CHAPTER ONE

# *'I certainly feel good about enlisting'*

World War II was a conflict on a massive scale but not all of the protagonists were military forces. Frequently the forces of nature proved to be an equally formidable enemy. In December 1942, the natural environment became a hostile opponent for the American crew of the B-24 bomber, *Little Eva*. During the bitter turmoil of the war against Japan in the Pacific, a savage wilderness became their unexpected foe.

The young men who found themselves in this terrifying predicament came from different cities, different professions and different backgrounds. The only common denominator was their youth. No amount of training or material support could prepare these airmen for the experience that lay in wait for them. Social standing, wealth and rank became irrelevant during their long ordeal and the man thought the least likely to succeed became the most likely to survive.

The journey that led them to their destiny in the Australian outback began with the events of a bright Sunday morning in Hawaii in December 1941.

The birth of the 90th Bombardment Group in early 1942 was a direct result of the death of the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The 'Day of Infamy' had belatedly thrust the United States of

America into a global war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt immediately called the nation to arms and began the greatest mobilisation in the nation's history. For decades the United States had enjoyed the peaceful bliss of isolationism. Germany's military aggression in Europe had alarmed the politicians and the populace of America, but it had not lessened the resolve of the people to remain neutral and not become involved in another European conflict. Since the early days of the European war, President Roosevelt had been supporting Britain with essential supplies, which meant that the country was engaging in a kind of clandestine war with Germany.

As late as November 1941 Roosevelt was still advocating neutrality. He knew the mood well: only 8 per cent of the US population were interventionists; the remainder wanted nothing to do with a foreign war.

Japan's military expansion was being stalled by the Allied oil and raw-material embargo and the freezing of all Japan's assets in America. However, Japan remained defiant and began to focus on strategic objectives. In order to continue armed aggression in the Far East, access to the oil-rich Netherlands East Indies and Malaya was essential. The only deterrent to the Japanese plans was the American fleet based in Hawaii and to a lesser extent the British naval base at Singapore.

It was from carrier-based aircraft that the Japanese attacked the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. In less than three hours, eight capital ships were sunk or severely damaged, 166 aircraft were destroyed — mostly on the ground — and 2403 Americans died. It was the end of America's isolationism and the beginning of global war. After twenty-three years of peace, Uncle Sam was once again embroiled in another war.

The 1930s depression, America's aloofness and its indifference to national defence had made the great Arsenal of Democracy a third-rate military power. The armed forces were undermanned, with meagre equipment that was mostly antiquated and obsolete.

All was not lost. The Selective Service Act, a Roosevelt initiative

that led to the first ever peacetime draft, had put a million men in uniform and in training. The National Guard was also mobilised, and a week after the 'Day of Infamy' sixteen million men had rushed to the nation's draft boards.

America's greatest weapons were its mobilisation and its production capacity. Japan's mistake was in underestimating the resolve of the United States. From the early days of the conflict, it was obvious that there would be no appeasement and no negotiated peace treaties in a prolonged conflict. However, full mobilisation and major offensive strategies would take time — at least a year.

The United States Army's aviation group from 1926 to 1941 was called the Army Air Corps. During the 1930s the Roosevelt Administration was mostly indifferent to the needs of the Air Corps. Indeed, until the 1920s the government had been indifferent to the value of *any* aircraft. Traditional bureaucrats believed that aircraft were 'simply a means of conveyance, captained by chauffeurs'. It was not until a young major called Henry 'Hap' (short for Happy) Arnold began to advocate air power as a potent weapon that the situation would change. Arnold was an experienced flyer, having been in aviation since its beginning. He was personally instructed by one of the Wright Brothers and received his wings in 1911. In 1921, in a single-seat aircraft, Arnold raced a group of carrier pigeons from Portland to San Francisco. The stunt was a direct result of a challenge by a national newspaper. Arnold beat the pigeons by forty-one hours. It was in no sense a match-up, but it created valuable publicity for the cause. The United States government was an interested observer. Four years later, a pugnacious Brigadier General, Billy Mitchell, bombed two obsolete American battleships from an aircraft off the Atlantic Coast. This time the government did take notice. Mitchell was promptly court-martialled and he ultimately resigned from the Air Corps, but he had made his point and his views on the benefits of strategic bombing would prove prophetic.

The Corps were convinced that the country required heavy

bombers to aid the nation's defence. However, most military experts disagreed. They believed that the main function of the Air Corps would be to assist the navy in coastal defence and the army in ground manoeuvres. In 1934 a special fact-finding group within the War Department concluded that 'independent air missions will have little effect upon the issue of battle and none upon the outcome of the war'.

With the economic depression of the 1930s and diminishing federal revenues, the plight of the Air Corps became a low priority and progress was slow. In 1934, the service managed to win approval to order its first fleet of heavy bombers and Boeing began production on the B-17. By 1939, thirteen had been delivered, with forty more on order. The war in Europe changed everything. Charles Lindbergh, trans-Atlantic pathfinder and national hero, had returned from Europe and was profoundly impressed by the Luftwaffe. 'They are more formidable than all the other European nations put together,' he told Arnold. 'The only weapon that they don't have is a heavy bomber as good as the B-17 Flying Fortress.' Lindbergh soon found himself on a blue-ribbon panel headed by Brigadier General W. G. Kilner to discuss the needs of air defence. The conclusion was a total reverse of previous strategic thinking. The United States could no longer rely solely on naval and coastal artillery defences to repel a potential invader. The Kilner board recommended 'new long-range aircraft that are capable of attacking enemy bases'.

The European war created a demand for more equipment and an independent air force. The fall of France in June 1940 attested to the might of the Luftwaffe. The value of air power was no longer in doubt. When Arnold, now chief of the Air Corps, went to Capitol Hill to discuss appropriations he was told that any amount would be granted. 'All you have to do is ask for it,' said Senator Henry Cabot Lodge.

The United States entered the Pacific War with 25 000 personnel

and 4000 aircraft. These figures would dramatically increase as the Air Corps took advantage of the blank cheque and Uncle Sam's production potential. The new arrivals of men and machines resulted in the Army Air Corps and the Air Force Combat Command being amalgamated under the control of Arnold. On 20 June 1941 the two groups became the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF). This new group still operated under the auspices of the Army group, but it had considerable freedom, with Arnold reporting directly to the Chiefs of Staff.

The 90th Bombardment Group was a genuine 'war baby', conceived out of the legacy of the Pearl Harbor disaster. The fledgling group was activated at Key Field, Meridian, Mississippi, on 15 April 1942. It was something less than a formidable force. There were no planes, no pilots and little equipment. The seventy-three enlisted men spent their time doing drill manoeuvres and awaiting events. On 15 May the group moved to Barksdale Field, Louisiana, which was a more comfortable billet. There was a swimming pool, a gymnasium, tennis courts and a friendly town called Shreveport nearby. The war seemed a long way away.

By the end of the month the organisation began to grow. Men and machines arrived and training began in earnest. The group consisted of men who were professional officers and those who were drafted, most as a result of the Selective Services Act. The criteria for officer entry into the USAAF were demanding. Walter Higgins was an ambitious young man from Fort Worth, Texas, who graduated with 115 other young men from Brooks Field, San Antonio, on 9 January 1942. It was a memorable day. In addition to being commissioned, Higgins received his wings in the morning and was married in the afternoon. He described the requirements to get into the Air Corps:

> *At least two years of college or equivalent was required. There were a lot of applicants turned down because of the strict physical examination. Eyes, heart, coordination were all monitored. Even after one made the grade for*

*flight training things got tougher. There wasn't a lot of time to teach you. You either did it right or you were on your way to other things. About half of your class would not make the grade. In my class about half failed Primary Flight School and many more Basic Flight School. In Advanced Flight School the only ones that failed to get their wings were those who managed to kill themselves flying. There were many training accidents. Most of us were not career officers. We joined because we were aware of the threat of war. Several of us in college quit and joined the Air Corps. I don't recall knowing any pilots that were drafted. By and large most of the personnel in the Air Corps, officers and enlisted men, were volunteers.*

Higgins was twenty-five when he received his wings. His fellow graduates came from all over America: James A. McMurria was from South Carolina, Lyle Schoenauer from Nebraska, George W. Sellmer from Illinois, Norman R. Crosson from Ohio, Edwin Holloway from New Jersey, Donald Elder from New York and Arthur Speltz from Minnesota. Speltz's letters to his family convey his buoyant enthusiasm:

*Well I certainly feel good about enlisting. We are certain to get service in the Air Corps. Plenty of hard work and not much time to study. When I sit and listen to our professor's lectures, I certainly learn something. Also get a lot of flying instructions. I soloed on February 6 — just a start. Should get my dress uniform soon and a short haircut.*

All were young and eager and they were soon dispersed into the ever-expanding USAAF. Pilots were allocated to fighters, light and heavy bombers, observation units and other specialties. Second lieutenants were dispatched in twos or threes into various combat units.

'Planes, we need more planes,' General Arnold told President Roosevelt. 'We need 50 000 new planes in 1942.' Roosevelt responded, 'No, we'll build 60 000 this year and 125 000 in 1943.' In

fact, the United States built 47 836 planes in 1942 and 85 898 in 1943. The USAAF took delivery of 295 000 aircraft during the war, 19 203 of which were the B-24 Consolidated Liberator.

During the 1930s, military analysts had stressed the need for heavy bombers to protect the American coastline from invasion. The B-24 was developed by Consolidated Aircraft in response to a request from the Air Corps to create a bomber that would be superior to the B-17 especially in range, bomb capacity and altitude. Drawing heavily on the Boeing Company's B-15s and B-17s, as well as the Consolidated P4Y flying boat, the first prototype, XB-24, flew for the first time on 29 December 1939.

It was an innovative machine, with turbo-supercharged engines — a Davis 'wet wing' arrangement with the fuel being stored evenly along the entire wing section. It also had considerable armour protection. However, it was an ugly brute, a fact that troubled Consolidated Aircraft President Reuben Fleet to the extent that he promptly ordered an extra three feet to be added to the snub nose to make it 'look prettier'. The Air Corps soon ordered 2434 Liberators to be delivered in 1942. Most of them were the B-24Ds, which were armed with .50 calibre machine guns, including two tail guns and two nose guns, as well as two located in the middle section, on either side of the fuselage, commonly called waist guns. The B-24Ds could carry up to 8000 pounds of bombs and fly at nearly 300 miles per hour at 30 000 feet. The aircraft had a range of 2800 miles and cost $336 000. Those who flew the B-24Ds knew that they could 'go anywhere and do anything'; better still, they were 'tough bastards'. Ultimately, many believed that the B-24D was the best aircraft Consolidated ever built.

Pearl Harbor gave Henry Arnold a third star. His decisiveness was matched by his influence. With thousands of aircraft being delivered, Arnold reshaped the AAF. Unlike the Air Corps, where most officers on the payroll were pilots, the AAF would need to find and train over 100 000 officers to be 'ground pounders'. Arnold insisted that

Consolidated and Boeing train five mechanics for every aircraft that came off the line. At one stage during the war, the personnel for the AAF exceeded two and a half million.

Arnold's favourite phrase was 'Keep 'em flying'. Before long he had the men and the machines to do so. The term became a catchcry for the nation. It was a rallying call for the defiant and a cheerful response to adversity. The day after Pearl Harbor, Glenn Miller and his orchestra recorded a piece called 'Keep 'em Flying' for RCA Victor in New York. Miller soon joined the AAF, as did other celebrities. The country had never seen such a devotion to national duty.

The men of the fledgling 90th Bomb Group wanted to do their share. When the brand new B-24Ds arrived at Barksdale, the men knew that they had the tools to do the job. The group began to structure its forces. Four squadrons were formed, the 319th, 320th, 321st and 400th. They were led by Major Arthur H. Rogers, Major Margraves, Captain Delbert Hahn and Captain Harry J. Bullis. The Group Commander was Lieutenant Colonel Eugene P. Mussett.

The group was soon on the move again. This time it was to a new base at Greenville, North Carolina. The town of Greenville was not the entertainment capital of the world and there was little to do during liberty time. One popular haunt for the men was a place called Shorty's Barbecue, on the corner of North Camp and Old Camp Roads. Jack and Eva Coyle bought the place in 1940, and the posting of the 90th Bomb Group to the area was a financial bonanza for them. It was standing room only. 'The boys were there all the time,' remembered Jack. 'The MPs were always circling around the place.'

Lieutenant Norman Crosson, a pilot in the 321st squadron, was a regular at Shorty's. The 26-year-old officer had grown up quickly. Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, he had felt the depression more than most his age. His father was a brick mason who had struggled for work during those dark days. Young Norm would leave home before daylight and shovel coal in those houses lucky enough to be able to afford

the commodity. He would do the same in the evenings. During school hours he sold candy bars to make enough money for the family supper. He did anything and everything to help support his family, which included a sister called Mary and a younger, physically handicapped brother who Norman called Yonce.

The future looked bleak for Crosson until he answered an advertisement in a local newspaper. Uncle Sam was looking for young men to enroll in the Air Cadet School. Norm's decision to pursue a military career changed his life. His career peaked when he became a lieutenant in the Army Air Corp.

Crosson liked the barbeque and sandwiches at Shorty's. Like most of the guys he couldn't get enough of the jukebox. The beer was always cold — that is, if you could get near the bar. Eva Coyle, an enormous woman — Norm guessed around 300 pounds — was the enforcer in the establishment. She could take care of herself and then some. Crosson heard that she'd once thrown a man through a glass door. Jack taught Eva to ride a motorcycle and she became a local legend; everybody called her 'Little Eva'.

The 90th Bomb Group began a period of intense training, including a rigorous schedule of cross-country flying. On 7 July 1942, a B-24D on its way from Barksdale to Greenville crashed into a Georgia hilltop. Lieutenant Earl M. Hobson and his crew were killed. They became the first of the 820 men from the 90th Bomb Group who would die for their country.

Six weeks later, the group was on the move again. This time the posting was Ford's new Willow Run plant at Ypsilante, Michigan.

On August 14th, Lieutenant Eugene King and his crew of eight died when their B-24 crashed into a Michigan cornfield near Hastings.

The rumours that the group would soon be shipped out proved correct and in early September the group was on the move yet again. It was a foggy, dim and miserable night on September 3rd when 1300

men, mostly 'ground pounders', boarded the steamship S.S. *Republic*, an old tub that had taken their fathers to the war in Europe a generation before. As the old vessel slipped under the Golden Gate Bridge, the men were told that their destination was Hawaii.

The group's aircraft were to be flown direct to Hawaii. It was an ambitious and dangerous exercise. From San Francisco to the Islands would take over thirteen hours. No pilot had spent so much time in the air and none had flown two thousand miles over the sea. On September 19th, the first fourteen B-24s left San Francisco's Hamilton Field at dawn. Arthur Rogers flew in the lead plane. During the long flight he made several entries in his diary:

> *Our plan was to take off at dawn and circle the airdrome until all of the young pilots were in sight of us, and then strike out for the long distant land twenty-four hundred miles away. All of the ships were stocked with ninety days operations. We also had as much gasoline as we could carry. Our planes were exceedingly heavy for our take-off. I had never seen such a larger or crueler ocean than I saw at that time. After thirteen hours of flying and checking navigation we saw the large mountains of Hawaii. We were all relieved. Successful landing were made by all pilots. A tired but happy crowd was ready for bed after putting the planes away and taking their small belongings with them.*

Rogers counted all but one aircraft take off. He immediately assumed that one had had mechanical problems and had been towed off the runway. The reality was different. Lieutenant John Davis made a fuel-transfer error and his aircraft plunged into San Francisco Bay. All of the crew, except 2nd Lieutenant William Gunther, were rescued.

After nine days of guard duty, drills, cards, reading and tedium, the *Republic* sailed past Diamond Head into Honolulu Harbor before docking at Aloha Tower. The group's aircraft arrived in September and the squadrons began to reform. Members of the 321st were billeted at Wheeler Field, the 400th at Hickam Field and the 319th at

Kahuka. The men of the 320th never knew what they had done to deserve being stationed in a sugarcane field near Kipapa.

In his diary Walter Higgins summed up the group's activities during the next few weeks as 'training and more training'. He added, 'Flew some submarine patrols — sometimes 850 miles out — boring'.

On 21 September 1942, Arthur 'Tony' Speltz wrote a short letter home to his brother:

> *We had a nice trip over and the calm Pacific was beautiful all the way. Hawaii is a real paradise with swimming pools, golf course, tennis courts etc. Swam at Waikiki beach and ate at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. Honolulu is a nice large city with streetcars, buses, Coca Cola and even hula girls. I have flown over the Islands several times, great from the air.*
> *Well must write Betty and Etta now so will close*
> *Your get-around brother*
> *Tony.*
> *P.S. In case you forgot my birthday is September 26 (just a hint).*

Speltz's family had not wanted him to enlist. His mother wanted him to stay with the family business, the one his dad had started in 1901. It was called the Speltz Grain and Coal Company and it was the biggest thing in the small town of Albert Lea, Minnesota. He listened when his brother, Stanley, told him not to get mixed up in the war: *It's the European thing all over again. America wants no part of it. Even Roosevelt is saying as much*. His sisters told him that he was needed in the company, but what did they know? He was the one who was expected to take over the business. His dad had been called Arthur too.

For the first time in his life Arthur Jnr had done something for himself. The family company — and their money — hadn't helped him one bit when he did his basic training at Bakersfield, or when he received his commission at Victorville. He was no longer Arthur

Speltz, clerk at Speltz Grain and Coal anymore; he was 2nd Lieutenant Arthur N. Speltz, United States Army Air Corps. It felt good. He nearly burst with pride when he got his wings. 'It's a poor man who doesn't look good in a uniform,' his mother had told him. The Corps provided two uniforms — the guys called them pinks and greens — but there was no need for the winter one in Hawaii. Everything fits him perfectly, except the flying boots; they're a little tight and will have to be changed, but there doesn't seem to be any time — anyway, the boots are made for flying, not walking.

He wished that his dad had been there to see him get his wings. It had been ten years since he died. Now, Arthur had a new company — Uncle Sam. He was co-pilot of a B-24 *Little Eva*. It was a good crew. The skipper, Norm Crosson, was from Cincinnati and there was John Dyer and Dale Grimes from Boston. The rest of the crew were okay, mostly kids — Ed McKeon from New York, John Geydos from Ohio and a goofy hillbilly called Gaston from somewhere in Alabama.

Arthur Speltz hung out with the other officers in the squadron and was well liked. The guys called him Arthur, or Art. He didn't want anybody in the Army to call him Tony — his family called him that.

The 321st was stationed at Wheeler Field, Oahu, next to Schofield Barracks. Nobody could complain about the accommodation. Arthur shared a residential billet with four other lieutenants. It had four bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a fireplace. Shoot, it even had a Frigidare. Nobody said that you had to do it hard, not like those poor guys at Midway or New Guinea. Hawaii, what a posting. Compared to his hometown of Albert Lea, it was paradise — beaches, swimming pools, golf courses. It didn't worry him that he had no regular girlfriend back in Albert Lea — there'd be plenty of time for that. He didn't want any complications. He was too busy having a good time. Some of the guys in the group were already married. Walt Higgins got married the day he got his wings, sending his pay home every week — nuts to that.

Arthur and his buddies went to Honolulu a couple of times. They played tennis and a little golf, but the big deal was Waikiki Beach. He wasn't much for the water, but Dale, he was one hell of a swimmer, a regular Johnny Weissmuller.

Norm Crosson's aircraft had been in the first wave when the group flew to Hawaii from San Francisco. Twenty-five hundred miles in one flight, under clear skies and over nothing but ocean. It had never been done before. There were six B-24s in the group, but Crosson's crew could have done it solo — John Dyer was the best navigator in the squadron.

Arthur had celebrated his birthday on September 26: twenty-six years old! The guys kidded him about that. Twenty-six was an old man in this war. A bunch of the guys took him on the town — what a night — starting at the Hawaiian and ending up at the Black Cat. You wouldn't know Hawaii was still under martial law. Everybody was having a ball. The pay was even better now Arthur was overseas. He was making nearly two hundred dollars a month; back at Albert Lea the job at Speltz Grain paid only fifteen hundred a year.

Most of the mail was from the family — birthday greetings and things. John Dyer got some records from the USO the other day. They were the new V Discs — Bing Crosby, Judy Garland and some swinging things by Tommy Dorsey and Cab Calloway. But the favourite disc was Artie Shaw's *Stardust* — it reminded everybody of home. Shaw was in the navy now and somebody said that Glenn Miller had joined the army. Everybody seemed to be doing their bit.

It had been nearly a year since the war started and nobody in the group had seen any action. They were a little green, but nobody doubted that, when the time came, they could dish it out. There had been something going on in the last couple of days, a couple of guys from the 320th had heard somewhere that the 90th was going to ship out again. Scuttlebutt was that it was either the Solomons or Australia.

The money was on Australia. Arthur didn't know much about the place, except that they were on our side and spoke English.

The paradise that was Hawaii was not to last. Between October 19th and November 1st, the Liberators and aircrews were on the move once again. This time the destination was Australia, 5000 miles away. The four squadrons were to fly via Christmas Island and Canton Island to the mysterious land down under. The ground echelon were to once again take an ocean voyage. The 90th Bomb Group also had a new leader. Colonel Arthur 'Art' Meehan took command on October 20th.

The reasons for the appointment of Meehan concern an issue that was deemed important enough to reach the attention of General Arnold in Washington. In a letter dated 8 October 1942, Arnold wrote to Major General Willis Hale in Hawaii:

> *We find ourselves faced with what may be a real and acute problem to psychology and in leadership in effecting a smooth and easy transition from the B-17 to the B-24. The net result is a false public impression that the B17 is a fighting aeroplane far superior to any other heavy bomber in the world, the B24 included, because of lack of briefness of combat experiences and publicity for its success in battle.*

In the two-page letter, Arnold listed a number of features unique to the new Liberators. He concluded:

> *Your quick and careful attention must be given to the requirement that this popular notion of the inferiority of the B-24 shall not be reflected in the personnel of the 90th Bomb Group. It must be perfectly evident to you that the result might approach disaster if the 90th moves to Australia, replacing the splendid, but war-weary 19th, with the general belief that their airplane is an inferior weapon. I shall expect positive action on your part in this matter*

*and will appreciate a letter from you stating the action taken and the results you will have attained.*

On October 27th, Hale replied. His letter included a list of perceived shortcomings relevant to the B-24Ds. They included the forward gun installation, congestion in the nose, and no belly turrets. Hale suggested that the navigator be moved to a new position behind the pilot and that the forward guns installation be changed to allow much more field of fire. The belly turret would have to wait for a later model. Hale concluded:

*The bulk of the personnel in the 90th Bomb Group, which are about to enter a war zone, are enthusiastic about entering the fight and have no feelings that the B-24 will not be satisfactory. The Group Commander and one Squadron Commander have been relieved.*

The problems of acceptance for the B-24 had as much to do with aesthetics as mechanics.

American propaganda had elevated the B-17 Flying Fortress into an exalted warbird, indestructible and incomparable. Had they not flown MacArthur from the Philippines to Australia? Wasn't Charles Drake flying one in *Air Force*, a Warner Brothers film playing to capacity crowds in American theatres? It was sleek, powerful and all American. The B-24s were 'ugly sons of bitches'. For the young pilots it was like taking plain Jane to the prom. However, time would remove any doubts — the B-24s were more versatile, more resilient, could lift more and had a greater range. Before the end of the war more than one 90th aviator would owe his life to the squat-nosed buzzard from Consolidated.

From late October until early November the four squadrons of the 90th Bomb Group flew the vast distance of the South West

Pacific to Australia. The diary of Walter Higgins describes the odyssey:

> October 26: *departed Wheeler Field to Christmas Island. Arrived same day. A plain atoll with some coconut trees and a few American troops.*
> October 27: *Departed Christmas Island for Pago Pago. Met a bunch of marines and caught up with the war stories from Guadalcanal. It wasn't pretty, but we were winning. The marines were doing okay with the local babes. We are enthralled. The local beauties walk around bare-chested.*
> October 28: *Pago Pago to Fiji. Saw some natives. The men have bushy heads and wear lap-laps.*
> October 29: *Fiji to New Caledonia. Surprised to see the natives speaking French. One of my crew from Louisiana spoke fluent French. That seemed to send them into orbit.*
> October 30: *New Caledonia to Amberley Field, near Brisbane, Australia.*

Australia was a mysterious land that few Americans knew about. The country had been at war since September of 1939. For the second time in a generation, Australia had leapt to the aid of Mother England in a European war and for the second time most of the best divisions were overseas fighting a foe that posed no direct threat. The Japanese menace in the Pacific was a different matter. In the early days of the Pacific War the Australians had suffered grievous losses. The fall of Singapore had led 18 000 men of the 8th Division into Japanese captivity. There was also a series of disastrous naval actions. On 19 February 1942, the same Japanese carrier task force that attacked Pearl Harbor bombed Darwin. It was the darkest hour — Australia had become the orphan of the South Pacific. Prime Minister John Curtin immediately ordered the 7th and 9th Divisions home from the Middle East. Churchill objected strongly but Curtin was adamant. The men were needed for home defence against the Japanese hordes. The only hordes that would invade the Australian homeland during the war were the American servicemen. They had been there almost

since the beginning. A convoy of American ships that had been en route to the Philippines was directed to the Port of Brisbane after the Pearl Harbor raid. On 22 December 1941, the first Americans jumped ashore; hundreds of thousands more would follow.

In March 1942, General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Australia to take command of all Allied Forces in the South West Pacific area. Despite a botched defence of the Philippines, the flamboyant MacArthur was already a legend. A highly publicised escape by motor torpedo boats through Japanese lines only added to his heroic aura. MacArthur found the Australian people more than receptive to help from Uncle Sam. As early as December 1941, Curtin had told the *Herald* newspaper:

> *Without any inhibition of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links of kinship with the United Kingdom.*

The Americans arrived in a vulnerable country that was in a perilous position; they were motivated not by Australia's needs but their own. The country offered the logistical and geographical advantages that would allow the United States to conduct the offensive against Japan. When MacArthur arrived in March, the number of US servicemen in the country totalled around 30 000. By the time the men of the 90th Bomb Group arrived in October, there were 120 000 Yanks posted down under.

The Americans had a difficult time coming to terms with the enigmatic Aussies. The country was the size of the United States, but the population was less than in New York. It was an isolated continent with an insulated culture. For the typical Australian the window to the outside world was the cinema, or 'the pictures'. The average Australian went to the pictures twice a week. The last film that Arthur Speltz saw before he left the States was *Western Union*. The first film he

saw in Australia was *Western Union*. He wrote a letter home on November 3rd:

> *People are very nice here, but very odd. They talk funny and their English-type money is hard to get used to, using pound notes, shillings, pence etc. Cars are driven on the wrong side of the road and the steering wheels are on the right-hand side. The cars are all old 1921–1932. Myself and four other Lieutenants are looking at an old 1924 Dodge to buy but they want 60 pounds for it, which is about $235. It's too high. Women still wear longer dresses and have old-style hats. The Aussie soldiers wear shorts. There are cable cars in the middle of the road. Had a good time at a dance on Saturday night. Getting plenty of sleep. There are always plenty of mosquitoes cruising around.*
>
> *Plenty of cinemas here* — Babes on Broadway *is coming soon.*

Walter Higgins was also a curious observer of Australian culture:

> *… found the local people to be very hospitable. Their use of the English language was very interesting to a Texas lad. I went to a dance and the Aussie girls stayed on one side of the room and the boys on the other. In Brisbane, I went to get some money changed and saw an American girl. I could tell by her talk. She was a nice little thing and had a young boy with her. I was told that she was Jean MacArthur, wife of the General. His headquarters were now in Brisbane. We used to say that MacArthur was directing the war from his jungle headquarters in the bamboo room of the Brisbane Hotel.*

Grady Gaston was a young 22-year-old from Frisco City, Alabama. Like thousands of others, he had been drafted in 1941. A farm boy, he had never left home until the war. Soon after arriving in Australia, he wrote to his mother, Wattie.

*This is a very big place with a lot of farms. Plenty of open spaces. All the folks are fine. I'm having trouble with the money. Pounds and pence. We don't know too much about the value. We usually just put some in our hand and tell the storekeepers to take what they want.*

The posting of the 90th Bomb Group to Australia was ostensibly to relieve the 19th Bomb Group that was returning to the United States for regrouping. The 43rd Bomb Group, which had been in Australia since March, and now the 90th were the only heavy bomb groups available to engage the victorious Japanese. On paper the 90th looked a formidable force, but the reality was somewhat different. General Kenny, the commander of the 5th Air Force, was concerned enough to write to General Arnold:

*Another disturbing element is the state of training of the B-24s coming from Hawaii. From the somewhat meager information I have to date I find that their night flying is not up to scratch. The job here calls for night take-offs with maximum loads and often with cross-winds climbing through overcast to fifteen to twenty thousand feet in order to navigate. I believe that considerably more night work is needed. I'm trusting that the tactical situation, the weather and other factors give me a chance to nurse them along for a while before I have to push them too hard, because they are not ready to start pitching the day they arrive in Australia by a long way.*

The 90th did not stay long in Brisbane. The aircrews flew their aircraft to Townsville and then to a small rural community called Mareeba. The 'ground pounders' were still on the water coming from Hawaii and were not due to arrive in Townsville until November 24th. The squadrons regrouped in Mareeba and awaited orders. With crews assigned, the pilots began to give names to their ships — a popular tradition in all branches of the AAF.

Some of the names were inspired by popular songs: *Nobody's Baby, I'll Be Around* and *Pistol Packin' Mama*. Some were inspired by popular

films: *The Powers Girl, Buck Benny Rides Again* and *Gone with the Wind*. Many were inspired by pretty girls: *Miss Ohio, Naughty Blue Eyes* and *Windy City Kitty*. James McMurria called his ship *Maid in the USA*. Walter Higgins named his B-24 *Cow Town's Revenge*.

The pilots were also allocated the crews that they would soon take into action. Norman Crosson's co-pilot was 2nd Lieutenant Arthur Speltz from Minnesota. The remainder of the crew comprised 2nd Lieutenants Dale Grimes and John Dyer from Boston, Staff Sergeants Loy Wilson, Charles Workman Jr and Corporal John Geydos Jr from Ohio, Staff Sergeant James Hilton from Texas, Edward McKeon from New York and Staff Sergeant Grady Gaston from Alabama.

The nose art on the 90th's ships was a serious business. Edward Jakowski was a 'ground pounder' of Polish origin, who was acknowledged as being the best artist in the group. Norm Crosson told him about a caricature he wanted painted on the nose of his B-24; it was to be of a very large woman riding a small motorcycle and had to reflect both mirth and menace. Crosson told Jakowski to caption the figure *Little Eva*.