



Three Uncles in World War Two: Part II – Lieutenant Cyril Egnal

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This is the second part of a story chronicling the experiences and events during World War II (1939–1945) in which three uncles of the sisters Arlene Rubin (nee Egnal) and Denise Buxbaum (nee Egnal) were soldiers in the service of the Union of South Africa's Defence

Forces. The three uncles were the brothers Alec Hyman Egnal^[1] and Cyril Egnal and from the second branch of this extended family, Max Sack. This second essay of a three-part series focuses on the early family history and the war record of Cyril Egnal.

South Africans volunteered for duty in the Union Defence Force (UDF) during the conflict in the theatres of East Africa, North Africa and Italy in those almost six years. It is necessary to recall these three soldiers' lives in that period of uncertainty, of danger and of extreme discomfort as part of the extended Egnal family's archive of memories. Three uncles, soldiers all, in the most brutal event of the 20th Century. Memories of war, of tedium, of boredom and of danger, of adventure and tragedy infused the experiences of the soldiers themselves as well as the household and family memories of these three men.

Excursis 1: South African Jews in WW2

"By the end of the War, South African Jews, serving in the Union Defence Force and other allied forces, who were listed on the (South African Jewish) Board's Register, numbered just over 10 000 (9400 men and 600 women), out of a total of a South African army of 211 193. Three hundred and fifty-seven South African Jews gave their lives and 327 were wounded or injured; 143 were mentioned in dispatches; two were awarded the D.S.O., seven the O.B.E., 20 the M.B.E., 14 the M.C., 16 the D.F.C., two the D.C.M., one the A.F.C., two the D.C.M., two the G.M., 22 the M.M., two the D.F.M., four the D.E.M., and two the K.M."^[2]



Servicemen and volunteers, Rest & Recreational Room, Jewish Guild (Johannesburg)

A Note on Methodology and Sources

In this three-part series which follows the wartime experiences of the three soldiers, only in the case of one uncle, Cyril Egnal (who in his later years emigrated from South Africa to Canada), is there corroborative evidence in the form of a biography which chronicles his time spent in the SAAF/RAF during the war. The information presented here is gleaned from the personal war time records of each of these three uncles. These records are housed in the recently established, splendidly impressive and immaculate stand-alone documentation centre of the Defence Force in Irene,

Pretoria. The stories related here result from the fleshing out of the almost hieroglyphic records of these servicemen at this repository. The records are "hieroglyphic" in the sense that to the untrained eye, to the uninitiated peruser of military documents, these handwritten contemporaneous files and cards detailing every officially ordered and sanctioned movement, transfer and placement of soldiers during World War II are peppered with handwritten military shorthand and abbreviations of a conflict now eighty years distant. From these records and a multiplicity of sources, the lives of the soldiers in those five years of horrific combat are placed in that larger, tumultuous context. Part narrative, part imaginative interpretation and assumption, the movements of the units to which these soldiers were assigned serve as a guide and are followed through the war. The protagonists' experiences are placed in that context. Herewith follows Part 2 of that narration.

Cyril: The early years.

Cyril Egnal was born on 19 July 1920 in the Johannesburg suburb of Doornfontein in a house in Upper Page Street. At that time, the Jewish Guild Tennis Club was opposite the family's house.[3] His education in the city followed a somewhat traditional route: Talmud Torah at the Hebrew School followed by membership of Habonim in G'dud Trumpeldor and Jeppe High School for boys[4]. At high school, boys attended compulsory, uniformed "cadets" which subjected the male scholars to the rigors of military discipline.

Cyril's older Yiddish speaking generation had immigrated to South Africa from the town of Kelm(e), in Lithuania.[5] Yet Cyril and his siblings acculturated rapidly to the new environment. David Fachler, in a recent study,[6] writes pertinently about this process of integration and its agents. Referring to both Dora Sowden[7] and to Jack Shapiro[8], Fachler suggests that "one of primary features distinguishing the first generation Jews born and bred in South Africa from their parents, and one which contributed to their acculturation process, was their participation in, and watching of, sports events." [9] Certainly this was true for avid enthusiasts Cyril and his siblings.

South Africa on the Eve of World War II

With the invasion of Poland by German forces on 1 September 1939, Britain, by its treaty with Poland, was obligated to declare war on Germany. On 25 August, two days after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland had been signed.[10] As a consequence of this declaration, those countries which were part of the Empire were required to join Britain with a force of arms.

The entry of the Union into World War II on the side of Britain and the Allies had been bitterly contested within South Africa. By a slim margin of only seven votes, parliament honoured its commitment to Britain as part of the Commonwealth.[11] J.B.M. Hertzog, the prime minister of the Union at that time of parliamentary defeat, had urged neutrality, while J.C. Smuts, the deputy prime minister, urged alignment with Britain. As a consequence, Hertzog resigned

and Smuts became prime minister. On 6 September 1939, South Africa officially declared war on Germany under Proclamation 197 of 1939.

But that slim margin of “only seven votes” meant that large swathes of the country’s electorate were opposed to fighting the war on Britain’s side.

Slim Parliamentary Approval, Large Public Disapproval.

As shown in Part 1 of this two part series, South Africa’s entry on the side of Empire during WW2 was a fractious event in the social fabric of the country. The political pact of the government of the Union was rent asunder, and Hertzog chose political exile as his response to his personal and his party’s (the National Party) desire to remain neutral in this conflict. It was a leap too far to expect the Union, still a fledgling geopolitical state in 1939, to enter a war outside of its borders on the side of the British Empire – an Empire that had disrupted, challenged and fought against the Boer republics in a bitter war of attrition less than forty years prior to September 1939. Generational memory of the hardships and suffering, the humiliation of defeat was still vivid in the consciousness of Afrikanerdom.

Various anti-war movements came into being. Pro-Nazi, pro-German groups in various shades and shirts were formed. The overhead body, however, was the Afrikaner-dominated *Ossewabrandwag*. The OB (ox wagon sentinel) had been formed on the surge of Afrikaner national consciousness in 1938, the memories of the past awakened by the Centennial commemoration of the Great Trek.^[12] The re-enactment of the Great Trek fused together in the cross country celebration of that trek its associated memories of heroism and fierce independence which helped to elevate the event to mythic status.

The OB formed itself as a cultural, nationalistic movement, celebrating the history of the Afrikaners in South Africa. Its birthing event was the one hundredth year commemoration, in 1938, of the movement of those disgruntled trekkers inland from the Cape, away from the British sphere of influence and its legal framework. As the post Anglo-Boer War century journeyed its way into the 1930s and the formation of the OB, two pillars of this movement stood out quite clearly: on the one pillar, great national pride. The Union of South Africa had been created, Afrikaans had been established as a respected official language, and the country, in what had been a rural agricultural backwater, was industrializing under the Afrikaner leadership of Jan Christiaan Smuts and J B M Hertzog. Both men had been heroic Boer war generals. On the second pillar, feelings of overwhelming resentment and bitterness persisted. The defeat at the hands of British imperialism, the growth of a poor white problem, the lack of control of the economy by Afrikaners, the portent of a growing clash of nationalisms between Black and White South Africans, the drift of the previously rural whites to the cities, all provided the building block for a resurgence of a strong group identity, personified in part by the growth of and attachment

to the nascent OB movement. Entering the Second World War on the side of Britain was thus anathema to the membership of the movement.

But that was not the only factor that would draw a section of the Union's population to oppose the joining of the Allies by South Africa's defense forces. Increasingly in the two decades of 1930 and of 1940, and promoted especially by the *Herenigde Nasionale Volksparty* (HNP), was the very considerable fear of the spread of communism, especially to, and in, the Union. According to the historian Milton Shain, [13] "[Eric] Louw's booklet, *The Communist Danger*, offered an unadulterated glimpse into Nationalist fears." [14] The entry of Russia into the war on the side of the Allies sent even greater ripples of fear into the hearts of the right wing in this country. The thought of an Allied victory, brought about in no small measure by the Russian army would see the defeat of Germany, a much feared outcome, and a resulting spread of Bolshevism. It fed into the consciousness of those who already opposed South Africa's participation in the war effort.

Time it was, and what a time it was it was...

In October 1940, Hans van Rensburg, a charismatic figure, became leader of the *Ossewabrandwag* when the movement's impulsive first leader, Colonel J.C. Laas was relieved of his post. Laas made the bizarre claim that he had been in telepathic contact with Adolf Hitler. [15] Van Rensburg, who had a military background was also the administrator of the Free State. He resigned as administrator on 1 January 1941 to assume his post as *Kommandant-Generaal* of the OB. He had, in 1936, attended military manoeuvres in Germany and met Hitler and Hermann Goering, whose leadership of Germany he admired. [16] Opposition to fighting the war on the side of Empire was paramount to his and the movement's thinking. According to the author Albert Blake conflict had been inevitable between "*strydlustige soldate*" and "*lewenslustigeanti-oorlogsgesinde studente*". [17] On 7 August 1940, some hundreds of soldiers from a military camp in Pretoria engaged in a pitched battle with students at the university. A number of soldiers and students were injured in the fracas, and considerable damage was done to property. This had the result that plans were afoot from militant anti-war persons to attack the military camp and to occupy it. The soldiers on the other hand, were prohibited from entering the university premises when it came to light that they in turn, wanted to burn down the university. [18] During the following months, a large number of anti-war agitators were charged with public disorder. Street fights occurred. There was, according to Blake, mass hysteria and an upsurge in popular emotion. This led to violence between "*wit mense*" in Central Johannesburg during the period of Friday evening 31 January and Sunday, 2 February 1941. "*In a stadium het dit gelyk asof dit in a bloedbad afstuur.*" [19]

Deputy Prime Minister General Jan Christiaan Smuts and Prime Minister J B M Hertzog, with their wives: Eric Louw; Hans van Rensburg

Only the Brave...

Such was the explosive situation in the Union, when obviously visible, uniformed soldiers wearing the lapel that set them apart, walked the streets in a society where very many citizens were dangerously opposed to them.

And it was in this frosty atmosphere where those men and women who had volunteered to join the forces of the Union and who were prepared to fight and serve on foreign soil, were doubly brave. By taking the oath, and especially by wearing the very visible red lapel, they risked danger abroad and hate and animosity at home in the Union. Among such stouthearted men were Alec Egnal, Max Sack and Cyril Egnal. They were indeed brave men and bold.

The South African Air Force.

Both Cyril Egnal and Max Sack, respectively, would soon after volunteering, be assigned to serve in the South African Air Force.

Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the SA Airforce was in a steady period of expansion. This was largely driven by Lieutenant-Colonel (later Sir) Pierre van Rynveld.^[20] In June of 1920 he was appointed Director of Air Services, headquartered at Roberts Heights, near Pretoria.^[21] "This date is acknowledged as marking the official birth of the SAAF.^[22] In 1939, the Union Government approved the Air Force Development Programme providing for the training of one hundred pilots and the establishment of two bomber groups, one medium and one heavy bombers respectively.^[23] Development under the threat of war proceeded apace and van Rynveld's approved plan, known as the "Peace Expansion Scheme" in which a total of 720 aircraft were acquired – 336 of which were fighters.^[24]

Air training schools proliferated. On 1 August 1940, a joint air training scheme came into being throughout the British Commonwealth. "The scheme provided for the establishment of 24 flying schools." By the end of the war in 1945, 36 air schools had been established.^[25]

In his memoir, Cyril writes that at the start of the war, he trained and qualified as a physical training instructor at what was then Roberts Heights Air Base, outside of the city of Pretoria. Interestingly, one of Cyril's instructors was the legendary rugby Springbok scrumhalf and coach, Danie Craven.

In January 1942, Cyril enlisted in the Union Defence Force and joined the SA Air Force. "I wanted to be a pilot, but since I was an accountant, they trained me as a navigator/bomber".^[26] His

brother Alec had joined the UDF at the start of World War 2.[27] A few months after joining the air force, in June 1942, Cyril was posted to 75 Air School in Youngsfield in the Cape.[28] Training lasted some months, Cyril being transferred to various units.

***Navigator working at his chart-table
in
an RAF Stirling bomber [29]***

Cyril would have carefully been following the air war as it unfolded in Europe. At this time, he was uncertain about where he would be posted. During his time of training as a navigator/bomber, the technology in this field was considerable and constantly evolving. He was being exposed to these methods which were being developed in the air war and the bombing raids by the Royal Air Force on German cities. He would have been undergoing training in navigation and target spotting by the use of wireless signals that would be displayed on a cathode ray tube to the navigator.[30] This early technology too was subject to jamming by the German systems, which had been instituted at about the same time that Cyril was promoted to the officer rank of 2nd Lieutenant, on 21 August 1943.[31] New technology employed radio pulses echoing from ground up. It was an increasingly sophisticated endeavour. The South African contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of radar was considerable. In the 1940s, urged on by Smuts and under the direction of (Sir) Basil Schonland and the later Vice-Chancellor of Witwatersrand University "Bozz" Bozoli, significant progress was made in radar technology. "Word had reached the Royal Airforce that the South Africans had a radar set-up which was more mobile than anything they possessed".[32] Cyril wore the red lapel, and with it came the knowledge that he could be sent into areas of conflict outside of the borders of the Union. It engendered considerable anxiety and insecurity, even for a man of the considerable composure and self-assured confidence that Cyril possessed.

Just prior to Cyril's promotion as an officer, the military records show too, that from his earlier posting at 75 Air School, he was then posted to 66 Air School, and thereafter, almost a year later, to 48 Air School (17/04/1943).[33] During this time at the various air schools, he was most probably being exposed to training on Junkers aircraft,

the JU-52s which were used as transport craft, and the JU-86s medium bombers.[34] These aircraft had now become part of his milieu.

Cyril's time in South Africa was drawing to a close. Having spent eight months at 48 Air School, trained and ready for service, he was posted to Cairo, Egypt, on 21 December 1943.

Lieutenant Cyril Egnal in uniform

Cairo, City of Intrigue.

Egypt, though an independent kingdom since 1922, was under the coercive influence of the United Kingdom.[36] However, there was considerable Nationalist opposition to the United Kingdom. Egypt, via treaty, hosted many thousands of British and Allied soldiers during World War 2, although, until almost the very end of the war, Egypt remained neutral. In the midst of the war, however, in 1942, there was potential for a conflagration in the relationship with Britain, during a standoff between the British military and King Farouk, at Abdeen Palace.[37] Naquib Mahfouz described Cairo during the late 1930s and during World War 2. He wrote it "mirrors an Egypt trying to plunge into the modern world but beset by colonialism, a rigid class system and political oppression." [38] During the 1920s, the Jewish population of Egypt had risen to almost 80 000. Regarding the Jewish community of Cairo, "a sharp distinction had long existed between the respective Karaite and Rabbanite communities, among whom traditionally, intermarriage was prohibited. They dwelt in two contiguous areas." [39]

It was on a memorable evening, in the middle of bustling, crowded, cosmopolitan Cairo, that by extraordinary coincidence, Cyril bumped into his older brother Alec, in a bar in the city.[40] Alec Egnal was in Cairo, on leave from the campaign against the Axis forces in Italy. Years later, Cyril in his memoir would write in nostalgic recollection, almost laconically, about the chance meeting with his brother Alec that evening in crowded Cairo: "We had a wonderful evening together".[41]

Excursis 2: RAF over Germany

During this time of Cyril's arrival in Cairo, intensive bombing by the RAF on German cities had commenced. The first Bomber Command raid had taken place on the night of November 18/19, 1943. On December 17, extensive damage was done to the Berlin railway system.[42] On the night of December 29/30, Berlin was attacked by 364 Lancasters, 8 Mosquitoes and 7 Halifax's. On the night of December 29/30 December, Berlin was targeted by a combined force of 712 aircraft.[43] "This campaign was a result of a decision taken by the War Cabinet....to destroy all of Germany's cities with populations of over 100,000." [44] A year later Bomber Command under (Bomber) Arthur Harris, had enough aircraft to attempt this campaign. Hamburg especially, on July 27 1943, had suffered approximately 20 000 deaths in a single air raid.[45] Despite all these attacks on these cities, Germany did not submit or capitulate.

The atmosphere among the many troops in Cairo, Cyril among them, would have been electric as this news siphoned through.

New Posting: The Royal Air Force

Again, at this very time, almost as if these dates were somehow engineered, Cyril received a new posting instruction, one that would determine how his time in uniform would unfold. He was instructed to join the Royal Air Force, and seconded to its ARC unit, the Aircraft Recovery Centre. The motto of the unit was "Swift to Recover". [46] Less generously, the (Joint) Aircraft Recovery and Transportation squadron was informally known as "crash and smash". [47] The squadron was tasked with the recovery and transportation of aircraft from post-crash incidents. The assessing, salvaging, repairing and transporting of crashed aircraft was the responsibility of such units during World War 2. He was attached to 21 Pilot training centre, and was being trained to work on heavy bombers, [48] and in the recovery and transportation of aircraft. In this squadron, on 21 February, 1944, Cyril was promoted to full lieutenant, one of a number of Jewish South African soldiers to attain officer's rank. Soon after his promotion, on 4 March 1944, [49] after a seemingly short tour of duty in Egypt of about 4 months, he was now transferred to the Royal Air Force Station Aqir, in the centre of mandated Palestine.

The RAF in British Mandated Palestine

During the period of the mandate, the British saw the tactical necessity for an air defence system in the region. To this end, the Tel Nof airbase was founded in 1939. [50] An even earlier aircraft base in the region, and the first to be established by the Royal Air Force, was RAF Gaza. [51] It was established on the south west coast of mandated Palestine. "RAF Gaza was used for passenger services....as a stop en-route to Baghdad and further to Karachi or Batavia...." [52] This RAF base, used as an ammunition depot for a few months in 1942, was located on the site of the present day Karni crossing between the Gaza strip and Israel. [53] The Tel Nof base, known as RAF Aqir (1941-1948) during the time of the mandate, was

close to the site of Aqir, an Arab village close by. It was located in the Ramle sub-district, some 9kms south west of Ramle itself. Aqir was thought to lie at the site of the ancient Philistine city of Ekron.

[54] Cyril, inquisitive of his environment and keenly aware of biblical history, would have been fascinated by the environment in which he now found himself.

Excursis 3: Airplanes and Bombers in the RAF

At the time of Cyril's posting at Aqir, a number of RAF squadrons were located at the base. Cyril would probably have known, and trained on some of the numerous RAF aircraft stationed there already since 1941. These aircraft were, inter alia, the Westland Lysander, the Halifax Bombers and the Bristol Blenheim. Training in heavy bombers entailed from Cyril rigorous discipline, attention to fine details, icy concentration. There were indeed numerous types of bomber aircraft in service in the Royal Air Force, and as the war progressed, improvements and adaptations to the fleet were made. The fast twin engine Mosquito light bomber (1941) was in extensive use but the squadrons were gradually being converted into four engine bombers. [55] The crew on these heavy bombers consisted mainly of a flight engineer, navigator, air bomber, gunners and a wireless operator. The Royal Airforce alone, in its various theatres of combat, suffered 39 804 fatalities. [56]

A Lancaster Bomber, RAF Museum, London.

Photograph courtesy Ron Gordon

"I was trained as a bomber /navigator...." [57]

Cyril would have undergone training similar to that described in the following extract: "The air bomber, (was) more normally called the bomb aimer. He manned the nose-mounted gun turret (usually twin .303 machine guns) during the operation and provided assistance to the navigator. To operate the bomb sight he would crawl into the bomb aimer's compartment in the lower section of the nose of the aircraft and release the bomb load onto the target at the appropriate time." **[58]**

On a similar initial training trajectory as Cyril was another Air Force volunteer, one who would go on to become a prominent South African politician. Harry Schwarz was born in Germany and arrived in Cape Town in 1933.^[60] Graduating from Jeppe High School in 1943, he opted to join the air force. He was stationed and trained as a “navigator and bomb aimer” at the Lyttleton Air Base, near Pretoria. After initial training, he would be posted to Egypt.as part of Squadron 15.^[61] Approximately half a decade after war’s end, “Schwarz’s organised anti-apartheid campaigning began with co-founding the Torch Commando, an ex-servicemen’s movement to protest against the disenfranchisement of Coloured people in South Africa. Its members included World War II flying ace Adolph (Sailor) Malan, and at its height it had 250 000 members.”^[62] Schwarz would have a stellar career as a member in the opposition benches to the Nationalist government in the pre-1994 South African parliament.

Bomb aimer lying flat in the nose of the aircraft [62]

Cyril and his brother Alec

Cyril, in his memoir, makes reference to having spent some time in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem, probably on furlough. It was probably on one of these visits to Tel Aviv that he met with his older brother Alec, for one evening in Tel Aviv.^[63] Alec was on leave from the allied campaign in Italy. It would prove to be the brothers’ very last meeting. Corporal Alec Egnal was killed on 18 July 1945, on his way home after 5 years in uniform, in a small aircraft that crashed at Sudan’s Khartoum airport. Not one of the thirteen homeward-bound soldiers and crew survived the devastating crash. Alec lies buried in the Commonwealth Cemetery in Khartoum. In a strange twist of fate, family memories suggest that a fellow soldier also demobbed and due to fly home on that very flight gave up his seat to him. As family memories suggest, the soldier felt that Alec, having been married during his wartime service, should be given the chance to return home sooner.^[64] Fate intervened, disastrously.^[65]

Excursis 4: 28 May 1944 and Spring of the same year

*On this day, United States troops landed on Biak Island, in the Pacific....***[66]**

*"A Mosquito XVI aircraft of No 60 Squadron, South African Airforce, (was) operating from Foggia Airfield Complex in southern Italy ...During one such mission, in Spring 1944, one of 60 Squadron planes ...photographed Auschwitz."***[67]**

In India

And on this very day, 28 May 1944, Cyril was transferred, quite suddenly, to India.

Events in the sub-continent had caused a considerable deterioration in the security situation in that part of the empire. Cyril's transfer occurred amidst the advance of the Japanese's 15th Army, which had begun, in March, against India's North East frontier. The attack had been launched to forestall a planned British invasion of Burma.**[68]** The 15th intended to capture the British supply bases on the Imphal Plain and cut off the road links. Imphal was on the frontier with Burma. It housed a considerable Allied logistic base.**[69]** The Japanese army was supported to some degree by dissident Indian forces who wished to overthrow British rule in India. The monsoons occurred between May and September, with the RAF and the US Air Force flying men, equipment and supplies to Imphal. "The Japanese defeat at Kohima and Imphal was the largest up until that time."**[70]** They had suffered 54 879 casualties, including 13 376 dead. Most of these losses were the result of starvation, disease and exhaustion. The Allies suffered 12 603 casualties.**[71]**

It was to this theater in the East that was in such considerable danger of the war spilling over from the Japanese mainland, that Cyril is recorded as being stationed at the 3rd Ferry Unit[73] of the air Command South East Asia (Pakistan/India). "The air component of the British-American South East Asia Command became Air Command, South East Asia (ACSEA) on 30 December 1943. It was based almost entirely in India.[74]

In India, Cyril was flying continuously on various aircraft missions. The skies, however, were clear of enemy. Many are the reports from RAF personnel in India at that time who noted that the biggest danger they faced were from the monsoons over the sub-continent.[75] Cyril, in his own short biography, somewhat tongue in cheek claimed that he got to know India better than his own homeland. He records that he flew, inter alia, to Delhi, Bombay (now Mumbai), Calcutta, and then also to Burma, Bangalore and Mandalay. Air miles indeed! Each one of the names are names to conjure with; they ring with a certain nostalgia and historical heft.

Excursis 5: More than 2 500 000 Indian soldiers joined the Allied Forces, but...

Aside, however, from the unsettling effects of the monsoons in the air, other disruptive forces were taking place on the ground below and in the streets of the towns and cities of India. India hardly displayed a unified voice of support for the Allies' war against the Axis forces. The RAF presence in India was to very many citizens, the symbol of the colonizing power of England. India, as part of the British Empire, was a country hardly unified in its allegiance to the Crown, and hence to the alliance of the Allies in their war against the Reich, as had been the case with South Africa. Although the Indian army in the period between World War I and World War II had undergone some considerable structural change in terms of leadership, the officer corps remained mainly staffed by British professional soldiers. Yet this response to nationalist demands was deemed insufficient and was "bitterly opposed by many British Indian army officers and led to racial tension among them" and "most Indians [saw] discrimination at the hands of their fellow British officers and were often viewed as outcasts among the larger social club. They were often paid less and had to endure harsher conditions than their British counterparts".[76]

The pre-war climate in India had led to large scale disaffection among its population. It had become a cauldron of expectation and dissension vis-à-vis Britain, the Commonwealth and participation in the war. It was felt that India had been forced into the war by undemocratic means. This is believed to have led to the launch of the 1942 Quit India Movement, "characterised by mass agitation against 200 years of British rule."[77] The Indian National Congress, led by Mohandas Karamachand Gandhi, had denounced the Nazi ideology, but demanded independence before extending support for the war against the Reich."[78] Nevertheless, some Indian leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and Mohan Singh Deb "advocated a military alliance with Germany or Japan, to

secure independence from Britain.”[79] Bose had, during 1941-1942, met with von Ribbentrop, Himmler and Hitler.[80] From August, 1944, the “Indian Legion” was formed as a part of the German Army, with the aim of liberating India from British rule.[81]

Prior to Cyril’s arrival in India, the British government had, in 1942, reacted very forcefully against the Indian National Congress and its Quit India Movement. The government arrested sixty thousand Congress leaders, and key members of the movement were to be kept incarcerated until 1945.

At the same time, however, Indian forces throughout all the theatres of the war, in the Middle East, in Europe and in South East Asia were a huge contributing factor in the defeat of the Axis forces and the Japanese Army’s onslaught in South East Asia, on India’s borders. Among those fighters were the Gurkha troops of the Indian Armyunder their commander (later Major-General) Orde Charles Wingate.[82] These troops, popularly known as “Chindits”, played a crucial role in halting the Japanese advance into South East Asia.”[83]

**Major-General Orde Charles
Wingate (1903-1944)**

But in the Air, and its Perils, Cyril...

Cyril was isolated from the discord being played out in the country. Quite probably he would have had access to various newspapers, such as the *Times of India* (founded 1838) at the RAF headquarters in the city. All these events of the tension and political agitation against Empire would have been known to the RAF airmen in India and especially to Cyril, inquisitive man that he was. He would surely have been immersed in discussions about the politics outside of the somewhat cloistered, separated and elitist RAF groupings in the country. He would too have reflected on the political situation in his own country, the Union of South Africa, and the growing antagonism of his fellow citizens to South Africa’s participation in the War. News about the degree of civil discord and the internment of anti-war agitators would have caused him to shake his head. Cyril would also have been preoccupied with thoughts of home, of his parents and siblings, and especially of his older brother Alec, who, in Cyril’s own words, had joined the army on the day war broke out.[84] He knew too that Alec, during this latter part of the year 1944, was with the Allied army in Italy.

As was the case in all the other theatres of war, flying was especially hazardous. Flying accidents, not associated with actual exposure to dogfights in the air or of anti-aircraft guns, but resulting at times from poor visibility, under-serviced craft, pilot error and extreme weather conditions caused many servicemen to lose their lives.[85] Cyril recalled the dangers of flying during the monsoon season which took a heavy toll on aircraft and how he survived “one scary and unpleasant incident (!) in a tumbling plane that eventually landed safely.”[86] Once again Cyril’s tendency to nonchalance is evident in his recall of this event. This same dismissive tendency was surely a means of coping, post the war, with the many horrifying events that the servicemen had experienced between 1939 and 1945.

Corroboration of Cyril’s recollection is supported by the writings of Elizabeth Dent, in her book *Clipped Wings*. [87] The book is a record of photographs found in a tin trunk that had belonged to her father, 70 years after war’s end. It is a fascinating record of the lives of the men and women who served in the Royal Air Force in India and Burma during the war. Dent writes, as had Cyril similarly, that “another hardship was the monsoons – continuous torrential rain for days, continuously, and they had to work in it all the time.” [88] Dent adds that another great hardship, often overlooked in retrospect, was how servicemen struggled with being away from home “when most youngsters had never been overseas before.” [89]

Flying, Flying...

During all this time of his service in the RAF in India, Cyril was traversing and criss-crossing the Indian airspace and sub-continent from end to end and beyond. He was sent to Karachi, in Pakistan. He ferried aircraft from Karachi to the main RAF base in Burma. He was part of the 3rd Ferry Unit (28 May 1944). [90] Cyril, by now a full lieutenant in the RAF, was posted to 8 Ferry Unit on 7 September 1944. Repeatedly, he flew from Delhi to Calcutta (now Kolkata), a distance (now) of 1305 kilometres. Cyril reports too, that, many a time, he flew over the Taj Mahal. From Karachi, where he was stationed at the base camp, he would fly across the sub-continent to Kolkata, a distance of 2590 kilometres, stopping en-route at British and American air force bases. He also flew, he says, to Poona. Ah, Poona! Poona was the scene of the meeting with the Aga Khan and Winston Churchill. According to the Khan, it was where he first met Churchill, in 1896. [91]

Flying, Flying, Flying.....[92]

In his colourful wartime recollections, Cyril entrancingly describes his own visit to Poona. It was here that he and a Jewish serviceman visited the Poona synagogue. Arriving at the so-called "Jewish Church" in a "gharrie", [93] Cyril and his "Jewish buddy" upon entering the synagogue, records that "we were astonished by its magnificence". [94] They would have stumbled into the Ohel David Synagogue, consecrated in September of 1867. It had been designed by the architect Henry Saint Clair Wilkins in the English Gothic style. Its commanding spire reached a height of ninety feet in the air. The funder of this house of worship was the famous David Sassoon, who seems to have died during the long period of its construction. He is buried in the Ohel David synagogue itself. [95] By chance too, according to Cyril, the chaplain at Ohel David during the war, would later serve at a South African shul. [96]

Ohel David synagogue, Poona[97]

In a tender recollection, Cyril remembered a cross sub-continent flight into Afghanistan. On a short furlough in that country, he recalls wandering into a busy market, to buy "a beautiful nightgown for my future wife, Hannah." [98]

Time for cricket, anyone?

During his time in India, between transport flights, Lieutenant Egnal could not let slip the opportunity of playing a highly competitive game of cricket. Cricket and India indeed “go together like a horse and carriage”. Being talented at many different sports, Cyril relished the chance to play in a series of informal, but highly contested matches between teams of servicemen. Her describes the competition of numerous games played “in a knockout system of four teams: the Europeans, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Parsees.” He further recalls that a match between the “Europeans” and the “Hindus” ended in a draw. It was agreed that the result would be determined by the toss of a coin. The coin fell in favor of the “Europeans”. “The Hindus went to the Supreme Court to have our win overturned. The court turned them down. The incident was major news in the papers.”[99]

The Red Lapel: An amusing and novel interpretation.

Cyril recalls, in a second short memoir, that the RAF headquarters in Calcutta were housed in the largest hotel in that city, which had been taken over by the Indian government to house Air Force officers.[100] The scene is set on one of those afternoons when five South African airmen of the RAF were relaxing in the hotel lounge. Now all those men who had joined the Union Defence Force as volunteers were identified as such by the wearing of the Red Lapel on their uniform. It was a badge of honour, a sign of willingness to join General Smuts’ call to arms in the Empire’s war against German expansionism and its murderous intents. It was indeed a “red badge of courage.”[101]

But on that afternoon in the hotel lounge in Calcutta, the red badge became an object of considerable curiosity to six British airmen who joined the five South Africans, presumably at tea. As these airmen believed the wearers of the Red Badge to be Russians, the South Africans resorted to moving the fable along by speaking to each other in Afrikaans! Their listeners were taken in by this charade. Unable to tell the difference between Afrikaans and Russian, they believed indeed that the South Africans were Bolsheviks! This too, found its way into a column in the South African newspaper *The Star*, to be greeted with much hilarity among that paper’s readers.[102]

All we are saying, is give peace a chance...

As the weeks slipped by, Cyril’s RAF squadron was headquartered close to the Taj Mahal. The war in Europe ended on 8 May 1945. The Auschwitz death camp, which had been reconnoitered by a South African Air Force air crew in 1944, had been liberated. Victorious Allies now encountered the horrifying evidence of the Nazi crimes across Europe.[103] Cyril had a few more weeks in India. He had begun thinking of returning home. In July, he received orders to return to South Africa for discharge. He would await transport home from Bombay, from whence he boarded a Chinese merchant vessel at the beginning of August 1945. It was aboard this ship, on 15 August, that he heard on radio that Japan had surrendered. Cyril recalls the jubilation on hearing this announcement, while at sea. “We now hoped for peace ever after.”[104]

Would Cyril by now have received the news of his brother Alec's tragic death in the airplane accident on the runway at Khartoum's airport, on that fateful day of July 18, 1945? Alec, he who had in Cyril's own words, volunteered for service on the day South Africa declared war on Great Britain's side?

Oh the wastage! Oh the carnage! Oh the murderers intent and its execution!

Khartoum War Cemetery

Post-script.

Cyril had boarded the ship bringing him home. The sudden prospect of stepping out of uniform and transforming himself into civilian life, would, this writer believes, have been accomplished with aplomb. Cyril, as the writer knew him, could distance himself from difficult events, and in a pragmatic manner absorb life's vicissitudes, board life's aircraft and navigate his way to a safe touchdown.

Cyril would, metaphorically, again connect with his brother Alec, whose most tragic of deaths would sear, scar and seep deeply into the family's collective memory. Cyril would on one occasion visit Alec's grave at Khartoum, in the huge British military cemetery of that city in the Sudan. And in a dream-like sequence in a deep sleep in his aged body, he would re-unite with his brothers Alec and Isaac (Itz). [105] Cyril died in October, 2019, in Toronto Canada, at the age of 99.

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contributions to Jewish Affairs include a three-part history of Herber House, a boarding facility for Jewish youth from the country districts attending King David school, which appeared in 2019-2020.

NOTES

1 For A H Egnal's story, see the author's <https://www.jewishaffairs.co.za/three-uncles-in-world-war-ii-part-1/> (<https://www.jewishaffairs.co.za/three-uncles-in-world-war-ii-part-1/>)

2 *South African Jews in World War II*. Published by The South African Jewish Board of Deputies, The Eagle Press, Johannesburg. 1950, p14.

3 Egnal, Cyril. "Great Great Uncle Cyril Egnal." Unpublished monograph, pp 53-62. Autobiography as dictated to, and assisted by his nephew, Avron Mintz, circa 2005-2008. P 1

4 See inter alia, Rubin, M, *The Jewish Community of Johannesburg, 1886-1939: Landscapes of Reality and Imagination*. M.A. Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2004; Habonim is a Jewish youth movement and G'dud Trumpeldor one of its age related groups Jeppe High School is located in Johannesburg.

5 Kelme. "According to the Yiskor book of Kelme, that town lay between the towns of Shavele and Tavarig. The origin of the name Kelme derives from the word "tree trunk." Buxbaum, Stuart. "Three Uncles in World War II (Part 1)." *Jewish Affairs*, Volume 77 #3 Spring 2022

6 Fachler, David. 'Tradition, Accommodation, Revolution and Counterrevolution: A history of a century of struggle for the soul of Orthodoxy in Johannesburg's Jewish community, 1915-2015' PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town, Department of Historical Studies, January 2022.

7 Dora Sowden. (b 1907) was the music and film critic of the leading South African newspaper, *The Rand Daily Mail*.

8 Jack Shapiro (b 1933).was educated at Doornfontein Primary School and Athlone High School, in Johannesburg. He authored the book *The Streets of Doornfontein*, ISBN 978-0-620-47340-b.

9 Fachler, op. cit.

10 "Anglo Polish alliance". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Polish_alliance

11 S Steyn, Richard. *Seven Votes. How WWII changed South Africa Forever*. Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, Cape Town, London. 2020

12 The Great Trek was that vast movement of disaffected proto-Afrikaners from the Cape who moved on ox-drawn waggons and on horseback with large herds of cattle and servants north, into the

interior of the country, away from British rule. In 1833 Britain had legislated that slavery must end in all their colonies.

13 Shain, Milton. *A Perfect Storm. Antisemitism in South Africa 1930-1948*. Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2015. Shain refers to Eric Louw's "The Communist Danger". Publications of the Enlightenment Service of the Reunited Nationalist Party, No 5, 1943.

14 Shain, *ibid.*

15 Blake, Albert. *Wit Terroriste. Afrikaner-Saboteurs in die Ossewabrandwagjare*. Tafelberg Uitgewers, 2018. pp33-34

16 *ibid*, p35

17 *ibid.* A rough translation would render the phrases as "soldiers eager to enter conflict" and "young, enthusiastic anti-war students."

18 *ibid*, p47.

19 *ibid.* "In a stadium, it appeared as if it would lead to a bloodbath." (Translated from Afrikaans) p. 47

20 In March, 1920, Pierre van Rynveld and Quinton Brand completed the first trans-Atlantic flight from London to the Youngsfield airport, in the Cape Province of South Africa

21 Voortrekkerhoogte was then known as Robert's Heights, named after Field-Marshal Lord Frederick Roberts. The cornerstone was laid by Lord Kitchener in 1902, and was founded by the British army in 1905. Kitchener and Roberts were the architects of the war against the two Boer republics during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. It was renamed Voortrekkerhoogte by the government of the Union of South Africa, in 1939. In 1998, in the new democratic dispensation of the country, it was renamed Thaba Tshwane. "*Thaba Tshwane*", en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thaba_Tshwane

22 The History of the South African Airforce (SAAF). <https://saafmuseum.org.za/about/the-history-of-the-sa-air-force/>

23 *ibid.*

24 *ibid.*

25 *ibid.*

26 Egnal, Cyril. *op. cit*

27 Buxbaum, Stuart. *Three Uncles in World War 2. Jewish Affairs*, Volume 77 #3, Spring, 2022

28 DODA, The South African National Defence Force Documentation Centre, (Military Archives). Herein to be referred to as DODA, Cyril Egnal file.

29 WW2 bomber navigator Stock Photos and Images. <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/ww2-bomber-navigator.html?sortBy=relevant>

- 30 Battle of Berlin. (RAF Campaign)
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Berlin_\(RAF_campaign\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Berlin_(RAF_campaign))
- 31 DODA. Cyril Egnal file.
- 32 "Radar at Wits: South Africa's development of Radar within three months in World War II"
<https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/radar-wits-south-africas-development-radar-within-three-months-world-war-ii>
(<https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/radar-wits-south-africas-development-radar-within-three-months-world-war-ii>) I acknowledge with thanks Frank Joffe from Forest Town, who brought this to my attention.
- 33 DODA ibid,
- 34 The History of the South African Airforce (SAAF). op. cit
- 35 Egnal, Cyril. op. cit
- 36 "Egypt in World War 2".
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt_in_World_War_II
- 37 ibid
- 38 Editorial Review, from Publishers Weekly: Naquib Mahfouz. *Sugar Street: The Cairo Trilogy, Volume 3*. [amazon.com/Sugar-Street-Cairo-Trilogy-3-ebook/dp/BOIGBAKAVO](https://www.amazon.com/Sugar-Street-Cairo-Trilogy-3-ebook/dp/BOIGBAKAVO) Accessed 10/07/2023
- 39 "History of the Jews in Egypt".
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Egypt Accessed 10/07/2023.
- 40 See Buxbaum, Stuart. "Three Uncles in World War 2, Part One". Jewish Affairs, op. cit
- 41 Egnal, Cyril. op. cit. For a fuller, imagined account of the brothers' meeting, see "Three Uncles in World War 2", (Part 1) op. cit
- 42 "Battle of Berlin". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Berlin
- 43 ibid.
- 44 "Operation Gomorrah. Firestorm Created Germany's Nagasaki".
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-43546839>
- 45 ibid
- 46 "Joint Aircraft Recovery and Transportation Squadron".
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Aircraft_Recovery_and_Transportation_Squadron
- 47 ibid.
- 48 Egnal, Cyril. op. cit
- 49 DODA, Cyril Egnal file.
- 50 "Tel Nof Airbase" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tel_Nof_Airbase

51 "RAF Gaza". https://Wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_Gaza. It was originally built in 1917, with German assistance, for military use by the Ottoman Empire.

52 *ibid.*

53 "Aqir" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aqir>

54 *ibid.*

55 "RAF Bomber Command aircrew of World War II".

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_Bomber_Command_aircrew_of_World_War_II

56 *ibid*

57 Egnal, Cyril. *op. cit*

58 *ibid.*

59 'Harry Schwarz'. sahistory.org.za/people/harry-heinz-schwarz

.article. Schwarz was born in 1924, and migrated to South Africa in 1934. A panel exhibit commemorates Schwarz in the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, Forest Town.

60 'Harry Schwarz.' en.wikipedia.org.za/people/harry-heinz-schwarz

61 sahistory.org.sa/people/harry-heinz-schwarz

62 "Bomb- Aimer". [https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20\(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out)

([https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20\(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out)

([https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20\(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out)

([https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20\(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out)

([https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20\(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/whos-who-in-an-raf-bomber-crew#:~:text=Bomb%2DAimer,-%C2%A9%20IWM%20(CH&text=He%20would%20lie%20flat%20in,number%20of%20operations%20carried%20out)

63 Buxbaum, Stuart. "Three Uncles in World War 2, *op. cit.*

64 Confirmed by Arlene Rubin (Ra'anana, Israel) niece to the late Alec Egnal.

65 "The Department of Defense regrets to announce that a Ventura aircraft of the shuttle service with a crew of three and thirteen passengers, crashed on landing at Khartoum yesterday afternoon. There were no survivors. The next of kin have been notified." Report contained in the *Eastern Province Herald*, 19 July, 1945.

66 "Battle of Biak", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Biak (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Biak)...

67 "Jewish Report ", 2015, and from an exhibit in the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre.

68 "Battle of Biak" *op. cit*

69 "Battle of Imphal".

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Imphal

70 *ibid*

71 *ibid.*

72 *ibid.*

73 DODA, Cyril Egnal file

74 Battle of Imphal, *op. cit.*

75 Cyril Egnal, *op. cit.* . See also Dent, Elizabeth. *Clipped Wings: Cpl Peter Walker's Illustrated Diary of his RAF Service in India and Burma, 1942-1946*. ISBN-10 978-0995581012

76 "India in World War 2".

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India_in_World_War_II#:~:text=British%20India%20officially%20declared%20v

77 *ibid.*

78 *ibid.*

79 *ibid.*

80 "Indian Legion". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Legion

81 *ibid.*

82 *ibid.*

83 "India in WW2", *op. cit.*

84 Egnal, Cyril. *op. cit.*

85 Airplane accidents occurred during the war, most memorably with the death of Major-General Dan Pienaar, killed in an air crash in Kenya in 1942, on his way back to South Africa. The late Advocate Jules Browde had a lucky escape on his flight home, when the pilot made a forced landing in Crete. "Veterans Voices", Jewish Affairs, Rosh Hashanah edition, 2015

86 Egnal, Cyril. *op. cit.* p57

87 Dent, Elizabeth. *op. cit.*

88 *ibid.*

89 *ibid.*

90 DODA. Cyril Egnal file

91 The Memoirs of Aga Khan, Cassel and Company, 1954. p18

92 Map of India. <https://www.google.com/search?>

[sca_esv=581526710&sxsrf=AM9HkKIZKjL-](https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=581526710&sxsrf=AM9HkKIZKjL-4KnzisiXZwj2Zk4yRlMwCA:1699713758568&q=map+of+india&tbm=isch&source=univ&fir=VgUYxNqK03)

[4KnzisiXZwj2Zk4yRlMwCA:1699713758568&q=map+of+india&tbm=isch&source=univ&fir=VgUYxNqK03](https://www.google.com/search?4KnzisiXZwj2Zk4yRlMwCA:1699713758568&q=map+of+india&tbm=isch&source=univ&fir=VgUYxNqK03)

(<https://www.google.com/search?>

[sca_esv=581526710&sxsrf=AM9HkKIZKjL-](https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=581526710&sxsrf=AM9HkKIZKjL-4KnzisiXZwj2Zk4yRlMwCA:1699713758568&q=map+of+india&tbm=isch&source=univ&fir=VgUYxNqK03)

[4KnzisiXZwj2Zk4yRlMwCA:1699713758568&q=map+of+india&tbm=isch&source=univ&fir=VgUYxNqK03](https://www.google.com/search?4KnzisiXZwj2Zk4yRlMwCA:1699713758568&q=map+of+india&tbm=isch&source=univ&fir=VgUYxNqK03))

93 Also spelt "Gharry" or "Ghari". A horse drawn cab used mostly in India. A "Gharry" driver is a "Gharry -Wallah.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gharry>

94 Egnal, Cyril. *op. cit.* p56

