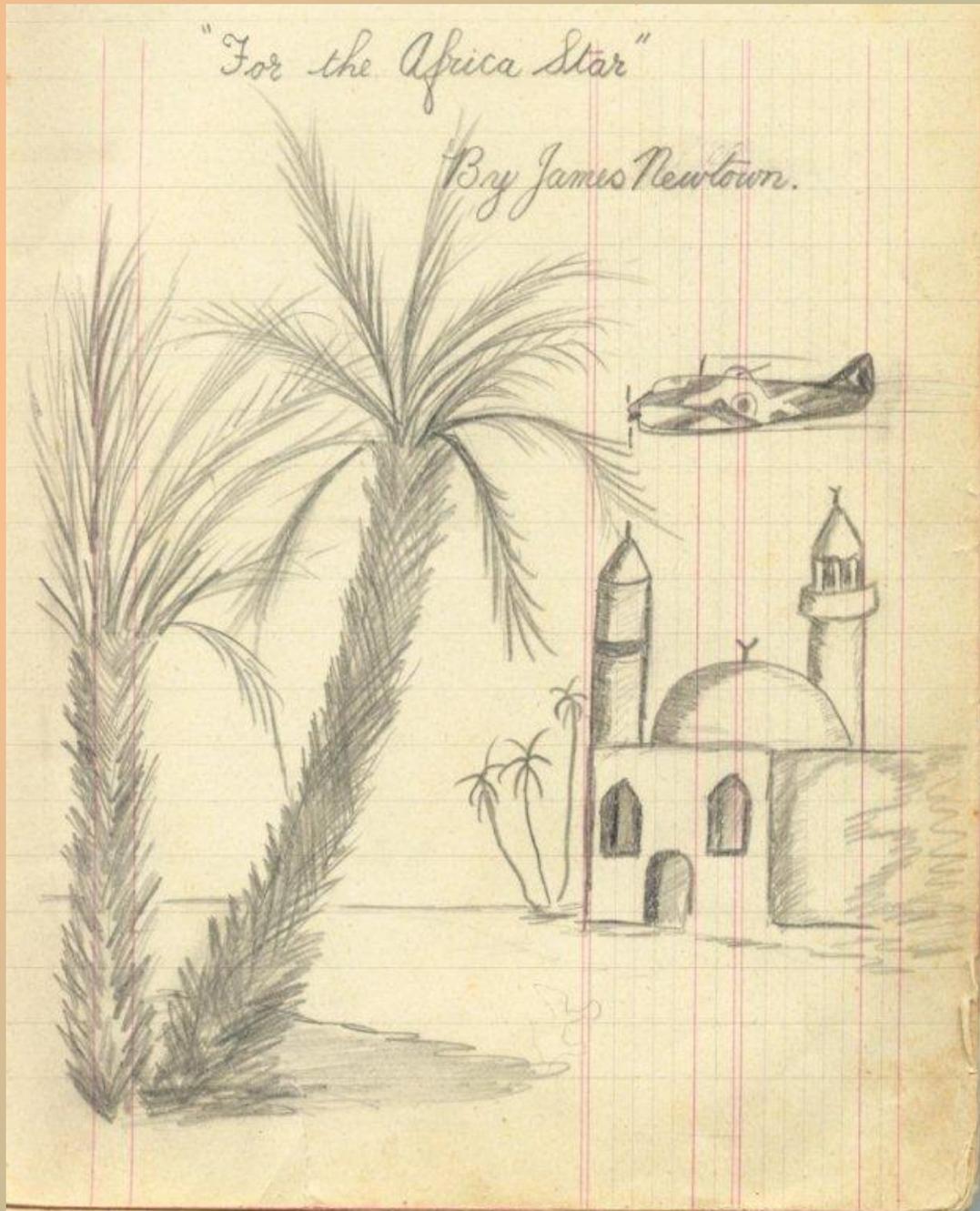


For the Africa Star

An Airman's Story – A job that had to be done!

By

James William Pratt



Note by the editor: This picture is a copy of the original front page of James Pratt's note book. Why he used the name James "Newtown" is not clear.

Foreword

Air - Gunner James William Pratt

This is a story my late brother James William Pratt wrote in a cash register type notebook - when, no one knows. Its about his voyage to war in 1941, he called it 'For the African Star'. James, the eldest of eight - four sisters and four brothers was born in 1921, in our home town of Grimsby. As an 18 year old butcher apprentice he joined the RAF in April 1939. Soon after joining he was transferred for gunnery training at the Cardigan Bay bomb ranges, flying 'Fairy Battles'.

In 1940, he was stationed at Manston, Croydon and Milton during the Battle of Britain. In 1941 he was attached to 501, 272 and 252 Squadron, Hurricanes Wellingtons and Beaufighter, bound for the Middle East. Leaving Egypt in 1943 he was stationed in Campo Marino, Italy, 19 Squadron SAAF Beaufighter, until 1945.

James retired as Flt Lt Senior Catering Officer, and one of his career highlights he told me, was being responsible for all the catering arrangements for the November 15th, 1972 Royal Opening of the Hendon RAF Museum. I read a letter of thanks from his Wing Commander Peter Clubbe, AMBIM RAF for all his hard work.

Sadly at 77 years old James became ill and died suddenly. It was a great loss to our family and his wife Margaret. It was Margaret who gave me his diary of events of that frightful journey to war along with photographs of camp life in the Western Desert and Italy during WW2.

Peter Pratt.

December 2009

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At Liverpool, April 20th 1941, it was raining very hard. Our kit and we were wet through. We had just arrived by train, and had taken our own last glimpse of England. Most of us had been through the Battle of Britain and now we were to embark on yet another undertaking, 'The battle for Suez'. Mussolini had already marched on to Mersa-Mutrah, to be driven back again by the great General Wavell and his gallant thirty thousand men, who at this time were in need of supplies and reinforcements. We were to expand the desert Air force, the first of many thousands to follow, for our nations leaders expected the Luftwaffe to show up on the Libyan front.

The troop-ship Dominion Monarch, or rather seemingly from outside appearance a luxury liner painted a war like grey, loomed up aloft over the quay on which we were standing, as the rain dripped incessantly from our water logged garments. I and thousands others gazed agoof at the rivet studded iron shell, which was to be our veritable refuge and transport for six or more weeks.

After much ado, and as it was neatly put, then, 'Bull-dug,' our kits found their tranquil space of rest in the ships salty damp holds. The ship looked indeed a Thirty Thousand Ton vessel, and we were apparently the first batch of troops ever to dirty its decks and scratch the paintwork. We were hurriedly dispatched in groups, to different parts of the ship. Some were fortunate enough to accommodate cabins, once sumptuously decorated for kings, viscounts or the wealthy. These cabins now refitted with as many wooden bunks as space would permit, but nevertheless, still a little more cosier than the damp holds, where some of the more unfortunate were hustled.

Furthermore, down in the crude holds one found not even a bunk on which to rest his weary frame, but a swinging hammock. And if he looked at the red - painted ships iron sides he would have seen rivulets of condensation oozing majestically down. It proved that ventilation for such a throng had not been entered on the shipbuilder's blueprints. Also those in cabins still had toilets left intact; while those in the holds had but a few in comparison of their number. We hadn't been long at sea before this proved a problem. Often one would have to wade ankle deep through water, and refuse that escaped the dainty porcelain pans, that had once seen more classier faces, than those of these rough and ready service-men.

The dining hall had practically been laid bare, all the furniture had been removed, as again for the delightful benefit of the troops who were about to stare death in the face. The only inkling of the previous existing luxury was an irremovable buffet, which was apparently left to the glorious administrations or even criticisms. Anyhow it appeared that the ship magnates had thought, that instead of ordering its destructive removal, they had concluded that the troops might have engineered the task, by spontaneous digs at its highly polished sides, with wilful misuse of their heavy armoured boots. Of course, if anyone wanted to gaze at something, that the Air Ministry had not undertaken to do in the airdrome dining rooms, one could gaze quite at ease, on the sculptured ceilings, hidden lights and symmetrical carvings, oil paintings and diverse attractions for the exploring flies.

We sat down, twelve to a table, and as we all were hungry everyone tore silently and indiscriminately through the copious meal laid before them. This was our first meal for many hours, hence the absence of comments. Even the fastidious were devouring without discovering fault. Everyone on finishing the long awaited repast dropped his cutlery with a languid air of profound satisfaction. Then, slowly and ponderously each person made his winding way up to the open deck to gaze on the world they knew so well, or not so well, as the case may be, for the last time.

The starboard side was crowded, for this was the side nearest the quay. Hundreds of men representing the youth of Britain, and from all walks of life, rich

men's sons and poor men's sons, some married and some single, some big, some puny but all none too happy as they all gazed down from those mighty iron plates over the roof-tops. Church spires rose saintly and rigid whilst distance clock towers ebbed away the time, meticulously and indifferent.

As the sun dropped lower into the ulterior we became ready to cast off. For how long? This question was undoubtedly in every man's mind. How long before we see again those happy village greens and rustic settings, only found here in England? How long before we rush through the busy city throng at lunch hour and make for the sea-side on foot, pedal, or even car, at well earned week-ends.

We soon found ourselves making our way down the Fairway, silently and swiftly. Farewell England, farewell those verdant slopes and village inns. We shall soon be back. Tarry not, for we go to rid the world of this Nazi scum, that's endangering our Empire. Farewell and God Bless you all.

Two days off Freetown, somewhere in the mid-Atlantic during the early hours of the morning. We were all sound asleep when we were frightfully awakened by what we imagined to be a shuddering explosion, that seemed powerful enough to tear our gallant ship asunder. Our first thoughts were that we had been hit by a marauding force, and as orderly and quickly as possible we made our way, groping in the darkness to our allotted boat and raft stations. It was apparently four o'clock in the morning, and except for a single beam of a searchlight shining over the turbulent waters, it was pitch black.

The searchlight swayed, in turn from one vessel to another, as if counting our numbers. When it was flashed onto our ship, it allowed us to glance about and some individual, quick in perception soon let us know that our ships bridge was lop sided; whilst another of equal talent pointed to what was once a reinforced gun-pit, now a heap of rubble. Fortunately no one mans the guns at night. It was a little time before we all realised that, not for one moment did our engines stop, for during the whole incident we were slowly ploughing our weary way through these truculent seas. It

wasn't until we gathered up speed again, and were told to return to our beds, as everything was all right that we realised this.

Making our way down to breakfast later on, we learned that we had collided with another of our convoy. There was a terrific rent in our starboard amidships, the bridge was twisted to incongruity. Furthermore several men occupying the cabins along the starboard side were thrown from their bunks, although there were comparatively few casualties.

West Africa

On our arrival at Freetown, West Africa, our ship hurriedly underwent a series of makeshift repairs. At least good enough until we reached South Africa and change ships for the remaining part of our journey to the Nile. At Freetown the natives, sparingly dressed, paddled their way in their frail looking craft, in and out of our monstrous iron sides, offering fruit for sale. The boys were soon buying fruit in vast superabundant quantities. The natives would hurl a rope up for the prospective buyer, who would in turn place enough money, for an already stipulated amount of fruit in the attached basket, so as to speak, money first, the Woolworths fashion! Other natives provided the on looking crowd with light entertainment, by diving into the depths for coins. 'How about a Glessgie tanner,' some would repeat. Sometimes a man athletically, would throw the coin far away from the diver's canoe, but the jolly native would dive in to reappear with the coin set between his strong set of flashing white teeth.

Around the Cape of Good Hope

Durban was our next port of call, and after battling our way through the famous roaring forties, those two great oceans meet, those once dreaded seas that dominate at the foot of South Africa, we arrived there safe and sound. The boat had shipped a lot of water during this latter period and many of the men had been victims of seasickness. Sometimes the waves appeared like mountains as the riding surf gave them a snow-capped appearance; they also felt like mountains, as they dashed down onto the decks with a ponderous fury, shaking the ship from stem to

stern. Other ships in the convoy were more spread out, were bobbing up and down on the tumultuous waters, as if they were corks.

After we left the Southern waters and began to sail in a northerly direction the weather became much more quiescent and it wasn't long before we sighted the African coast near Durban. Durban is the chief seaport of Natal South Africa, and nestles amongst picturesque scenery. As we approached the harbour, the translucent water hardly moved, whilst the sky beheld not a cloud, and was of the deepest blue. Kitty-hawks and other birds circled and squawked about the ships masts. Everything seemed so celestial, as our bows sliced gently through the water, hardly making a ripple.

All the Empire had heard of how the Royal Air Force, as it was then, very small, had fought and won the air battles, day after day over Britain. This is why the people of South Africa gave a warm welcome to the 'boys in blue'. They flocked in their sumptuous, high horse-powered cars to the docksides every day, offering invitations to their homes and parties. After the first day ashore, the men related to one another their various experiences of that day, and how kind they thought the South Africans to be. They were so liberal and gay and after we had spent our three weeks ashore at Durban many of the men were becoming intimately attached to many of the families and vouched that they would return after the war.

On the last day we were due to leave, hundreds of people crowded the quaysides to wave us good-by. Many of the men had made sweethearts and even in that short time, some had become engaged. The sky was exquisitely blue and the sea divinely beautiful when we sailed away from this land of dreams and, as when we left England only six weeks before, many a tear was shed.

As we approached the equator on the East side of Africa, in the Indian Ocean, the heat became humid, and it wasn't until we had passed Aden and was sailing up the Red Sea, that we enjoyed an occasional breeze. All danger of being torpedoed had passed now, and we felt a little safer.

It was exactly two months ago since we left Britain. We were anchored in the peaceful looking waters that wash the white sands of Suez. For the majority on board these last two months had been full of new excitement, and longing. Longing to set foot on terra-firma again. We had only been four days out of the port of Liverpool, when it was learned that we were being snared by packs of U-Boats. Those were anxious days, but we had an efficient escort, comprising of several war-ships of no light displacement. One day it was flashed around the convoy that two enemy submarines had been extirpated by their dextrous tactics. Loud cheers arose on hearing this, and everyone began to feel a little more confident in the ability of the, 'Senior Service.'

Silence is Golden.

I believe, that which I hear with my own ears
And believe, that which I see with my own eyes.
I must never listen to rumours or advice of information
Or advice of information from those who I consider enemies
I must judge for myself but not advertise the result.

A poem by J. W. Pratt.

Note by the editor: *Sadly, the story ends here. There were surely much more to tell. Why James Pratt did not write down the rest of his experiences, we will never know.*

When Peter Pratt made contact with me, it was clear that he was passionate about saving the memories of his late brother, and trusting his SA Air Force brothers with this little jewel was foremost in his mind. He handed me the notes he transcribed as well as all the original photographs of his brother. These photographs, with a synopsis of James' service, will be framed and given a place of honour in the SA Air Force Association HQ in Pretoria, South Africa.

The photographs and drawings on the following pages were provided by Peter Pratt.

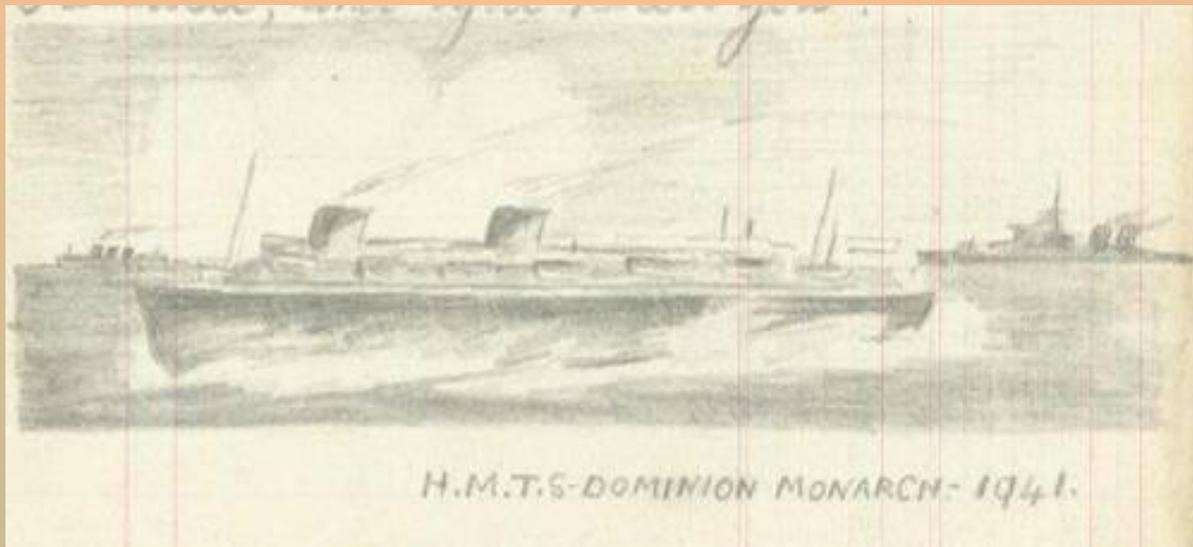
Sydney Fryer
Editor
January 2010



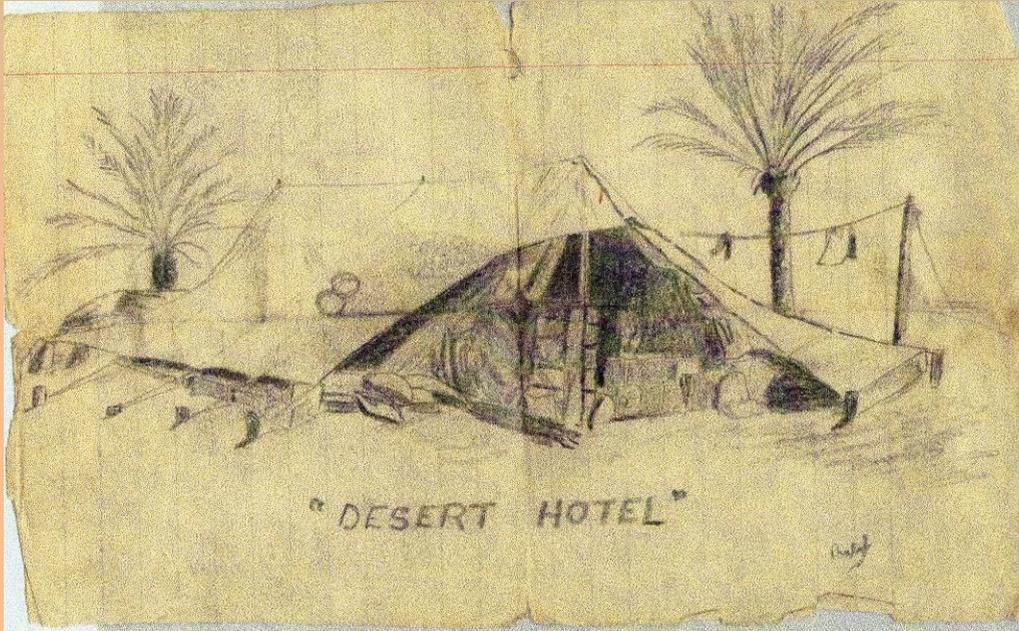
Air Gunner James Pratt, 1941



Flt Lt James Pratt, 1976



A sketch of the HMTS Dominion Monarch, from the note book of James Pratt.



Presumably a sketch of James Pratt's tent in the desert.



Bengazi Libya, 1943. James Pratt's tent.



Campo Marino, Italy 1944. Catering Staff. SAAF, Swazi & Basuto helpers. James Pratt is second from left in the front row.



Campo Marino, Italy 1944. 19Sqn SAAF Beaufighter Mess Hall. The wall murals were done by James Pratt to "brighten up the place for the lads".

Edku Desert Camp Egypt. Undated.



James Pratt with friend.



Mobile kitchen and staff.



Convoy through "Hellfire Pass".



Admin Staff Group.

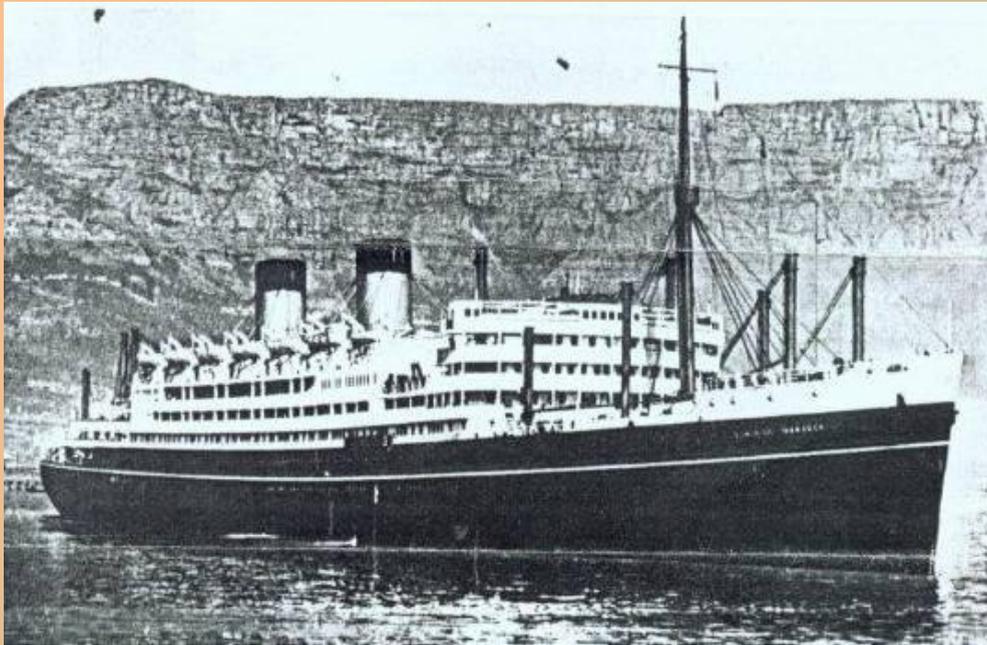


19Sqn SAAF Service Crew

The M.V. Dominion Monarch

The Dominion Monarch was built by Swan Hunter Newcastle England. At 26,463 gross tons she was launched as a cargo/luxury liner in 1938 for Shaw Savill and Albion Co Ltd. In 1940 the vessel was converted to carry troops.

Throughout WW2 she carried 90,000 troops and sailed 350,000 miles, running the gauntlet through the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans. After WW2, The M.V. Dominion Monarch was returned to her normal self. She continued her commercial service carrying 517 first class passengers, and holds full of valuable cargo. She was withdrawn from service in 1962 and sold to become a floating hotel at the Seattle World Fair. That same year The Dominion Monarch was sold to the Japanese who renamed her as the Dominion Monarch 'Maru', and later broken up for scrap.



The Dominion Monarch in Cape Town Harbour. Date unknown.

HISTORY

Launched	27 Jul 1938
Completed	Jan 1939
Maiden Voyage	17 Feb 1939
Start Service as Troop Ship	Aug 1940
Return to Civilian Service	Jul 1947
Service End	1962

TECHNICAL DETAIL

Gross Tonnage	26,463
Length	207.8m
Beam	25.8m
Engines	4x Diesel
Total power output	32,000 BHP