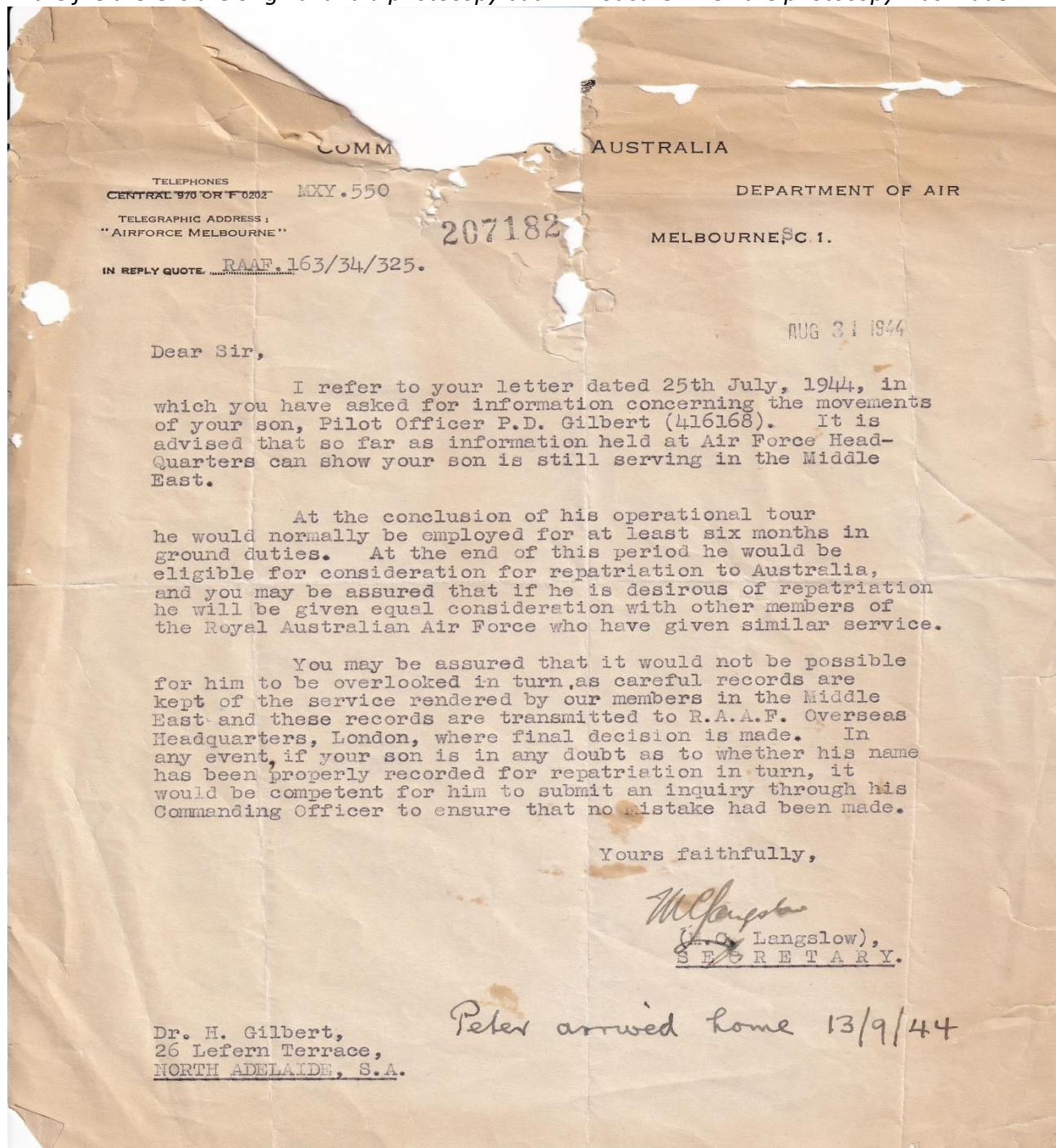
Will say cheerio for now.

Lots of love to all.

Peter.

The following letter is from the Commonwealth of Australia Department of Air to Peter's father Dr Henry Gilbert. It would appear to be in a response to a query from Dr Gilbert re Peter's pending repatriation and may have questioned the possibility that Peter had somehow been missed in the line for repatriation.

In the file there is the original and a photocopy but I'm not sure when the photocopy was made.



This is the photocopy of the original letter

COMM OF AUSTRALIA

TELEPHONES
CENTRAL 976 OR F 6202

MX. 550

DEPARTMENT OF AIR

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS :
"AIRFORCE MELBOURNE"

207182

MELBOURNE PC. 1.

IN REPLY QUOTE RAAF. 163/34/325.

AUG 31 1944

Dear Sir,

I refer to your letter dated 25th July, 1944, in which you have asked for information concerning the movements of your son, Pilot Officer P.D. Gilbert (416168). It is advised that so far as information held at Air Force Headquarters can show your son is still serving in the Middle East.

At the conclusion of his operational tour he would normally be employed for at least six months in ground duties. At the end of this period he would be eligible for consideration for repatriation to Australia, and you may be assured that if he is desirous of repatriation he will be given equal consideration with other members of the Royal Australian Air Force who have given similar service.

You may be assured that it would not be possible for him to be overlooked in turn, as careful records are kept of the service rendered by our members in the Middle East and these records are transmitted to R.A.A.F. Overseas Headquarters, London, where final decision is made. In any event, if your son is in any doubt as to whether his name has been properly recorded for repatriation in turn, it would be competent for him to submit an inquiry through his Commanding Officer to ensure that no mistake had been made.

Yours faithfully,

W. Langslow
(W. C. Langslow),
SECRETARY.

Dr. H. Gilbert,
26 Leferm Terrace,
NORTH ADELAIDE, S.A.

Peter arrived home 13/9/44

TELEGRAM

Sent and received 11th September 1944

DR H GILBERT
26 LEFEVRE TCE
NTH ADELAIDE
SA

LEAVING TODAY ARRIVING TEN TOMORROW LOVE PETER

TELEGRAM

Sent and Received 11th September 1944

DR H GILBERT
26 LEFEVRE TCE NTH ADELAIDE
TELEPHONE C 1054 SA

MET REX DECIDED TO STAY NIGHT SEE YOU DEFINITELY WEDNESDAY NOTIFY
TIME ARRIVAL PLEASE RING CLAIR.....PETER

TELEGRAM

Sent and Received 12th September 1944

DR H GILBERT
26 LEFEVRE TERRACE
NTH ADELAIDE
SA

ARRIVING EXPRESS TOMORROW LOVE PETER