Chapter 12: Gawler 1944–45

By the start of 1944 the airfield at Gawler had seen some use, but without permanent facilities the value of the base was open to question. The only real structure on the site was a duty pilot's control tower structure reportedly built of "bush timber" and positioned close to the intersection of both runways. However, the long runways were very well-constructed and were in fact the only sealed and all-weather runways in South Australia at the time. This meant it was the only airfield in the state that could accommodate large, fully loaded aircraft such as B-24 Liberators.

The USAAF's 380th Bombardment Group (BG) was equipped with B-24s and began operations from Fenton in the Northern Territory in mid-1943. One advantage the unit had was that, using the long range of its aircraft, regular flights could be made to Sydney to enable personnel to get regular periods of rest and recreation. On the return leg, the aircraft were loaded with fresh food, alcohol and other luxuries in what became known as "fat cat" missions.

The 380th BG was soon directed to send the "fat cat" missions to Adelaide, instead of crowded Sydney, and on these visits the Liberators made use of Gawler airfield. Initially, the Americans were wary of the new location, which offered only a pale imitation of Sydney's nightlife, but in time the 380th grew fond of Adelaide with the following entry in their unit history *The Flying Circus*:

> Adelaide is a beautiful town, with the scenic Torrens River coursing slowly, windingly through it, and the small boats and the swans moving slowly on its surface; with the green hills in the background and the clean, light-coloured buildings of the city itself. Soft beds with clean sheets, warm baths, good food with white linen tables, gleaming silver, candles, good wine – and friendly people – those are things which can never be forgotten by a tired, mentally fatigued fugitive from the Northern Territory who went there.

The Adelaide "fat cat" flights became regular occurrences throughout 1944. On 22 August 1944, residents of Adelaide read the afternoon newspaper headline "Bomber Drops Liquor & Eggs on Adelaide". The article began:

> Residents of West Parkway, Colonel Light Gardens, were showered with champagne, sparkling burgundy, beer, Coca-Cola, eggs and oranges about 8am today. The shower came in crates and bottles accidentally dropped from a big, low-flying American bomber.

The bomb bay of a B-24 inadvertently opened while the pilot was conducting a "farewell sweep" over Adelaide's southern suburbs; fortunately, nobody on the ground was hurt. The "fat cat" B-24s were dedicated aircraft no longer fit for combat and this particular B-24 was named *Adelaide Fever*. In February 1945, the 380th BG moved from the Northern Territory to the Philippines and the Adelaide "fat cat" flights ended.

Meanwhile, for some time, construction activity had been underway at Gawler in respect to the movement there of the Adelaide Wireless Transmitting Station. This unit had been formed in March 1942 to provide communication facilities to RAAF units operating in and around Adelaide. It had operated from the basement of the North Adelaide Golf Club and also from premises in Barton Terrace, North Adelaide.

The specialised construction for this unit at Gawler was rather elaborate and appears to be a hangover of the plans devised during the invasion emergency of early 1942. It included a large (136 feet long x 30 feet wide) underground bunker with a one-foot-thick curved concrete ceiling. This housed the central communications facility, to be staffed around the clock, and was equipped with a dozen AR7 receivers, teleprinters and a telephone switchboard. Some three miles to the west of the airfield was a transmitting building of similar size, but which was only partly underground. Nearby were two antennas mounted on steel lattice masts 120 feet high as well as several other antennas mounted on timber masts half that size.

Aside from the core communications role, the unit could also function in a Direction Finding (D/F) capacity which helped pinpoint aircraft through the receiving angle of their radio signal.