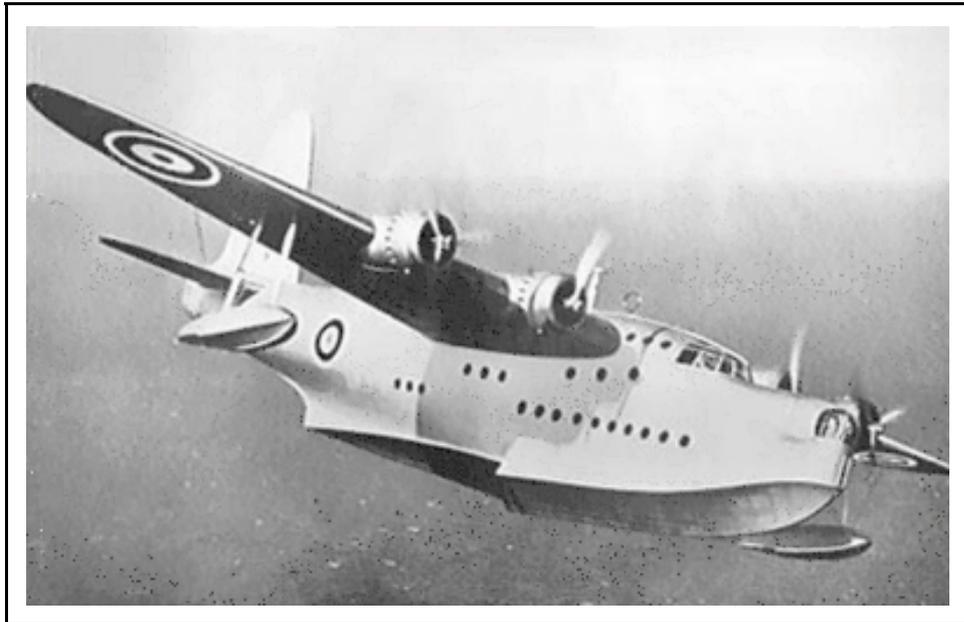


Chapter 26

The Gambia - Bathurst

I travelled to Bathurst on a 95 Squadron Sunderland Flying Boat which did a twelve hour submarine patrol on the way. Once in the air, the Sunderland was a pleasant aircraft in which to fly. It was fitted out with a galley and eating area complete with a table and benches which could also be used for sleeping. At that time, it was thought that the flying boat was likely to be very much part of the future of long distance travel.



Short Sunderland

When we got to Bathurst, a Sunderland Squadron was already using the base; all maintenance had to be done either with the boat floating in the sea or pulled up onto a smallish concrete area. A large specially designed hangar and workshops had been built; this was large enough for a Sunderland to stand facing it. Four gantries had been built to allow the engine fitters to stand level with the engines. In between the hangar and the landing area was a large area which had been dug out and was waiting for the concrete. This eventually turned up but with no reinforcement iron. Our CO, Squadron Leader Howard and the contractors doing the work decided that something had to be done. Old bedsteads and anything else made of iron was collected and this had to do so, with fingers crossed, the contractors went to work.

One incident did give us a problem. A Sunderland took off and unfortunately caught the tail of another as it did. It got off alright but the hull was holed. After a 14 hour submarine patrol the pilot did his best to land so that he was on the concrete staging. He nearly succeeded but not quite. We built wooden supports under each wing and tried to pull it in with the huge tractor we used for this very purpose. Unfortunately our wooden supports did not stand the strain and one side collapsed so that, in the end, we only succeeded in literally turning the aircraft into a wreck.

In comparison to Sierra Leone, Bathurst was a pleasant place to be. The living quarters were virtually on the beach where there was excellent swimming. The Mess had a library and films were shown. It was there that I saw 'Casablanca'.

The set up at work was peculiar. Squadron Leader Howard was in charge of the Maintenance Unit, I was the Engineering Officer (acting) and a Flight Lieutenant Electrical Officer reported to me. I made Bill Tyson, who was a Sergeant Aero Engine Fitter, a sort of Technical Adjutant. We were generally responsible to the CO Bathurst who was closely connected to the Sunderland Squadron. It was at about this time that I was sent on my trip to Portuguese West Africa which is documented in the next chapter.

One incident which occurred where I was able to help. A sergeant who was Mess Treasurer had all the Mess funds stolen which was a serious problem. I saw the Station CO and asked him to give me 24 hours to sort it out. To this he agreed. I got all the Mess Members together and explained that the sergeant could be Court Martialled and suggested that if we each put in a pound, it would cover the loss. I put my pound in and they all followed. I could now report to the CO that the money was now OK. He agreed and the matter was closed. Needless to say, the chap concerned was most grateful.