

Australians at War Film Archive

Kenneth Briggs (Ken or (A)cid) - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1019>

Tape 1

- 00:35 **So Ken can you tell me where you were born, where did you grow up and when did you join up for the navy?**
- Yes, well I was born in Glen Innes, New South Wales. I lived there all my junior life until I joined the navy. I went to school at Glen Innes, both the Primary and High School.
- 01:00 I left there at went to Sydney for a couple of months before I joined up.
- And after you joined up for the navy can you take me through your wartime service?**
- Well, I basically did my initial training. I might add that at that stage I was only 17 years of age.
- 01:30 I went in as an Ordinary Seaman Second Class. I was destined to be trained as an ASDIC [Anti Submarine Detection Investigation Commission or sub detector] operator which was submarine detection gear which as you will probably understand was sorely needed at that stage because of the U-Boat menace in the northern Atlantic.
- 02:00 As soon as the initial training was over I was sent to England with a small group of people on a ship which was going over to be converted to a troop ship. We then lined up with the Royal Navy ASDIC trainees and eventually we were allocated to
- 02:30 various ships.
- And can you just tell me briefly which ships you served on and where?**
- Well it's a bit hard. A lot of the ships you served on you were actually operating from a base, so initially when I went over I was going out on various
- 03:00 ships doing training. Most of those were North Sea trawlers which had been converted to carry ASDIC sets. Eventually I was allocated to a motor launch flotilla in Coastal Command and we eventually
- 03:30 wound up in the Mediterranean and went through various bits there and then I went back to England and did an officers' training course and then transferred onto midget submarines.
- And from the time in the submarines...how long did you spend there, and did that take you through to the end of the war?**
- It took me to the end of the war, yes.
- 04:00 **And post war?**
- Well post war... I didn't have a great education I might add. I was a bit dumb I think. I had to get into something pretty quick and I was able to get a job as a trainee mechanic with British United Shoe Machinery
- 04:30 which was a big company in those days. I progressed with them and spent the next 38½ years with them, and that's about the story of my life I think.
- That's excellent. So we'll go right back to the beginning at this point and talk about Glen Innes. What kind of town was Glen Innes when you grew up?**
- 05:00 Well, I think a typical country town. From memory the population was about 6000 in those days. I didn't know anything different, of course. I spent my whole life there. I didn't see the sea until I was 9 years of age. I guess like any other country town.
- And what**

05:30 **did your father do?**

He was an accountant. He was originally a clerk or an accounting clerk with one of the big main general stores in Glen Innes. He had come up from the coast looking for a job no doubt. I mean jobs

06:00 were hard to find in those days.

Do you remember him always having work?

Yes, he was employed right through the Depression. After the general store there was a shoe factory and tannery in Glen Innes and he eventually went there and spent most of his working life there.

06:30 **Was he involved in World War I?**

No, he wasn't. I think probably because my eldest brother...he had only just married and my eldest brother was born at the time, and that's the only thing I can think of, but he never mentioned it.

Did you hear anything of

07:00 **World War I?**

Oh yes.

What sort of things did you hear?

I think the schools used to give us propaganda on this sort of thing. We understood the hardships and the conditions that the men went through. I think we had a fairly good idea of that.

07:30 **Do you remember celebrating Anzac Day at all?**

Yes, they had quite a good Anzac Memorial in Glen Innes which consisted of a pair of big wrought iron gates and they had the names of all the men who volunteered, and that's still in existence.

How many brothers and sisters

08:00 **did you have?**

I had two brothers, both elder. The one immediately above me, he was three years older than me. He was in the air force during the Second World War, and the other one was a motor mechanic.

What sort of relationship did you have with your brothers as a child?

08:30 I would say good. I don't remember anything that wasn't good. Being the youngest, of course, I always got shooed away from whatever was happening. My mother came from a big family. She was one of 15.

09:00 I had plenty of aunts and uncles. My memory is we all got on very well together.

What sort of memories do you have of how you used to spend childhood days? What sort of games?

Well, I guess anything that involved athletics or that type of thing. I liked to run and cycle,

09:30 box and wrestle. I was quite happy with that. I'd rather do that than go to school.

And what was school like?

I think that's a little hard. I was a bit of a terror at school. I don't think I did very well academically.

How were you a terror?

I would give

10:00 cheek to the teachers. Maybe a bit of that.

Have you any specific examples?

No, not really. I'd rather not say. Anyone in Glen Innes would tell you about it probably.

Was there a reputation?

Oh yes. That's only people in my age group.

What sort of punishment would you get for giving cheek to teachers?

10:30 Not very much, no. You don't remember those things very much.

What was the school like in Glen Innes? How many students on average?

Again, my memory's not too good on that. I would say it was a mixed school,

11:00 boys and girls which went through from, in those days, from first year to fifth year and I'd say 300 students.

Your childhood was during the Depression. What memories do you have of the Depression?

11:30 I think everybody was involved in that. Obviously money was short and people were very friendly and trading bits and pieces. For instances vegetables that were home grown, and rabbits and that sort of thing. We would exchange bits and pieces for

12:00 food and clothing. That didn't apply in my family quite as much as in some others. Dad had a reasonable job and we seemed to manage all right. Although as a kid I suppose I was demanding, and sometimes it was "you can't have this and you can't have that".

What sort of things do you remember being told

12:30 **that you couldn't have?**

Again, luxury items. Probably lollies and that sort of thing.

How did it affect things around the house? Were there shortages in things like electricity or any of the actual day to day living things?

There could have been but I think I was a bit young to

13:00 really appreciate it all but electricity only came in...that was modern. We started off with kerosene lamps and what have you in the house. We also had a gas lamp which was supplied from the local gas works, and

13:30 we had that in two rooms; one in the kitchen and one in the lounge room. Later on of course electricity went right through the house. A 25 watt globe was all you were allowed. You couldn't have a big 100 watt because it burnt too much electricity.

14:00 So that sums up the Depression.

Do you ever remember your mother having to scrimp or save for certain things?

I think that was on all the time, yes.

Do you have any specific memories of that?

I think though

14:30 she often...I can remember the impression that she went without herself for the kids, the children quite often.

In what sort of ways?

In clothing. In that era, people tried to put a brave face forward in amongst their neighbours and what have you.

15:00 I suppose things like underpants and that sort of thing were made from old flour bags that had been washed and tidied up and that sort of thing.

What do you remember of people coming through the town and maybe looking for work?

Well, there were the

15:30 old hump the bluey type of fellow who had old his possessions. He had a roll on his back and a billy can on his belt and most of these people would present themselves at your front gate and ask for work. They'd be quite happy to

16:00 chop the wood because they were all fuel stoves. And do little odd jobs around the house for a feed, for a meal. There was no money. So everybody did it on the barter system.

Did they work at your house?

I don't doubt we had one or two there, yes.

And what was it that you called them?

They humped their bluey.

16:30 **What does that mean?**

The bluey was their roll and what have you on the back pack and of course these fellows slept out under the stars every night and they went from town to town.

What age were you when you left school?

17:00 I was 17.

What year was this?

It was 1940.

What are your memories of hearing the declaration of war in 1939?

There was a lot in the newspapers and that at that particular time. My most vivid memory is a

17:30 newspaper article with photographs of Russian equipment. At that stage there was a lot of talk as to whether Russia would come in on Britain's side or switch to the German side. But no I think articles and that were freely available.

18:00 Most people understood there was going to be a war but a lot didn't understand what that involved.

What was your understanding of what war was at the time?

Guns and gung-ho and let's get into it, you know. We're as good as them, let's go.

Do you remember listening to the radio when war was announced?

I wasn't an avid radio listener.

18:30 Of course radios weren't particularly on everybody's itinerary at that stage. Mainly I think the parents listened to the news and what have you and discussed it. If there was anything they thought we ought to know...

Did they discuss the war with you?

Not as such that I remember.

19:00 **What were your thoughts about Britain being at war and how did this relate to you?**

We felt very close to Britain. There was something there that was educated into us at school I think.

19:30 My birthday for instance was the 24th of May which in those days was called Empire Day which was a celebration of the British Empire.

What would the celebration involve?

The children and everything were made

20:00 well aware of our involvement in the British Empire. I think it whipped up enthusiasm.

Was it a public holiday?

No, not a public holiday, but it was well known. It was well advertised.

So what kind of allegiance did you feel for the Empire?

Well, that was our saviour.

20:30 We would look at an atlas and have a look at all the countries that were coloured in pink because they were part of the British Empire and we were proud of that I think.

When did you make the decision that you were going to go to war?

I think after I left school and when I

21:00 went to Sydney, of course I wasn't real happy and the navy seemed a good opportunity.

What did you do in Sydney after you left school?

I had a couple of months when I worked with a glass company there.

What did you do?

Just a roustabout.

Where was this company?

In Sydney, Alexandria.

And where did

21:30 **you live?**

I was living at Rushcutters Bay at that stage.

What was the experience like living out of home?

Well, I think the first couple of days were all right. But when it came to washing and making your bed and goodness knows what else, things started to tarnish a little bit.

How much did you grow up in this time?

22:00 Oh very much so, yes.

What sort of lessons on life did you get?

I always felt that I was grown up when I was an early teenager but of course that was a misnomer. When I had to fend for myself things advanced pretty quickly.

What kind of people were you working with at the glass factory?

22:30 Working type people. The glass company was where those who couldn't get a job anywhere else wound up because there was a lot of dirty work in the way of....let me go back and say it was cut crystal glassware.

23:00 This has to be etched and put in acid baths and polished and this sort of thing. That wasn't...it was all manual work which I would classify as dirty. It wasn't like office work or anything like that.

Did you form many friendships with the people you worked with there?

Yes I did have a friendship with

23:30 one chap. He wanted to join the navy so I said, "I'll join with you." But when we went for our medical, I got through and he didn't.

Why didn't he get through?

I think his eye sight or something wasn't ...he eventually joined the army and I saw him after the war, but that friendship hasn't continued.

24:00 **So aside from wanting to join the navy because your friend was, what were your expectations or what did you think about the navy before you joined?**

I thought I would see the world and have a great time. Girl in every port.

What did you know about ships?

Nothing. No, absolutely nothing.

24:30 **Why the navy?**

Well, the army didn't appeal to me and my brother had joined the air force at that stage, so I thought I'll have something different, I'll go for the navy, but my friend also...I think that influenced me.

And what's the procedure that you go through to join the navy?

In those days, the navy was very much

25:00 on a peace time basis at that time. It was a matter of an application form which you had to fill out and submit and they went through the rigmarole of your education and your background and what have you. You had to have references.

25:30 **And you were 17?**

Yes.

Was this a problem?

Oh no. The navy have what they called 'boys'. Quite a lot of naval officers start as 14 year old boys and progress up the ranks.

26:00 **So there was no set age? Like you didn't have to be 18 to join for instance?**

Well, they prefer 18 but it was no problem. I was 17 and a half.

You didn't have to put your age up?

No, I didn't.

How about your parents, did they have to...

They had to sign the document and I think I put one over on that.

How?

I think I signed my Dad's name.

26:30 Of which I'm not proud of course.

Why didn't you ask him to sign it?

Because the paper work had to get to Glen Innes and back, which was fairly slow in those days. I was anxious to get everything fixed up and so

27:00 took care of the papers as it were.

What did you tell your Dad about that?

I eventually explained to him. I wasn't proud of it, but he was quite happy.

What was your mother and father's general reaction to the fact that you had joined the navy?

I think they were pleased. Pleased I think because I think they thought it would give me a bit of discipline.

27:30 **Did they think you needed...**

Oh I'm sure they did.

And so after you've put this paper work in, what happens next?

You got a call up notice and I had to go to HMAS Rushcutter for an interview.

28:00 **What was the interview?**

' Just personal stuff, just to get your right story and everything. You have a medical and right, you're in.

What's the medical?

To see you didn't have TB [tuberculosis] or ruptures and this sort of thing.

What sort of tests would they do?

Well, in those days you stripped down and

28:30 they went all over you with a stethoscope. It's hard to say. Then they'd ask you to cough once or twice and what have you.

And who conducted the interview?

One of the naval officers.

Was this the first officer you had come in contact with?

29:00 Yes, I'd say so, yes.

What was that like?

Oh, I suppose about as frightening as this interview.

How frightening is that?

That's a long time ago and I don't have much recollection of that.

During that time, when you had the interview and the medical, what were you thinking about the navy at that stage?

29:30 I was very excited. You know, we understood we were going to do a couple of months seamanship course and then go on to the anti submarine detectors course.

Why specifically the anti submarine course?

Well, as I understood it, the Royal Navy

30:00 weren't able to produce enough people to man all their ships because anti submarine detection gear was something new, or reasonably new and with the convoys and that going over to England, they had to protect the ships against U-Boats [German submarines], and that was the job of the anti submarine detector.

30:30 **And how did you become involved in that rather than other duties in the navy?**

Well, the intake...there were 16 who went in this initial intake of people, and we all trained as seamen and then we all trained ASDIC operators.

Was there something specific they'd look for in an ASDIC operator?

31:00 Well, you had to have good ears because the ASDIC is based on a sound transmission, and the return of a signal, and according to what the Doppler was you could tell whether a submarine was present or whether it was going left or going right or towards you or away from you. So basically I think

31:30 hearing was essential.

And they essentially decided you'd be an ASDIC operator when you first joined up?

Yes. Oh, yes they took us in with that understanding.

And what did you think about this?

I didn't know anything about it. Being the navy, the forces, you go along with it.

And so tell me about your

32:00 **three months seamanship training?**

Yes, a couple of months.

And where was it?

At Rushcutter.

What did they teach you?

Well, you did book work and practical work.

What bookwork?

Well, you know classrooms and they gave you a sort of

32:30 history of the navy. Mind you at this stage we were still in a pre-war position, the navy, as far as I could see. I went in as Royal Australian Navy Reserve which is part time sailors and that sort of thing.

33:00 That was altered soon after. Practical work we did, knots and sailing and rowing and goodness knows what. All the roustabout jobs.

What kind of knots?

Well, everything applicable in the navy.

I don't know what knots are applicable in the navy...

Well, if you want to lift a

33:30 barrel you use a barrel hitch, which is a rope you can put around a barrel that won't slide. You can put a sheep shank on which shortens a rope down and doesn't alter the strength of it. On the other hand if you're out in a dingy and you want to tie your dingy to a wharf, you can use a knot for that.

34:00 They're only simple things.

And could you swim?

Yes, but not a great deal. In those days I would say 50 yards. Because we had always swam in fresh water at Glen Innes...we had a river near by. But, yes, I could swim.

34:30 **And what was it like getting a bit of discipline?**

I didn't mind it at all once people explained why they were doing it.

How would they explain it?

Well, they'd tell you all about what you were learning and what you were doing it for and what it was all about. I didn't mind that at all.

35:00 **What about the general lifestyle that you were seeing of the navy?**

It was fairly concentrated. We were billeted in a private home at Beach Road at Rushcutters Bay, just a short walk from the depot and there wasn't any social life. It was a case of

35:30 go go go.

What was the private home like that you were billeted at?

It was...that area's quite a nice area. I don't know if you know it or not. I was billeted at a private house which was run by a woman who was on her own.

36:00 She had two daughters. One about 18 and one about 14, and they used to do all our meals and that sort of thing.

Did you start to make any friends among the people you were training with?

We knew each other. I wouldn't say...there was no friendship as far as buddy buddy pals type of thing.

- 36:30 **What sort of news were you hearing...you mentioned that the navy seemed to be on peace time footing? What were you hearing about the war from other sources at all?**
- Not a great deal. No, I don't remember much about that.
- What was Sydney like at the time in terms of troops? Were there lots of movement of people joining forces?**
- Yes.
- 37:00 For instance in the navy at Rushcutters Bay, we had ships coming and going. Not only naval ships but the troop transports for the Middle East. One of my memories there is of seeing the Queen Mary
- 37:30 departing through Sydney Heads as the Queen Elizabeth came in. A magnificent sight. There were other...at that particular time there was a big convoy of ships that was going to ship troops to the Middle East. There was the Mauritania, the Aquitania. Yes, lots of movement, lots of troop movement.
- 38:00 **What was it like seeing these big huge ships head out to sea?**
- Well, I was in awe. The Queen Mary of course couldn't come in. They had to anchor her out off shore because she is so big but we got to,
- 38:30 in our training on handling craft, we got to go out and go round her and touch her.
- What was she like?**
- Just big.
- Was she painted in...**
- No, all grey. All the troop transports were grey. The ship I went to England on wasn't.
- 39:00 That was a ship called the Oranje which was a Canadian Pacific liner [Briggs is probably referring to the Oranje which was actually a Dutch ship belonging to the Nederland Line and which was used by the Royal Australian Navy during World War II] which went from Canada through to Sydney and New Zealand. She was still in her colours of green and cream. But she was painted and transferred to a troop ship.
- 39:30 **Was it strange not being on a grey ship as you headed over?**
- It was strange being on a ship of that size. She was still in her peace time livery. In other words, not many passengers went to England, but there were still a few private people who went. There was a small contingent of air force people and our contingent of navy.

Tape 2

- 00:40 **If you could tell us the day-to-day learning when you were doing in anti-submarine detection at Rushcutters?**
- Yes, HMAS Rushcutter.
- What would you do on a day-to-day basis, training?**
- That was seamanship at Rushcutter.
- Oh. What would you do there?**
- 01:00 That was day-to-day business of what your duties would be once you were employed on a ship. Most of that was cleaning and scrubbing and goodness knows what else to keep a ship clean.
- What do you learn about scrubbing?**
- You can go back, in those days decks of ships
- 01:30 were wooden and they used to give you what they called a 'holy stone' to scrub the deck with. That was like a brick, coarse sandy type material that had a hole in it that you used as a broomstick. You pushed it up and down the deck and polished, cleaned all the muck
- 02:00 off the wood which you got lovely and white, but as the war progressed that all went by the board, of course. Camouflage came in. If you are doing any painting on a ship they always tell you to leave the deck until last.
- What kind of thoughts go through your head when you're scrubbing the deck?**
- 02:30 I think in those days it was, "How long has this got to go on for?" They featured all sorts of training. You learnt how to handle what they called a "whaler" which wore a cutter for a bigger boat, basic

seamanship stuff,

03:00 you touched on tying vessels up, that sort of thing, general stuff. That was our seamanship. We were only ratings, we weren't officers, so you didn't do navigation or anything,

03:30 like that at that point.

What did they tell you about taking orders from an officer?

I think that put into you fairly quickly and we all understood that you took the orders; there was never any problem on that.

04:00 **How were you taught to salute an officer?**

As you approached, if you were both walking together, then it was up to the rating to salute first. The officer would return the salute.

How do you salute in the navy?

What

04:30 do you mean? Physically?

Yes.

Hand flat, touch your cap, straight down to the side.

They salute differently in the army.

Yes, everybody has their own salute.

Where did you go from Rushcutters?

05:00 The anti-submarine detection course was carried out at HMAS Watson, which as you probably know is on South Head. They had a set up there, what they called "attack table" which once the operator learnt how to operate a set you

05:30 could put a situation on the attack table where you had to find and attack the submarine, using the gear that you had.

Describe the gear that you had?

Again I don't think I can do that in a couple of words, but mainly we wore a set of headphones, we had

06:00 a wheel for training the ASDIC dome and that consisted of a transmitter which sent out a beam in the water, it'd hit an object, it would return an echo. So you trained this oscillator in degrees

06:30 until you picked up a noise and from then on you had to determine (a) was it a submarine and (b) was it moving: which way was it moving, left, right, towards you, away from you and you could tell that from the difference in the sound heard on the earphones.

07:00 **Describe the sound of a submarine coming towards you?**

The sound that was transmitted was increased in pitch when it was coming towards you, when it was returned.

What about going left or right?

Well, you picked that up on the training where you were training the oscillator, you could switch onto it or off and you could pick it up on the compass reading.

07:30 **What does an ASDIC dome look like?**

Well, they've got various ones; mind you we're going back to the very early days.

That's what we want to find out about?

Underneath the keel of a ship in those days they had what we called a dome, and inside

08:00 that dome was a quartz oscillator and quartz vibrates at a certain cycle and that was able to transmit the sound with that.

So the sound is oscillated out?

It was directional, we're talking a general 'S'

08:30 type of set here. When I went to motor launches we had a different set altogether, but on the normal way in those days you trained the oscillator around to the starboard beam, brought it up in five degree increments until oscillating it dead ahead,

09:00 and then you let it down 90 degrees to port and came back and did the same thing. So that you covered an area from left to right on the ship.

Would you cover 360 degrees?

No. Only 180, unless you felt that if you had a periscope sighting,

09:30 or something like that, you could swing it around 360 degrees if necessary. But in normal sweeping without any indications that was anything present you would only do it through 180 degrees.

Why wouldn't you check, say, behind you and do 360 degrees all the time?

10:00 Well, there's not much point in doing behind you, because you've already been over that area and you would have picked anything up when you were coming up from the sides up to the bow.

You mentioned 5 degree increments, what was the width of the arc of the sound that was being pushed out?

That was probably, it varied on the water conditions,

10:30 that had a great influence on the beam, but if you said 10 degrees that would give you a couple of degrees either side of where you were actually intending to transmit to.

It would cover about 10 degrees?

Yes.

What was the sound of the submarine going away from you?

That was a lower sound returned than what you transmitted.

11:00 **How would you**

It was called "Doppler effect". That was up to the skill of the operators. Operators used to go mad because of this constant pinging in their ears, it used to drive them around the twist a bit.

11:30 **What did it sound like?**

I'm sure everybody's heard that on the pictures, a submarine transmitting, but it's a fairly high pitched sound that "ping", we used to call it "pinging", that'd go out and come back at a different intensity.

12:00 **How could you tell the difference between a submarine and something else?**

By sweeping across it. If it was a submarine you possibly would hear engine noises, if it was a whale you'd probably hear a whale noise.

12:30 You could pick a whale up like a submarine for instance. If you were operating in shallow water then you'd get an echo off a rock or something like that. Most of them were only done at sea where the water was deep. You got different results from different water temperatures, or different salinity of the

13:00 water, that effected the beam. It wasn't all cut and dried; if you put it on to starboard 40 you may have gone to starboard 50 by the time that it went through the water temperature and water salinity.

How would you make sure the beams could go at different depths?

13:30 You had an indicator that you were watching like a big compass, so that you knew it was a compass repeater type of thing, you knew what course the ship was on and you had an indicator to give you the direction that you were transmitting the beam.

14:00 **How much depth could the beam go in deep water?**

That was mainly on whether the salinity of the sea water redirected it. You get situations where the beam will stay in a layer of water and won't go down or up, but that was experience you had to, over a period of

14:30 years, you got that experience.

How were they teaching all of this at the training school?

On the attack table mainly. Then we had a couple of boats, one was HMAS Kyabram, which they used to take classes out and give them practical

15:00 experience, they used to run from Sydney heads up to the Hawkesbury River and back sort of thing.

Would they test them with Australian submarines?

No, we didn't have any at that stage. They used to go into shallow water and pick up rocks and various bits and pieces and

15:30 sometimes they had another ship with you that would give you the experience of engines running and that sort of thing.

How would you learn aspects of listening out for submarines?

The attack table taught you that. That reproduced all the bits and pieces; under ideal conditions of course.

16:00 I could tell you that in a North Atlantic gale it's a lot different trying to track anything than it is on, say, the attack table in an office.

I'm just trying to get that concept of the practical realities?

In those days it was hit and miss a bit.

16:30 ASDIC has been refined and refined and refined. They don't call it ASDIC today. In those days you had to be within a couple of miles of an enemy submarine to pick it up. Whereas today that's gone out a long, long way.

17:00 **With experience you know the sound of a submarine, but without testing on a submarine how would they explain what to listen for?**

They had submarine noises.

How would they translate this to you? Would they play it to you?

Oh yes, that would come off the attack table.

Describe the attack table for us?

I couldn't really.

17:30 It was a glass table which was smoke glass and the images of your ship and the ship, the sub you were hunting or what have you could be planned and altered

18:00 in operation, it was a bit like a flight simulator, or something like that with aircraft. They could set you a problem if you were going for your turn on it, they could set a problem up where maybe the submarine was going to alter course rapidly or something like that.

18:30 **How quickly would you hear it?**

Again that's dependent on the type of submarine. Some submarines made a lot more noise than others, but in the main they were silent, right down, if they

19:00 could get them to run more silent they would of course.

What about a submarine that was almost stationary?

Unless your transmitted beam reflected off it you wouldn't know it was there.

Is this a new threat that the navy was learning to deal with?

Yes, oh yes. With the

19:30 U-boat menace on the convoy.

How many of you would stand around the attack table learning at one time?

We were learning operating at that stage,

20:00 but there'd be probably three or four officers who would be responsible for the overall operation of ASDIC where they would more or less control any attack, whereas the operators all they did was operate the gear. If they found something then the officers would

20:30 come in and help and give you directions if they thought that they understood it a little better than you, understood the operating of the ship better than you under the circumstances.

How hard was this to learn for you?

It

21:00 wasn't a difficult job. They taught you the various components in the set and how to repair some of it such as, in those days the valves were the old radio valves,

21:30 you had to be able to replace them.

How do you replace them?

Pull one out and put another one in. You had to have a good idea on which valve, but they were fairly reliable.

- 22:00 **Would you break them down completely and then put them back together?**
- No. That was mainly done if the ship was in for a refit or anything like that. In conjunction with this they had graphs for the machines which put all your transmissions on graph paper; this is where
- 22:30 the officers would come in. It would measure or show you the exact yardage that the object was away from you. It would also indicate whether it was moving left, or right so you had a visual record of the transmissions.
- 23:00 **Would you be listening to recordings of the noises through the headsets in training?**
- No, only when you were doing an actual attack. In reality when you were on a ship your watch was four hours, you'd be four hours on the set.
- When your time was off would you hear noises?**
- 23:30 I think a lot of people did. Heard funny noises in their head I think in those early days there were a lot of people who... I suppose we'd call it stress today, but some of them had to leave the profession because they couldn't stand it.
- A bit like not being able to turn something off?**
- Oh no, I think
- 24:00 just nervousness.
- After this training what happened?**
- The contingent that I was training with, that consisted of 16 people, when we completed that training we were sent to England, they were going to allocate us mainly to
- 24:30 destroyers that were being built in England for the Australian Navy, but they weren't ready. Ships like the Nizam, Napier, they were all N-class destroyers, when we got there they weren't ready so they tended to split
- 25:00 us up and sent individuals off to other ships as replacements.
- Tell us about that trip? You mentioned briefly that you went on the Oranje. What was that journey like?**
- It was a bit of a ball as far as I was concerned. I think as far as we were all concerned. The ship was just coming
- 25:30 off being operated as a cruise liner and she was going to England to be converted to a troop carrier. When we travelled on her she still had all the first class, second class cabins and dining rooms and the whole box and dice.
- 26:00 We felt a bit honoured, whilst we slept in hammocks, we had hammocks, we ate in the dining room and played shuffle board on the upper deck, just as if we were passengers. They had cabin crews, that sort of thing, on and it was quite an experience.
- What was the feeling among the men on board?**
- 26:30 I think everyone was happy that we were going to overseas, we were more or less coming out as it were, we'd be allocated to ships and we could get some identity. The Oranje, that was a long trip over.
- Tell us about some of the places you went on the way?**
- 27:00 This is one of the things we didn't do too much of; we actually went from Sydney to Halifax in Nova Scotia and didn't get ashore once.
- Which direction did you go?**
- We left Sydney, we went through the straits at New Zealand, between the North and South
- 27:30 went on what they call the Southern Circle route which brought us, that was fairly well down south, brought us up the Galapagos Islands, we went through the Panama Canal and then from Panama Canal up through the Caribbean, North Atlantic to Halifax in Nova Scotia.
- 28:00 **Even though you didn't get off did you see some sights on the way?**
- The only sights we saw were flying fish; I think the brightest sights were the people that operated the little trains that pulled the vessel through the locks on the Panama Canal. Most of these
- 28:30 were dark Americans and they were real characters; they pull you through the lock with little trains on the side of the lock.
- How were they characters?**

You know, in their attitude towards each other, they were always full of fun.

29:00 They all carried colourful umbrellas because it rained every five minutes. They generally were a different type of person than we'd been used to.

Was this your first overseas?

Yes.

What was it like for a young man leaving his home?

It was a bit funny the first night we sailed, but I think we all helped each other; we were all in the same

29:30 boat, in the same circumstances. Everyone coped with it rather good.

Were you seasick at all?

No I was never seasick, in all my jaunts in the navy I was never seasick.

What was the food like on board?

On the Oranje was good. That was virtually peace time food.

30:00 Probably we were getting second class stuff, but it was quite good.

Did it feel like you were going to war?

No we felt like we were doing a cruise. No, we didn't know what war was about.

You arrived at Nova Scotia. Did you get off here?

30:30 Yes. We were allowed to go ashore there. We were only there for a couple of days. That was a port, the home port for all the escort vessels that were doing the convoys across the Atlantic. So it was a navy port, you weren't anybody there you were just another

31:00 sailor. I think our main experience there was that most of us met up with Canadians and wound up at a place called Citadel Hill which was a club where you could have a drink, probably the first drink a lot of us had ever had.

What about yourself?

Yes.

What did that feel like?

31:30 I think a bottle of beer got us going a bit. We went looking for girlfriends, but there weren't too many of them about.

What were the Canadians like?

Our first impression was that they thought that we were English sailors, which they call "Limeys".

32:00 **Why Limeys?**

I think that originates from Liverpool where a lot of Liverpudlians are called "Limeys" they weren't real, they were more like Australians than the English naval people.

What was the scene like at Nova Scotia. You mentioned it was a big naval base, but what did it look like at that time?

32:30 I don't have any impressions of that, but dockyards and wharves.

Was it full of boats?

Yes, oh yes, it was an assembly point for the cargo ships that were going to get into convoy and travel across to England.

What news were you hearing at this stage about the war?

The sinking of these ships.

33:00 We started to get into it there of course because in each convoy there were many ships sunk by submarine.

Did this worry you?

I think it started to worry us, yes. Oh yes you wonder what you're getting into. On the other hand we felt we had to the equipment and we were just as good as what the enemy were.

33:30 **So take us through your journey from there to Scotland?**

That was just plain cold and rough would sum all that up. The convoy we went on went up near Greenland, which was to try and dodge the submarine.

34:00 The living conditions on the Oranje were slightly lowered because we had more personnel then, they loaded other people, Canadian people on board so we started to get back to the nitty gritty.

Were you sleeping at this stage?

Still in hammocks.

How was that?

34:30 In our initial training we were issued with a hammock it was part of your kit.

I mean how was it in these changed cold conditions?

It didn't worry you because the hammocks were very cosy. Things started to get cold in the day of course, the Atlantic

35:00 can be an inhospitable environment.

Were you seeing icebergs?

No we didn't see any icebergs at that stage, they were a bit further north but they were about.

Tell us about arriving in Scotland?

We berthed at Greenock.

35:30 Sent to the ASDIC Training School for the Royal Navy which was at, not far away, Dunoon. Our contingent was sent there en masse and that was our living quarters, we did a

36:00 bit more training there.

Were you given any leave?

Not at that stage. A little later, yes, we got some leave.

What were your first impressions of Scotland?

I didn't mind Scotland at all. Again we didn't see much for a while. I wasn't keen on the weather

36:30 although Glen Innes was pretty cold. You could still get this cold wet weather which didn't go down too well in those days. You soon got used to that.

What was going on at this training school?

It was similar to what the training

37:00 school in Sydney was. It was on a bigger scale but similar.

Were you with other Australians?

Our contingent that went over we were all together there for a little while, then they, as vacancies on ships came up or they wanted an operator

37:30 here and there, they started to break us up and send us out.

What about the equipment in the training school was it the same, what was different?

All the same.

Including the attack table?

Yes, all that was the same. We didn't get too much of it at Dunoon, but we were sort of odd personnel

38:00 we were, they didn't have anywhere to send us so we did a fair amount of work with the PT [physical training] instructor and this sort of thing; generally being occupied and kept fit.

What kind of physical training would you do?

38:30 Running. Boxing. Quite a bit of that physical stuff.

00:36 **So what were the quarters like where you were housed?**

I don't remember a great deal about them funnily enough. I do remember that the first evening, I hopped in the shower and I put my gold watch on the basin

01:00 and when I got out of the shower it was gone. Apart from that I think we were still in our hammocks, but obviously we had our proper messes and everything like that.

Can you take me through what a typical day would have been like there? What did you do?

01:30 Well, if we weren't training on the ASDIC sets, as I say we were utilised as...just to keep us busy and active we spent a lot of time in physical training with the physical training instructor. He used to like taking Australians ashore with the Military Police, or Naval Police patrol.

02:00 And because he thought that we were probably a little more athletic than some of the English sailors, he liked us a bit better. One day we had...he challenged our contingent which was still 16 people to a boxing match. He was a Mediterranean

02:30 boxing champion of the fleet. The Mediterranean Fleet Boxing Champion. He said, "I'll have a round each with you." So we got to number 6 and that was it. He'd had enough. So I think he thought we were all pretty good blokes. From then on in, the people were split up. Some went

03:00 to English destroyers, escort vessels because they only had a limited number because if one chap...if they wanted a relief on a ship, then one of ours would go and fill that vacancy.

You were saying before that this was new technology in a way, how many ships were fitted with this

03:30 **ASDIC?**

I couldn't possibly answer that, I don't know. But it was something that was coming in all the time. For instance some of the American destroyers that were transferred to the Royal Navy under the lend/lease scheme were fitted with ASDIC sets but they still did escort duty.

04:00 My role from the outset was to...I went to a section that handled a lot of the light craft, coastal command craft and what have you which was called Seahawk, HMS Seahawk. I used to go out on the North Sea trawlers for a week

04:30 and they would do escort duty just to bring convoys in once they were almost into England. And the convoy, the destroyers and that, they wouldn't land, they would turn around and go back to Canada. So they'd only just complete the crossing and

05:00 hand the convoy over to some of these other North Sea fishing boats. And some of them were fitted with ASDIC and some weren't.

What if they weren't fitted?

Well, you just went along as a seaman and did your watch, sea duty watch.

What does a sea duty watch involve?

Different on every ship. It's just like

05:30 going to the office every day. You have a different duty. You work the watches. Most ships run on three watches. The alternate. You have a four hour on and eight hour off and that alternates with the dog watches. They're only two hours on and

06:00 two hours off.

What were these North Sea trawlers like as ships?

Well, as they say, they'd roll in a puddle. They were very lively vessels in the sea. They didn't have a lot of draft so consequently

06:30 they didn't need very much of a sea to make them roll and what have you. To compensate for this they had a big high bow which used to divert the sea coming over the bow.

Were you ever seasick?

No I was never seasick. But

07:00 I've seen plenty of people who were, though. And I've seen people get sick the minute sailing orders go on the notice board and of course they shouldn't be in the navy.

Are there many people in the navy who do get seasick?

Oh yes.

You never got seasick, but I guess watching other guys, was there ever a way they could control it?

Most of it controlled itself. You were sick for a while

07:30 then you dragged yourself out of it. I think a lot of it had to do with your personal health.

And on these North Sea trawlers how many men would go out on them?

They'd have a varied amount. The crews were fairly small on them.

08:00 Most of these ships of course were trawlers in civilian life and they had been taken over by the navy and the original captain of the vessel, he generally was transferred into the navy and he was then captain of the trawler and probably had half a dozen men with him,

08:30 like permanent sailors, and the rest of it would be trainees or what have you, like myself.

And on these trawlers when you were escorting convoys in, did you ever have a submarine scare?

No, we did not. They were virtually at the end of the voyage.

09:00 It was in too close with a lot of traffic, a lot of escort boats. No we didn't.

Would any convoys come in who had been attacked along the way?

Oh yes.

Can you tell me about some of them?

Well, a ship either arrived or it didn't. Mostly when a convoy was attacked it depended on whether it was one or a dozen ships

09:30 were sunk. You couldn't...otherwise the trip people, if they were attacked and a convoy sometimes split up and each ship went their own way. Other times they'd close in a bit and keep together.

With so many ships

10:00 **being sunk, what was the level of tension like on any of these convoys?**

I think people were very conscious of it and as a result of this everybody was at top efficiency. Look outs, gun crews, and in the case of ASDIC, this was run all the time.

10:30 **What hours on and off would you work on the ASDIC?**

Well, you worked normal ship hours, which was four hours on and eight hours off. Some of the ASDIC operators couldn't work four hours. It was too much for them. In that instance you would have a compensating number of ASDIC operators.

11:00 Instead of say having three, you might have five.

What was your boundary of concentration?

Well, I wasn't on them long enough at that point to form much of an opinion. From my recollection

11:30 the trouble out at Singapore with the Japanese was becoming prevalent and I wanted to get back to Australia if I could, so I got myself eventually onto a boat which we thought was going to Singapore. I was an ASDIC operator on that, but things turned out a little different.

12:00 **You mentioned that some men couldn't handle four hours on the ASDIC. Could you?**

Yes. What I had experienced, yes I was able to do that.

So on these North Sea trawlers, what was the learning curve like? Were these some of the first ships you were on where you were actually using the ASDIC?

12:30 Yes. Well, I think you were more concerned with the rough weather and the general sea conditions than anything else. I mean the ASDIC, you sat on a chair and you turned a steering wheel and that was your shift. If you could stand that for four hours then you had a good shift.

13:00 **And did you have much leave or downtime when you were in Scotland?**

No. I think the first lot of leave, we had a few days and the main thing was to try and get to London and have a look at London.

13:30 **Did you get to London?**

Yes I did.

What was London like?

Just a bit awe inspiring and of course in between all that there was a war on there with all the bombs and aircraft attacks and what have you.

Did you witness any bombing?

Oh, not only witnessed, I was part of it.

Can you tell me about what happened?

Well, I think

14:00 that's something you'd never forget. You're in an area and an air raid siren goes and if you're in the bombed area then everything around you is just destroyed. The fires start. The British people just went about their business. They tried to help victims

14:30 and it's a dreadful scene.

Where were you during one of these bombing raids?

Well, wherever you went in London...and not only in London — they were all along the east coast of England and of course any naval dockyard, they would try and bomb that.

And what bombing raids were you involved in when you were in London?

I don't know if I quite follow that one.

15:00 If you were at the Australia House or privately, if you were living privately then the raid might be in the middle of the night and it might be in the middle of the day. But you just performed according to what the circumstances were.

15:30 **What sort of warning would there be before a raid?**

You generally got an air raid warning and for many years after the war that used to really upset me. It's a terrible wail of a siren and the minute that went...am I going to cop it or is it somewhere else.

16:00 And of course if you could hear the siren then it was fairly close to you. We're talking about aeroplane bombing, but later on there were V1 Doodle Bugs [German flying bombs] and rockets. The rockets you got no indication at all [whereas the V1's made a whistling sound]. They just landed.

Was this your first up close and personal experience

16:30 **with the war?**

Yes.

What was that experience like for you?

I think you get a bit frightened. You don't quite know what's going to happen, but once things start to happen you either hide your head or you try and help out. There were many, many civilians of course who took the brunt of this and if you could help them, you did.

17:00 Spread everywhere funnily enough were buckets of water with stirrup pumps, and if they dropped incendiaries with the bomb, you grabbed one of these and pumped a bucket of water on the fire. It seemed a bit ridiculous, but that saved a lot of people.

17:30 **What sort of things did you do in London on leave?**

You saw what you could, but a lot of the...it wasn't touristy of course and most of that sort of thing was either boarded up so

18:00 they weren't damaged. Obviously you wanted to see Buckingham Palace or Waterloo Bridge or something like this. I think as navy we used to head first to Australia House on the Strand and see if there were any mail or any parcels from home.

18:30 Just in case some had arrived and they hadn't sent them out.

What else was at Australia House?

I think that covered everybody. Every Australian who was over there. If you had any queries or anything like that you could go and talk to people there. They kept your records and

19:00 everything.

Was there any accommodation available there?

Not to my knowledge but they would...if you had a couple of days and you were at a lost end then they had people on their registers who were quite willing to accept an Australian for a couple of days leave.

Did you ever?

19:30 Yes I took advantage of that. One place that I was sent to was on Lake Windermere which was a magnificent couple of day's holiday for me.

Where's Lake Windermere?

I'd say central west of England.

And tell me about the family that you stayed with?

They were elderly. They were

20:00 too old to be in the war or be in the forces. But they had a magnificent property and they were obviously very rich people. You were at your own...you could do what you wanted to do, but again they were there if you needed any help. Whilst I was there they were

20:30 talking about rabbit shooting which is what we used to do here in Australia, or I used to do before I joined the navy. We used to fire pee rifles or 22 calibre rifles. And I said, "Yes, I'd like to go rabbit shooting", so they gave me a shot gun. That didn't seem right to me but

21:00 anyway. It was all enjoyable.

Did you get any rabbits?

Yes, that wasn't any trouble. They weren't prolific like they were in Australia.

And did you keep in contact with this family at all?

No I didn't. No I couldn't...today I couldn't even tell you their names. That's a bit of a slur on me.

And I guess

21:30 **the things you saw in Scotland or in London and around England...what were the effects - aside from the bombing that the war was having on England?**

I think food; that was the main thing. Everything was rationed. People...it's hard to understand just how harsh the rationing was.

22:00 Meat, butter, sugar, those base things were very difficult to come by. They were purchased with coupons of course. You were allocated with so many coupons and whether you spent that on butter or sugar...

22:30 **Were you given coupons?**

Yes. If we went on leave we were. And we could take them along and supplement anybody's rations.

Was this appreciated?

Yes, very much so.

Towards the end of your time in Scotland

23:00 **where were you told you'd be heading to next?**

Well, I was sent to this base which handled coastal craft. These were motor torpedo boats, motor gun boats which were operating in the channel. They weren't a big threat in those

23:30 days. The depot I was in allocated me to what they called a Fairmile, which is a 120 foot length vessel and is in affect a motor boat. They were based ...the base for that was at St Christopher which

24:00 was up at Fort William on the west coast of Scotland. So while we were waiting to be distributed around, I was distributed to Coastal Command. The boat I was to join wasn't built, it wasn't finished. It was being built at a place

24:30 called Brightlingsea, which is at the mouth of the Thames River on the northern side. So I joined her there. Again we were billeted at a private house which the navy had actually taken over. So it wasn't private really. It was a naval place.

25:00 **When you say we, who were you with?**

Well, the crew. The crew was assembled there. I was one ASDIC operator. There were two gunners, a signaller, a radio operator. We were all sent to this one area to join the new ship.

Where had you all come from?

Oh, all over the place.

What nationalities?

Well, everybody else was English. I was the only Australian on that one.

25:30 **Did you get on with the English?**

Oh yes, no problem at all.

Was there any good natured sort of ...

Plenty of banter, yes.

What sort of banter?

Oh I don't know. There was Aussie B's and Limeys and Pommy so and so's. That's all good natured. Anyway that crew formed up at Brightlingsea,

26:00 including the officers.

What was this crew like?

Well, a mixed bag. Our motor mechanic who was a square rigged guy; he was a motor mechanic in civilian life. His stoker who used to help him was only my age. Only

26:30 about sort of out of school. So were most of the others. They were either civilians who had recently been working and had joined the Royal Navy, or they were conscripted.

You essentially mentioned the Royal Navy. Were you part of the Royal Navy?

I still belonged to

27:00 the Australian Navy, attached to the Royal Navy, paid Australian rates. So there was no difference really.

Was it a strange feeling of not quite being...

No it didn't worry me. I quite enjoyed it actually.

And as a crew how did you get along

27:30 **together?**

Well, it was like commissioning a new ship. Everything was new. Everything had to be worked up to its correct level. I think everybody on board was eager to do that. I was the only ASDIC operator so that was completely in my charge. I had to make

28:00 sure that any components and things like that were ordered for the ship. It was my responsibility.

With you being the only operator, you mentioned that you had worked four hours on and eight hours off...

Well, you didn't do that on coastal patrol. It was a different navy altogether. With our boat we weren't out on the high seas

28:30 like a normal boat going from England to Canada. We were only like going from England to Ireland and unless there was some indication that a submarine was about, you didn't even switch the ASDIC on.

What indication would you get that there was a submarine about?

Oh, personal sightings or

29:00 radio contact. I mean, perhaps an air force plane had sighted a submarine on the surface in the immediate area and then obviously they would send boats like ours out which were capable of ten minutes sailing time. We were on say ten minutes notice. After a warning

29:30 you were gone. We threw the ropes off, pressed the starter motor and gone.

What sort of preparations do you have to have in place for a ten minute starting time?

Your crew's on board ready to go to action stations. In other words, if you were a ten minute duty boat, you weren't allowed leave. You were there on duty

30:00 relaxed, but if you got a call then it was a case of blow the hooter and you had everybody ready to go in minutes.

Being based in Essex while the ship was being built, would you ever hear on the radio or anything, any

30:30 **German propaganda?**

Oh yes.

What would you hear?

Well, what was her name, Rose...she used to broadcast. Nobody took much notice of that though. We

didn't have private radios ourselves. They were a bit of a novelty, portable radios.

31:00 So all we heard was the official news which didn't worry a sailor very much anyway.

Why not?

I think we were looking to have a good time sort of thing yourself, enjoy yourself while you could.

31:30 **While the ship was being built, how much time did you spend around the ship in familiarisation?**

Oh yes. It was in a small dockyard obviously. A boat of that size doesn't need a lot of room. We watch it being finished and then we started to load equipment and get equipment on board.

Can you tell me what she was like as a ship?

32:00 Well, from my point of view nowadays, it was terrific. I really enjoyed my time on board there. As I said...we weren't in a serious navy. It was a terrific sort of ...a more friendly atmosphere.

32:30 Not a lot of...discipline was there but it was self inflicted. I think a bit like submarine life. That's very much so. It was something new. We understood that we weren't going to be at sea for weeks and weeks.

33:00 We went out for the day or two days and then back into port. So it was a much easier life.

How big was the crew?

Our particular boat had sixteen which included three officers, a coxswain and twelve ratings,

33:30 as we would call them.

And what were your relationships with the officers given that it was slightly relaxed?

Good. We turned out to be the senior boat, out of a complement of...there were eight boats in the flotilla, and we had the senior officer.

34:00 So we became flotilla leader. So we had one officer more than the other boats. Generally they had two officers and as flotilla leader we had three.

I've heard about the hierarchy in the British forces, what was your experience with this. How well did the officers treat you?

34:30 Very well.

Did you observe any class differentiation?

Very little. You occasionally struck one or two there but I guess that's prevalent anywhere. No, our Commanding Officer who was the flotilla

35:00 leader, he was a pretty strict guy, because of his position no doubt. Being ratings we didn't come in contact with the officers very much. That's done...the officer gives the order to the coxswain and he's the go-between between the officers and the ratings.

35:30 **I guess on a ship where there's only sixteen, is that relaxed at all. Is there any shared socialising or anything?**

Oh yes. If there was three of you out of the twelve, you didn't fraternise with the officers obviously.

Even though it was such a small...

Well, yes. Normally...

36:00 there's a distinction there. No fraternisation as such. They didn't encourage that at all. So you were with your buddies that you slept with in the forward mess.

You've mentioned the flotilla. Can you tell me about the set up of it, how did it work as a unit?

36:30 Well, there were eight units in our flotilla. We eventually wound up with only six because two of them weren't ready when we assembled to go out to Singapore. But if you had a specific job...for instance two craft might go out together and

37:00 would operate as a unit together, but each captain of those craft were responsible...but you had a senior and a junior. And this is very prevalent in the navy. If you join a unit, somebody says to you, "What's your seniority?" So if you had two lieutenants,

37:30 and one had been made a lieutenant a month ahead of the other one, then the one who was the older of the two in commission was the commanding officer if anything happened. He was the responsible officer.

And what was the relationship like between the whole flotilla? How did you get on with the other crews?

Well, we didn't do that until we got out into the Mediterranean.

38:00 It was quite a rigmarole before we got there. As I mentioned earlier, St Christopher up at Fort William was the base and when it was known that we were going originally to Singapore, although the boat was just new, it wasn't fitted with long range petrol tanks

38:30 that were needed to go from England to Singapore.

Why?

Well, there was no room and there was no need for it. These vessels carried petrol engines and our petrol tanks below decks

39:00 carried 5000 gallons, and then we were fitted with another 5 tanks up on the upper deck to augment so we could go say from England to Gibraltar without refuelling. So to fit those petrol tanks, we then had to get rid of

39:30 depth charge throwers and a 6 pounder gun etc, so we could fit the tanks on the upper deck, which took up a lot of deck space, and that made it a lot harder to walk around the craft.

Tape 4

00:36 **You mentioned with all this fuel on board, did this make the ship dangerous?**

Very much so, yes. They were self sealing tanks but it was high octane petrol, 98 octane stuff, and

01:00 yes, a trace of bullets or what have you would have been quite dangerous.

What could happen if you were hit?

Well, it could burst into flames. We had one instance when we were in Operation Torch when we were under shell fire. One of our seaman

01:30 decided he was safer down behind one of these until somebody yelled out, "Look what you're behind, Jock." And of course they realised a shell or something would be quite dangerous. Any of these coastal supply boats that operated against U-Boats and that

02:00 in the channel. Invariably there were a lot of burn ups.

Was there anything that protected the tanks?

No, no. Oh no. It was a type of rubberised tank, self sealing, which was supposed to...if an ordinary bullet hit it, it would tend to close so you wouldn't gush petrol out.

02:30 Obviously it would still seep out so it was a big threat. Tracer bullets of course could ignite.

Tell us what happened when the boat was ready. What happened?

What, at Brightlingsea?

Well, you said it needed to be completed.

Well, on completion we then

03:00 proceeded to Tilbury Dock to have depth charges fitted and we then made our way up the east coast to Scotland where we entered the Caledonian Canal and went right through to the north of Scotland to Fort William where we were going to have

03:30 the long range tanks fitted, and to form the flotilla up.

Did you have a name for the ship at this stage?

No, we were only a number. Our number was HMML 469 and we were part of the 29th ML Flotilla.

04:00 No, those boats didn't have names. They just carried numbers.

What about a nick name?

No, didn't come across one.

Was it a he or a she?

All boats are she's.

Why's that?

I don't know if I can answer that.

04:30 **And so Fort William...you had to go through Loch Ness?**

Yes, we went through Lock Ness. We worked out own way into all the Lochs through Lock Ness at different water levels and what have you. A lovely experience. Truly a memorable one as far as I was concerned.

Why's that?

Oh just the beautiful country and cruising

05:00 through with no war, no nothing. You didn't have to worry about anything. It was fairly free from any of the bombing raids or anything. I think very rarely they'd get a reconnaissance plane over but they weren't a threat.

What was the feeling like as such, seeing the bombing raids in London and then this, Loch Ness...kind of stepping in and

05:30 **out of war?**

Oh definitely. You know London was a place you would really have to experience. If I said to you that the underground stations every night, all the children and their mothers who were working in the war factories

06:00 they would all carry their mattresses and what have you down into the air raid shelters just in case there were air raids. They did that every night. And you'd be stepping over bodies and what have you. People were so good and so cooperative.

So what was the feeling like going from this to almost idyllic

06:30 **conditions?**

Well, I'd know what I'd pick.

Did it ever seem strange?

Well, you weren't switching regularly. You might go 6 months before you got a bit of leave, a couple of days leave. Of course, if you could get to Glasgow or get to London, the thing then was to

07:00 live it up. The air raids, if you could pass them up as an air raid over that way, it didn't worry you that much.

When you were going through Loch Ness did anyone talk about the old legend of the Loch Ness Monster?

Oh yes. We had look outs up there to see if we could see it. But obviously it was still in the pub.

07:30 **Was there anyone who was telling stories that they could see it?**

I've never met anyone who's actually seen it, but the legends up that way are quite strong and everybody knows someone who's seen it, especially if they live in the area.

So tell us about forming the flotilla?

08:00 We had to undergo this refit. Just in passing, I nearly lost my life at Fort William. We took our little dinghies...two other chaps and myself. We rode onto a sand bank to gather some cockles and muscles, and the tide rises pretty quick up there.

08:30 And we didn't use our knots that we'd learned in training to tie it up. So the next thing we know the dinghy's floating away and being the only swimmer amongst the three of us, I got the job of swimming after it. But the water was so cold that I just blacked out and went. On our boat, the lookout who was

09:00 on duty saw it and called for help and they fished me out of the water with a boat hook and poured a bit of brandy down my throat and I survived. But another minute or so I was gone.

How long were you down there?

I don't really know. I blacked out, so I had no idea of time.

09:30 In the water there...Fort William is at the base of Ben Nevis which is one of the highest mountains in Britain and of course the water is icy cold. I had not experienced that before. It was a lovely day but the water was so cold that...

10:00 and this is what happened to airmen and that. In the North Sea or what have you, you don't last very long.

Did they tell you about what happened to you?

Oh yes.

Did anyone have to give you resuscitation?

Only the brandy as far as I know. I'm not sure what happened. No, resuscitation wasn't a word that was known very

10:30 much in those days. I probably got abused for putting other people at risk. We never did get the feed of muscles.

How far away was the boat that rescued you?

Fifty or a hundred yards.

How was your recovery. Were you ill?

11:00 No. I was straight back on duty as soon as I warmed up.

So tell us what happened when you were forming the flotilla after you got refitted?

The boats were all refitted the same. They all had long range tanks fitted, and we then proceeded to... we

11:30 had to go to Falmouth in Southern England to where we were leaving to go to Gibraltar. So from Fort William we went across to Ireland. From Ireland back to Milford Haven in England. Milford Haven around to Falmouth.

Do you have any memories of this journey?

12:00 Only that we were at sea and there was another incident where I broke a front tooth on the journey and they pulled into Milford Haven and got me fixed up there so we were a day extra.

How did you break your tooth?

I didn't have good teeth.

12:30 I had a pivot...they put a pivot into it.

Any impression from Ireland?

We didn't get ashore in Ireland. We went in and had a look at the fuel situation and what have you and back to sea.

13:00 **What did you do once you arrived at ...sorry I've forgotten the name...**

At Falmouth?

Falmouth, yes.

All the other boats who were in our flotilla then joined us, or we all joined up together there ready to sail. There was a merchant ship that was due to sail

13:30 at about the same time. So it carried aircraft supplies which were urgently needed for Malta. So it was apparently decided that we would go with it. It would help us with navigation....a motor launch was pretty small and although the navigation in those days was a lot different to what it is today.

14:00 No satellite stuff in those days. You took a sun sight and worked out your position with your tables.

So tell us about this journey?

It was fairly uneventful apart from the mountainous seas.

14:30 I'm still only a rating as a seaman and we kept watches the same as we normally do. We went onto watches. The seas were probably the biggest I've ever seen before or since. The vessel we were with was a 9000 tonne vessel

15:00 which is a small merchant ship, but when it was down in a trough you couldn't see the top of its mast. So they were fairly big seas.

What was creating the sea to be so big at this time?

I think the Bay of Biscay is always rough or generally rough. They've got seas coming in off the Atlantic

15:30 I mean there are...and I'll probably tell you about them later, but there are smoother seas. They're an experience, they are, but in the main you can always expect a bit of lively sailing.

What were the days like? What was the weather like?

16:00 Well, it improved as we got nearer Gibraltar. In England you've got the winds and rains and what have you and that improves as you get towards the Equator.

But on the journey was the weather strong or was it ...

I'd say it was medium, yes. I've got no recollection of it being

16:30 bad or good.

What about sleeping in this boat?

We had bunks. We returned our hammocks into the naval stores and we then had a bunk each. These bunks folded.

17:00 There were 12 bunks, 6 on either side and there was one bunk above the other. So you really had 3 lower and 3 higher. I had the upper bunk right forward on the starboard side which is where the ASDIC equipment was situated.

17:30 So it was handy for that but when you were at sea, in a bit of a rough sea, the water was just over your head.

Is this where you'd have to operate the ASDIC equipment?

No, I operated that in the bridge. But you had to...on the motor launch, on the Fairmiles the ASDIC sets are

18:00 different things altogether. Instead of having a guy training the ASDIC dome, the dome is fixed and you steered the vessel. A different set up altogether.

Can you describe that for us exactly. So it was a fixed dome...

Well, it had...instead of just a trainable oscillator,

18:30 it had a fixed oscillator training forward and another oscillator that transmitted both sides at once. So the arrangement here was if you picked up an echo you could switch from the bow one to the side one. So

19:00 normally you operated on the side ones which put out the ping on either side and then if you got an echo return you then had to steer the vessel to ascertain on which side it was. And you did that by steering 10 degrees to starboard

19:30 or 10 to port...once you lost...you had to lose the echo and pick it up again by steering the vessel. Then once you knew where it was you switched to the forward looking ping and then re-picked it up with that.

And would you keep steering it round or just the ten degrees?

No you steered it to what you wanted.

20:00 The ASDIC operator sort of took over command of the operation. It was entirely up to you, unless one of the officers interfered...no, not interfered, that's not the right word, interrupted and sort of said, "No, I think we ought to do this or that".

20:30 **Otherwise you were giving orders about steering?**

Yes, you did the steering yourself.

So you did that while you were listening?

Yes. It was a pretty hands on thing once you picked up a contact. But mind you that was few and far between.

21:00 **What about in a situation where you might be trying to avoid a submarine?**

Well, this is where the officers would countermand you.

Had you received a lot of training in steering a ship?

Oh yes. In seamanship, oh yes.

And the officers, what were their quarters like?

21:30 They were right aft. They were quite luxurious, I thought. They had air mattresses. They had good lockers and all this sort of thing. No, they were well appointed I thought.

What about your space. Did you have lockers?

Yes we had a locker. The lower bed folded up

22:00 under the top bed, then you sat around the mess table which was in the middle of all this. Then you sat on top of the locker when you were sitting at the mess table.

And going back to your trip to Gibraltar. Tell us about arriving in Gibraltar.

Well, of course the trip out there was very

22:30 tiring because we had...our commanding officer kept us at different watches where we were working two hours on and two hours off so nobody got any sleep. So after 3 or 4 days we were a bit like zombies. We came into Gibraltar fairly late in the day,

23:00 tied up to a wharf and we were ready to go to sleep but that evening they happened to get an air raid which ...we were right alongside on the wharf where we were tied up to. They had a rocket launcher there which they used to call 'flaming onions'.

23:30 It used to throw a lot of rubbish into the air which would tangle aeroplane propellers and that sort of thing. But the noise was absolutely frightening because we were right under it. We hadn't experienced that before. But later on we had a good look and knew what we were going through.

What did it sound like?

How does a rocket sound when it goes off. Whoosh, whoosh.

24:00 **Did you have time off at all around Gibraltar?**

No, only our ordinary days when we weren't on shift. There was no extended leave or anything like that. Of course, Spain was not in the war, although there were Italians there.

24:30 We were based on the rock and there was nowhere to go.

So tell us, what news of the war were you hearing from Gibraltar?

You'd only get the bulletins each day which they'd put out and that could cover anywhere. It might cover some of your own operations. The Mediterranean was a pretty lively place

25:00 at that stage, as well as the Pacific area.

What were you hearing about the Pacific?

That things weren't going too good at all and as a result of the Fall of Singapore and what have you we were based at Gibraltar rather than proceed on. So instead of coming out to the Pacific we

25:30 were based in the Mediterranean.

How did the men feel about this change?

I think most of them, because they were English sailors, they were quite happy to stay there. With the way the war was proceeding, they felt it couldn't last too much longer. They were closer to home to get out of the navy.

26:00 **What were your feelings?**

Well, I was a bit the other way around. I always felt that if I could get near Australia I could probably wangle some home leave or something like that.

So take us through what you would be doing at Gibraltar now you were based there?

I suppose our vessels were

26:30 general duties sort of stuff. We did all sorts of little bits and pieces. We used to be duty boat to the army radar. If they had any queries or what have you. We'd have a duty boat out every night in the Straits of

27:00 Gibraltar and it would be one of the six. We used to alternate all that around.

What does that involve? What does a duty boat do in the Straits of Gibraltar?

It depended on whether you were called there or not. If the army picked up something on the radar they would call out the duty boat and then direct you to where the radar contact was.

27:30 One of them we went to one day was a mop that had been tossed over board from a ship, and the mop head was down in the water and a couple of feet of the handle was sticking out, and the radar had picked that up. It obviously gave much like a periscope reflection.

28:00 We used to...we did a few things. We ran operatives up into Portugal.

How would that work?

They'd direct someone...I was only a seaman, I wasn't in all the knowledge of all this.

What did you see?

28:30 I didn't have anything to do with the running of the boat. We would pick up a guy in Gibraltar in civilian clothes and take him up and we'd scatter the fishing fleet. We'd have one particular vessel. We'd swap him over and run alongside on the pretext of getting fish off them or something.

29:00 The bloke would surreptitiously transfer to the boat. I guess they were spies or whatever you'd like to call them.

Did they ever talk to you?

No, not very much. We had one guy who showed us some of his little gadgets which included a camera in a tie clip. Talk about miniaturisation today.

29:30 But in that era we used to all wear a clip across the tie to hold it down and this fella's tie clip and a little jewel in it and that was the lens. So they certainly had miniaturisation. He could photograph papers and that sort of thing.

Were there any other impressions of these spies?

No, only

30:00 that they weren't English. They were all from around the area. Probably some of this was necessary because the Spaniards were harbouring Italians and Germans. And we used to...in Spain,

30:30 they had an airfield behind the mountain on Gibraltar, and at one stage they mounted on our vessel a big pyramid, an aluminium pyramid. A thing about 12 feet high. We used to go up the Spanish coast. The army would direct radar onto us

31:00 and we'd spin this pyramid around slowly by hand and that would redirect the radar beam in behind the back of the mountain. They were trialling that sort of thing. Another important job we did there, when the Italian frogmen

31:30 were sinking vessels in Gibraltar harbour. They'd been very successful in Alexandria. They were pretty active around Gibraltar, they had sunk a couple of vessels there, and they were coming from Spain across the harbour and putting limpet mines

32:00 on cargo ships or navy ships that were anchored in the Roads there.

And how did you manage to catch them?

Well, we used to do a couple of things. There was a guy called Buster Crabb, later Commander Crabb. He was the officer-in-charge. He had a couple of chaps helping him who

32:30 used to go out...we'd take them out on our vessel and help them. They'd drag a rope underneath a cargo ship, run it down either side until they came to a dead halt and then if they thought that was a limpet mine they would then put on a

33:00 Davis escape apparatus which was the submarine escape gear...a little oxy set. Dive down and if it was a limpet they'd unscrew it and bring it up for destruction. We were lucky in the point that these limpet mines were attached

33:30 either by magnet or by a little clamp, but they didn't start and prime themselves until the vessel got underway. So the vessel could sail from Gibraltar and then blow up. We used to keep a ...do a watch out for these people at night. We used to drop little charges

34:00 every now and then through the night to try and discourage them. If we dropped one of them near them they could be injured of course. They were coming from an Italian vessel which had sort of got itself in bed with the Spanish authorities.

34:30 And they had decided they'd keep it in port and unbeknown to...well it was suppose to be, they cut a hole in the side of it and they were putting their frogmen out the side of the ship under water. So nobody ever saw them and they would transfer across to...we could see the ship

35:00 that they were operating from but there wasn't anything they could do about it. It was suspected of course.

Was there a temptation to sink it?

It was on neutral territory and of course they couldn't do that.

What's it like dealing with a country that's neutral, in Spain.

Well, they were on a peace time basis.

35:30 A lot of Spaniards came into Gibraltar every day to work, and returned every night. Of course that was a pretty poor country after the Spanish Civil War.

Were there any concerns about the Spanish being informants?

No I think we used them just as much as they used us.

36:00 **Did you go on missions of having to pick up survivors from ships that had been sunk?**

Oh yes. In the Mediterranean. Oh yes, that was one of the purposes of our...we'd have a convoy come through. We'd link up with the convoy and any ships that were torpedoed or bombed and something like that and there were

36:30 men in the water and what have you, we'd pick them up. We'd quite often do that.

Any particular memories of this that stick in your mind?

One I remember was one of the 'Strath' boats. They used to come from Australia, the 'Strath' Liners. It was in convoy and was torpedoed. By the time we looked around

37:00 after the explosion, the vessel had gone. It obviously had blown up, but there were 40 air force people in the water who we picked up. Another convoy, some of the ships, an odd one, a cargo vessel, had ramps

37:30 on the bows which held a Hurricane fighter, and if they ran into a bomber raid, because there were no aircraft carriers and that with the convoy, they would launch the Hurricane and shoot him off. But he had no where to land, so we'd get the job of picking the pilot up after he had parachuted out

38:00 or his petrol ran out or what have you. They would have to just ditch the plane.

How did you bring them on board?

Well, we were only a few feet above the water. We could just grab them out of the water or hop in the water and help them up the side. We had scrambling nets which

38:30 helped.

What was it like for you to rescue someone from the water?

I think it was just part of your duty. Anyone you could help you would help. If they were German air people you still had to help them.

Tape 5

00:36 We picked some up off the 'Strath' boat that was sunk.

And when you picked them up, what would be done with them?

Well, we took them back and delivered them into the right people's hands and they looked after them from there.

What sort of state were they in?

In all sorts of states.

01:00 Of course those that were below deck didn't escape at all. It was only the people who were on the upper deck enjoying the sunshine and didn't go down with the ship but finished up in the water.

And you just didn't pick up allied people from the water?

Oh no. If there were any enemy we'd pick them up.

Were they treated differently?

No.

01:30 **Were they treated differently in terms of the freedoms they were allowed on the ship?**

Yes, they were watched carefully. Bear in mind we were never really far from the bases.

In that respect were there any things on the ship, for instance if an Italian had been brought aboard, that they wouldn't have been able to see?

No, not on the Fairmiles.

02:00 They were straight forward motor boats.

When was the decision made to leave Gibraltar and that area?

At the beginning of Operation Torch which was the invasion of North Africa. We left and picked up

convoys that were coming through from America

02:30 and England, and helped escort them into the invasion regions.

How does a convoy travel?

Well, they travel at the speed of the slowest sheep in formation. They're allocated a certain position by the commodore of the convoy.

03:00 So you might have, in the case of the North African ships, there were hundreds coming through at different periods, but you might have four lines of ten ships in each line. You might have 40 ships in a convoy.

It must look amazing?

Yes it did.

03:30 **And where would your position be?**

We were roaming. If there was an air attack and anyone was sunk then we'd roam over and pick them up because the bigger ships...mind you, these big convoys had lots of escorts. They could have a battle ship; a couple of aircraft carriers; cruisers;

04:00 destroyers; mine sweepers, and they wouldn't jeopardise them by stopping as a sitting target for a submarine or for aircraft. So we weren't big enough to be worried about. So we'd do all those little odd jobs which would save the others for their big escort duties.

04:30 **Would you still be doing the ASDIC work?**

No, very rarely because whenever there were big escorts, they did the ASDIC. We weren't effective as anti submarine vessels because (a) we didn't have enough depth charges ...with the upper deck tanks we had to fit, that cut down on the depth charges, so

05:00 we couldn't lay a proper big pattern of those. We were fitted with anti aircraft guns for the Far East.

And who would man these guns?

The seamen on board. The twelve who were living below deck. I think we had two people who were trained gunners, but

05:30 in the course of everybody's training they learnt a bit about this and a bit about that. My action station was on the bridge with a pair of Lewis guns...anti aircraft Lewis guns. We didn't carry a cook on board so we used to swap and change that around.

06:00 **Were you a good cook?**

I don't think anybody was a good cook. They'd put up with it. If you groaned about it, it was your turn next.

What sort of food would you prepare?

Well, this was a bit of a talking point. Those vessels were on what was called 'canteen messing', which meant we didn't have a cook and were

06:30 issued with supplies. The ship was paid so much per member and that amount of money you could spend wherever you liked and wherever you could. So if you could get into a naval depot you could go ashore and buy up naval stores.

07:00 But if you were in the invasion of North Africa, or anywhere around the coast there, there was no food or very little, so it was difficult to buy anything. I remember once when we attended to a merchant ship which had been torpedoed and was slowly sinking. We took the

07:30 crew off and asked them whether there was any food handy. Yes, there was a bag of potatoes at the top of the gangway. So up we went and got the bag of potatoes. We hadn't tasted potatoes for quite a few months. We had no access to fresh meat. If we got nearer the capital ships such as the

08:00 battle ships or something like that, then we could beg, borrow or steal a bit off them, frozen stuff anyway.

When you say beg, borrow or steal, would you trade for supplies?

No, mostly they would give it to us. We used to do a bit of swapping when we were based around Gibraltar.

08:30 We could get bread and the Spaniards couldn't. So we used to go amongst the Spanish fishing fleet and for a couple of loaves of bread we could get a bucket of fish.

Where would you get the bread from?

That was from the bakeries on Gibraltar. They had a very big passing parade. Something

09:00 like, I've heard a figure of something like 40,000 people mentioned, into Gibraltar and out every day. And everyone of those people would take home half a loaf of bread. So the bakeries were...

And this Operation Torch, can you tell me about what the purpose of it was?

Well, it was bringing

09:30 an invasion force in to come up behind Rommel and start the invasion of Europe. There was one part of the force went in to Casablanca on the west coast of Africa. There was the force we were in that went into Oran, and then there was another one that went

10:00 further towards Algiers. They were the first American troops in, on that conflict. And American ships and British ships cooperated...I actually have a photograph, a little snap shot of an American ship flying both the American and

10:30 Royal Navy flags at the mast head, which is most unusual.

What was to be your ship's role in the operation?

Again we were a little auxiliary that toodles around here and there. After an invasion if a merchant ship came in a convoy and most of the convoy was going to A and

11:00 it was going to B then we would take it on its own as an escort.

And tell me about when the operation began?

Well, they expected a pretty easy entry but there were two sides to the French. There was Vichy French [French who sympathised with their German occupiers] and...

11:30 the invasion where we were at Oran, they thought that would be over in a matter of hours. Just in case they sent in two...what they called 'cutters'. They were small merchant ships which carried commandos and they were going to secure this operation,

12:00 like the guns and that, that were in the shore battery. Anyway it seemed to me, and again I'm not responsible for this, but it seemed to me the effort was a bit weak because the invasion force tried to broadcast their message into the French people at about midnight

12:30 so nobody was awake and things didn't go according to plan. All of a sudden all hell broke loose. The two commando ships were fired on at point blank range. We had shore batteries firing at us. There were submarines out. It was suddenly very chaotic.

13:00 Two of our boats went in with the commando ships. They were going to drop depth charges on the boom so the bigger ships could get in. They had a bit of a torrid time of it. Fortunately the big guns in the harbour couldn't get down low enough to

13:30 do much damage to them. The firing was over their heads which decimated the two commando ships. I think they were the Walney and the Hartley. One of those vessels, they got three people off out of four hundred. There were bits of bodies lying everywhere on them.

14:00 Where was your ship's position?

We were in the main bay laying smoke screen...

How do you lay smoke screen?

We had smoke generators. We carried them especially for the trip. That's like a great big garbage can that you set off

14:30 and it emits very dense smoke.

In what sort of radius?

Depending on the wind of course, but only in a small radius, but in a harbour it's enough to blank out gun sites and that sort of thing. You think it helps, maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. But you try and do your best for your mates.

15:00 What sort of fire were you coming under?

We didn't come under direct fire until the next day when the two shore batteries opened up on us. They were nine inch guns mounted on the cliffs overlooking the harbour. We were...

15:30 I was on the wheel at that particular time and our senior lieutenant was directing and he and I cooperated. He was a New Zealander who was very kind to me. He would spot...the two guns were

synchronised. They couldn't both

16:00 fire together which helped us. We would set on a course...one gun would line you up and fire and we would alter course before the shell arrived and then get back on a course and the other one would do the same thing. So we were actually dodging the shells. By the time they left the guns and arrived at the ship we were 50 or 100 yards off.

16:30 We eventually...our CO who was in charge of those bits and pieces, he called in one of the Royal Navy battle ships, the Rodney, which had 16 inch guns which meant they could fire a lot further at the batteries. And a couple of shots from her silenced the shore batteries. They weren't a

17:00 menace after that.

Why had she not been brought in earlier?

She was protecting convoys and what have you.

You mentioned before that the ships had started broadcasting at about midnight....what were they saying?

17:30 "We've come in peace, please surrender". That type of stuff. It was in French, so that was one of the senior officers, one of the senior British officers. He was doing that and he was later killed.

Take me through the night that you spent...when you were laying the smoke screens. Did you continue to do it

18:00 **at night?**

Yes, once you're at action stations you stay there. It doesn't matter how long. Whether it's all night and the next day.

And what sort of sights were you seeing during the night?

Nothing. It was darkness with search lights and gun fire of course which lit up the sky, the big stuff that the ships had on board, the French ships.

18:30 We patrolled around. We were in radio touch with our other boats. We were generally seeing if there was anything we could do, and we would do it.

And how were you feeling about how the operation was going?

I think you were too busy to worry about that. You did what you were told or what you had to do and look after yourself. If action stations were on you wanted to give as you get.

19:00 I don't think there's any fear of that sort of thing. You seemed to take it in your stride.

And how about the next day when you started getting shelled?

Before we got shelled we were right in the inner harbour.

What did it look like?

It was a tremendous shambles. You can imagine a couple of ships

19:30 close together which had been blown apart. There were troops everywhere, there were sailors everywhere. There was smoke screen. We actually...and again I was on the wheel, we followed a submarine out of that inner port...a French submarine.

Why's that?

Because we were lost to get out. The smoke screen was so thick, and we didn't know the harbour as well as

20:00 we should I suppose.

How did you follow it out?

It was just 20 yards in front of us.

Were you listening to it?

No. No, we weren't there to attack them.

So you could see the submarine?

No, we weren't there. We were trying to win them over to our side.

20:30 So that the troops and what have you who were coming up in the transports could get ashore and start a new front going towards Rommel from the other end of Africa.

How did you follow the submarine out?

Visually.

Was it aware it was being followed?

Oh yes.

They were OK about that?

Yes.

21:00 It was one of those situations. As I said, there were two French; the Vichy French [French who sympathised with their German occupiers] and Free French [French opposed to their German occupiers]. While we were in Oran a classic example of this was, the French owned one of the biggest submarines in the world. It was quite a monster. It had its own aeroplane on board and had a couple

21:30 8 inch guns which were tremendously big. My particular boat, 469, went over to near Toulon in France and gave it...the submarine and its French escort, an escort back to North Africa. The submarine crew turned over to the allied forces

22:00 but the other vessel that was guarding it, pulled a lever on the water cocks and sunk it. They didn't want to change over.

What did all the men on that ship do?

They didn't pull the plug until they knew they were safe, but they then robbed the allies of

22:30 getting that vessel.

And you just had to watch?

Nobody could do anything about it. That wasn't near us. They sunk that down towards Algiers. It was a period of time when things weren't real stable. Nobody knew what the Americans were going to do and they kept

23:00 piling troops in and it just advanced from there.

As you followed the French submarine out of the port, where did head to then?

Out into the bay which was clear and it was a big bay there, and we were in that bay watching back to the port to see what was transpiring. We were the inner harbour to see what we could do to help

23:30 because we knew things hadn't gone right.

And is this when you were shelled...in the bay?

Yes.

What's it like to be shelled?

I don't know. It's the first and only time I've seen it and experienced it. I think when the first one missed, it was all right but we were a bit apprehensive when we saw

24:00 the gun fire and heard the shell whistling.

How far away from you did it land?

About 20 yards.

Into the water?

Yes. As I say we soon worked that out...if you let one fire and then altered course, the shell couldn't alter course but you could, so you got away from it.

24:30 **And then how long did you spend in the bay?**

It was four days before we went in and got settled.

Before you went in to the port?

Yes.

So what was the outcome of the invasion?

They eventually surrendered, if that's the right word. Once it was all explained

25:00 and everybody in the French garrisons knew what was happening, they came across to the Allied side and it was then, go. All the merchant ships came in, the troop ships.

How many ships would there have been in the port?

If I said fifty, that might be right. Some of those were American

25:30 ships stocked with goods for the shops to smooth things over with the locals. Others were American war ships. There were...things started to happen. We actually...on the surrender, we picked up the French naval officer who was

26:00 doing the surrendering, and took him out to the American/British ship, the Lague [?] which was serving as the senior ship in the operation. They're the sort of jobs we did.

What was he like?

I didn't meet him. Again I've got a photograph of him on the tender.

26:30 Being a seaman you didn't know what was going on. You just did what you were told.

And what other sorts of things were you doing in the port?

Until we...after those four days we sort of went in and established a base. We took over a sardine factory and

27:00 it had a bit of a warehouse, and commandeered a couple of boats. Then our flotilla transferred from Gibraltar into there. It was called Bay de Algeciras, the harbour. The Allies then started to use the whole area as a base to start push push.

And what would you do on shore there?

Again the locals were fairly friendly. A lot were Spanish or French. They treated us pretty good. I personally didn't strike any hostility. I got on well with a Spanish family. I used to go to their

28:00 place for a meal every fortnight or once a month.

How did you meet them?

One of the chaps worked on the docks where we were, and again they were looking for goods, sweets, chocolate, food.

Could you help them out with this?

Where we could. A little bit. Nothing very much.

28:30 Those people didn't have soap. They didn't have cheese. These sorts of things just didn't exist. There were quite a lot of Arab people. It was nothing to see an Arab mother with a kiddie strapped to her back down on a rock in the sea water washing the clothes,

29:00 washing the goat skin mat. They went through some pretty hard times.

This Spanish family, what sort of time would you spend with them?

Only an hour or so for a meal. He worked at the dock and I was able to discuss stuff with him in a bit of school boy French.

29:30 I could never learn Spanish. I tried when we were at Gibraltar but I didn't get very far with that.

What other sorts of things would you do, I guess for leisure at this time?

Well, you didn't get much. It was a run ashore, into town, have a drink and back on board.

Can you describe what the town was like, what the architecture looked like?

30:00 Not really. More of an Arab influence. We later on went into Algiers which is a city. I went through the Kasbah there which was a pretty dangerous place. But I think like any other city or town...

30:30 At Oran there was one instance where one of the American army trucks was coming down a hill. They lost the brakes and there were a lot of people looking over a stone wall at what was going on at the docks and the truck went right down through about 40 of them. Just squashed them against the wall.

You mentioned spending time with the Spanish family, what was your interaction with the rest of the people who lived in the town?

Well, you didn't have much to do with them really. If someone spoke to you, you'd try and speak back. Being a different language

31:30 it was hard. The English weren't particularly liked at Oran because they had had a do in with the French there, naval gun wise, previously. There was a big cement wall around the harbour and one time when they...the French and the British were at

32:00 loggerheads [disagreeing], the French ships were behind the wall and the English ships were out at sea. But the English ships could lop a shell over the wall but the French ships couldn't...if they lifted their guns high enough to go over the wall, they couldn't hit the fleet out at sea. So they took a bit of a

beating there, and like all middle eastern countries

32:30 they did harbour a grudge a bit.

How were your crew getting along at this time?

We were still altogether. Yes, enjoying the life and enjoying each other's company as it were. We didn't have any problems crew wise until

33:00 just about our end of stay at Oran. We started to break up the crew a little bit and people went...

Why?

Because we had been together for 3 years or something or a couple of years...and people, as they advanced up the ladder they had to go to other ships.

33:30 Motor launches didn't carry ranking people. We were on the lower end of the scale and if somebody, for instance went from an able seaman to a leading seaman, there mightn't be any opening on the boat for him so he was then transferred to another ship. We'd get a new operator, and

34:00 it was not long after this when we were operating out of North Africa again that I was transferred back to England.

Just before we talk about that, you mentioned you went to Algiers and you went through the Kasbah. Tell me about this?

Well, I don't know why we went. I suppose

34:30 it was the thing to do. Our crew were amongst the first to go into Algiers on the invasion. They were a little wary. The Kasbah's a dreadful place. They lived in sort of dreadful concrete dwellings, rooms.

35:00 They had a goat's skin on the floor and that was it. The people all appeared dirty and it had the reputation of being the home of criminals much like the films depict I think. We went in...about 8 of us I think started off and it finished up only 2 of us. A Scotch mate of mine and

35:30 myself went in a bit further. There were a couple of little girls about 9 or 10 years of age. They used them as decoys. 'Hey Johnny, come on Johnny. You come with me'. We had a belly full of beer I suppose.

36:00 There was an old bearded Arab sitting on a stone wall. He caught my eye and he just went like that. 'Thanks very much.' We turned around and came out quick smart. In other words, don't try and take on the girls or anything like that. Next day one of the British sailors who went in there was killed.

36:30 He had his testicles sewn up in his mouth and chucked over the wall back outside.

By who?

By the people who lived in the Kasbah.

Why did you want to go in if it was so dangerous?

Well, we weren't fully aware of the dangers. We were lucky that we went in first because those inside weren't quite sure of what was happening either.

37:00 **And why do you think this man warned you?**

I think he probably had some feelings for the sailors. Anyway he did and we didn't speak to him other than that. Just a "Thanks very much".

What other sorts of things did you do in Algiers?

37:30 Well, we caught a sniper. There was a big 100 ton crane there and there was a sniper hiding in it. He was popping off people in the dock area every now and again and we eventually woke up to where he was. He was hiding in the block of the crane and he was

38:00 finally silenced.

How?

Shot.

By?

Oh, somebody in the navy that was looking at him.

How were you involved in seeing him?

We were parked right underneath him. We were very close.

Did you see him?

Yes.

What made you look?

We were looking for him.

38:30 People were getting shot who were wandering around in the dock area. Just one single shot. Nobody there, nobody there. But of course you can't...if you're hiding in a big part of the crane you've got to show yourself, and that's why we had lookouts everywhere. Once somebody caught a glimpse of material

39:00 he was gone. He couldn't get out.

How long was he up there for?

A couple of days.

And what was Algiers like as a port compared to Oran?

It was much bigger, but we were seeing it under different conditions. We were there when Darlan was assassinated.

39:30 I remember quite clearly, they flew the flag half mast from the French government building. Over looking Algiers when we went in there was quite a big tower, which was sort of the lookout. If you climbed that you could see all over Algiers.

40:00 The Americans came in and said that's an aircraft decoy so they destroyed it. I don't know why.

How did they destroy it?

Just blew it up.

Did you see it?

Yes.

What was it like?

Just boom and the whole thing fell over.

It might seem like a funny question, but were they allowed to do that?

40:30 They weren't going to take notice from anybody. They were in charge according to them, and that's how we do it.

How about according to the British?

Well, I don't think who ever was in charge of the British section...they probably weren't even part of the discussion on it.

What was their opinion on the Americans?

I had

41:00 reservations on them. I can tell you many funny stories...it's not funny some of them, but stories which give you the impression that they're a different type of people. A different mentality altogether to the British who are more conservative. Just for instance, in part of the invasion

41:30 we tuned in...they used to talk on the radio to one another, whereas the British would keep radio silence. In one of these sessions the guy comes on the radio and says, "Right ho Jo, we're going to send a despatch rider and he's about to leave now, he's on so and so, and away goes the despatch rider and gets down..."

Tape 6

00:37 **You were telling us a story about the despatch...if you could tell us about that again because it was right at the end of the tape?**

Walkie talkies seem to be new to them. They chit chatted backwards and forwards. One example was when

01:00 they came in on...we used to keep radio silence. We didn't broadcast but we could hear. We heard this despatch rider being sent from one area to another. And they gave the area he was going to and the area he was coming from just on the open area. So away he goes,

01:30 gets a couple of mile down the road, bang. And they said, we'll send another one. We'll despatch

another one. So away goes a second one. Boom, same thing. And you wouldn't believe it but they even put a third fellow up. He got to exactly the same spot and bang. It was like a turkey shoot. It took them three despatch riders

02:00 before they realised they had told the enemy when and what they were doing. Another instance we had in Oran was they brought over two American PT boats which were fairly fast boats and fairly similar to our own.

02:30 So they decided to do patrol. They've got all their navigation lights on in a blacked out section. Everybody else operated on a black out. So they've got lights and they've got their wireless playing records to each other. "Would you like to hear so and so." We found that very strange.

03:00 **Would kind of things would they talk about over the radio?**

Anything and everything. Whether it was ice cream or coco cola or the latest record. They weren't CD's in those days of course.

What about women? Would they talk about women back home?

I guess everybody talked

03:30 about women.

What would men talk about?

No different to today I don't think.

What was it like to be without women for so long?

It didn't worry some of us. Some of us had had no experience with women.

04:00 Others wanted to hop off and go to a brothel. No I think that's pretty individual. Anybody and under some circumstances, I have no doubt people change.

Where were the brothels?

North Africa had a few brothels which were government controlled apparently.

04:30 You could go in there for a dance or something like that if you wanted to. If your ambition was a bit more you could select one of the ladies. "You, up stairs." I think that's a pretty crude way of putting it but that's the way it used to go.

05:00 **What were the women like in these brothels?**

I don't really know. I think there were some pretty crook ones and there were also people who were university students operating in them because it was a lucrative market, especially with the Americans.

05:30 **Were there any interesting stories from the brothels that men had to tell?**

I think there would be plenty of interesting stories but I think I'd rather dodge them.

Were any men scared by brothels?

No I don't think so.

06:00 I think the biggest scare was...as Australians, was to keep away from anything of that nature because the disease rate there was extraordinarily high. Whether that was just scare tactics that were given to us.

06:30 **What would the officers or the people in charge think about the men going to brothels?**

They didn't comment at all. That was your own personal time and they never interfered with that. If you got into trouble they'd come into it and they could discipline you. It would depend on whether you were picked up by naval police for a certain action or the local police

07:00 and they complained. I think that was an individual effort. But no, the officers never interfered. If you got into trouble they'd probably say, "Well, a right royal old sod you are."

What were you noticing about the Arabic

07:30 **culture of North Africa?**

Well, very few of them worked. Even down to the kids. They would thief anything they could put their hands on. I actually had a wrist watch taken off my wrist by about an 8 year old girl and I never felt it go. It was

08:00 gone. They would grab your hand and say, 'Hello Johnny.' And boom. They'd move around in little gangs.

Did you feel any resentment towards your presence in these countries?

No not really. I suppose we weren't looking for any.

08:30 I never struck any myself. You tried to cooperate with the locals and see things from their point of view.

So you mentioned that after North Africa you went to England. Tell us about this journey?

We were operating of course by that stage towards Italy.

09:00 I got a recommendation from sea to go to Officers Course, so I had to get back to England to do that, or back to Australia. They chose England. I was given passage back...I think I joined a fleet of landing craft ...infantry landing craft at Gibraltar,

09:30 one of six, and had passage back to Falmouth again, in England.

Were there any events on this journey?

Yes. Going across the Bay of Biscay again, we were attacked by the four engine German Focke-Wulfs which were four engine bombers.

10:00 They'd drop two 250 kilogram bombs at a time. The convoy we were in, the landing craft. There were six in two lines. The bombers came in from forward and travelled aft in that direction which gave them the biggest target.

10:30 We had no guns so we couldn't fire back so they were pretty low. They attacked the first one on the right hand column. The two bombs hit and there was a cloud of smoke and it was gone. Then the second one, they did exactly the same to her. In that instance

11:00 three of the sailors came out of the debris, the smoke, paddling what they call a Carley [life] raft. We picked them up. Then the next attack was on the vessel I was on, but instead of coming fore and aft they came across. They had us dead set in their sights.

11:30 One of the bombs dropped on the port side and the other on the starboard side. Both exploded and kicked our vessel right up and completely clear of the water, but no damage done and no injuries. I would have been within 3 yards of where the bomb fell. I didn't even get concussed.

12:00 So I think we were lucky they landed in the water and it took all the blast, apart from the fact we were blown right up out the water. We then received a message from the senior boat who was in the other column to say, 'We're glad to see your bottom is clean.' He was referring to the ship's bottom of course.

12:30 **So how far up out of the water did you go?**

Well, it was a vessel that was probably kicked two feet out of the water. We're talking a 100 tons.

It's still quite amazing.

Yes it was amazing. Normally you would expect it would have broken a plate or something. The other ones they were gone in two seconds.

13:00 **What's your feelings in this sort of attack. What goes through your mind?**

I don't know. What can you do but pray.

Did you have any religious beliefs?

Nothing strong, no. But I've certainly said a few over the years.

Did you have any rituals or superstitions?

13:30 No I don't think so.

Lucky charms?

No, but later on I had an experience with a tea cup reader, but that was back in England later on.

What was that? What did they say to you?

I was in civilian clothes and I called on some friends at Birmingham

14:00 just out of the blue. And as I walked in the front gate, the mother and daughter were about to walk out the front gate to go to the tea cup reader and invited me along just to accompany them. When we got there the lady doing the readings agreed to do mine, and amongst some of things she

14:30 said, was, 'I can see you operating from a one funnel ship in shallow water and you're going to receive a medal.' There it is. So I must admit since then I've always treated them with a bit more respect.

15:00 **So what were the results of this attack. What were you talking about straight after?**

We continued on our way. The bombers returned to their base because we were then getting within

British Flying Boat range. They could have shot the bombers down because they were more heavily armed than the German bombers. So we were safe from then on past there.

15:30 And that trip across the Bay of Biscay was quite smooth.

What were your feelings for the men who were lost in the attack?

Well, apart from sadness overall, but I didn't actually know any of them. I hadn't had anything to do with any of them. They were part of the invasion

16:00 fleet at Italy on the way back to get prepared for D-Day there. The [allied] invasion of Europe.

So, what could you see of the plane that came over?

Quite easy. You could see the people in them.

16:30 You wouldn't recognise anyone, but you could see the bomb aimer in the front fuselage, and there were others about. We're talking about 2000 feet, not very high.

How fearful were you at this stage?

Fearful? Well, nothing you could do about it. By that stage it didn't worry me too much.

17:00 It was...I had said to myself, trust me...go through all the other business of invasions or what have you, and some guy comes along in an aeroplane and sees you off, there's nothing you can do. You can't run, you can't hide, you've just got to take it.

Is that the general feeling on a navy boat?

17:30 I think so. You've got a job to do and in this case I didn't have a job, I was a passenger. But you know, you wished you had a gun, and anti aircraft gun or something like that, but they would have been much higher in the sky then. They realised we couldn't shoot back.

So tell us about arriving in England for the officers

18:00 **course? And quickly on the officer's training, how did you feel when you heard the news?**

Oh elated. I was absolutely rapped because I never thought in my wildest dreams that I would ever aspire to that.

Why do you think you had been recommended?

I think from the job I did on board. I always tried to do my best.

18:30 I think I was efficient. I could fill in as signaller, I could fill in as radio man. I could fill as gunner. I had quite a...what's the right word? I was versatile

19:00 and I got on well with the officers. I hadn't blotted my copy book [made a mistake which would damage his prospects] any where along the line.

Who do you think recommended you?

I'm sure the New Zealander who was the second officer on board. He later became the skipper [captain]. He was a very nice fellow.

So tell us about arriving in England?

19:30 I arrived in Falmouth. We had a couple of days leave and then transferred to the Officers' Training School which was King Alfred which was situated in Brighton on the south coast.

What as this place like?

20:00 Well, the building was a peace time fun parlour type of place. A resort taken over by the navy. Again we were just billeted and went on the course, just like being in school.

Who were you billeted to, do you remember?

No, we

20:30 were billeted in the building. We ate and slept in there and did some of our course there and some of it at a place called Hove which is further along the southern coast, at a place called Lancing Boys College, which is still a well known English boys college. They had the teachers and the classroom because

21:00 they used to turn out quite a few officers.

What were you learning?

I went through seamanship and what have you again, but at a higher level than what I had done previously. I was fairly ofay with a lot of it because of my application on the 469.

What was new to you?

I think some of the ...

21:30 none of it was new, it was just higher up the education ladder. You never cease to learn.

So what kind of things were you getting new knowledge on?

Well, a lot of it was about liaison with the lower ranks. I was on the other side of the coin now. How to treat people and what

22:00 you could do and the Kings Rules and Regulations of the navy, besides all the navigation and signals and that sort of thing.

How were you being told to treat people?

In a proper English manner.

Which is?

You look after everything and you behave yourself, and be fair and honest with everybody.

22:30 **What about some of the mannerisms and also the rank structure. Were you told ways you should be acting towards men of lower rank?**

Yes I think there was a bit of that going on.

So what does that involve?

Oh I don't know. I can't be specific about it. It was a case of you doing the course and you either passed or you didn't pass.

23:00 If you passed then you were on the way. I think you got more information. And if you didn't pass you were chuffed off never to appear again.

What about skills such as navigation. What kind of skills were you learning at a higher level than what you knew before?

Navigation particularly.

23:30 I think in the main, it was classroom stuff. I haven't got any specific memories of it.

Tell us how you felt when you came through this and what happened?

Well, once you did the passing and

24:00 you were all dressed in your uniform, you started to think you were pretty good. But in effect you weren't. You were still the lowest. Again they start to disperse all these people from the class to different ships or different placements, and according to if you suit what they want, and

24:30 if you didn't know what you wanted or what have you, they would transfer you to somewhere. It might be a big ship or a little ship.

So what did you want?

I didn't know what I wanted. Because I left school early and hadn't had any background education for a job

25:00 I didn't really know what I was going to do because at this stage the European war was starting to turn around and we sort of understood that it wasn't going to be too long before the war would be over. So in my discussions with the senior officer I mentioned this and

25:30 he suggested I might try and get into port clearance which in my imagination meant that a lot of ports around the world were wanting to clear goodness knows what around the place. And perhaps that was a skill I could learn in the navy.

26:00 So the next thing I had a chit to go to Portsmouth.

So just take us through. You thought it was a new skill you could learn. Why did you want to learn this skill of harbour clearance exactly?

Well, I couldn't use any of the others. It didn't matter...again my experience in life and what have you wasn't

26:30 that good. So when someone pops a question at you, you want to answer the right thing, that was all I could think of at that particular time.

Did you think you could use this in civilian life?

Well, that was the idea. Port clearance once the war ended. There would be ports that had been bombed

and goodness knows what,

27:00 ships that had been sunk in them. All of those had to be cleared before they could operate again. So I thought obviously there's some scope in that direction. I knew I was mechanically minded a bit so I thought that might suit me.

Was this a potentially dangerous choice?

I don't think so. I didn't see any danger in it.

27:30 On the other hand I didn't understand it fully either.

What was it...at Portsmouth?

Yes. Sailing orders or whatever you like to call them.

So tell us what you did in Portsmouth?

Well, when I got to Portsmouth, again I went for an interview with a senior officer and

28:00 we were sitting in his office a couple of floors up. He was asking me what I wanted to do and what have you and I went through the story. He said, "You've volunteered and if you would like to look out that window, you'll see what you've just volunteered for." Of course, I had a look out the window and I couldn't see it at first.

28:30 He said, "Have another look." And there was a little midget submarine which was on the surface and he said, "That's what you've just volunteered for. What do you think?" Anyway by this time I knew that midget submarines had carried out operations.

29:00 So I said, "Well, if other people can do it, I'm sure I can. Yes I'll be in it." From then on the training started for them.

So why would you have a first reaction of going oh....?

I think anyone with submarines...and then talk midget subs, you obviously get a reaction. Would you like to go on a submarine?

29:30 You wouldn't worry?

So tell us about the training you had for the midget submarines?

We were eight...myself included and seven other new officers formed the first

30:00 course for officers' oxygen diving people. There had been others who had dived but ours was a specialised course where we went onto these midget submarines as a diver, not as a general hand. Our part

30:30 was not in running the submarine, it was in carrying out diving operations from the sub.

Tell us about learning about diving then?

Well, our first mission was to...in Portsmouth harbour there's an island called Haulsey Island. It had a 30 foot deep torpedo testing range in it.

31:00 We were sent up there with four instructors and we started our practical training. Most of it was practical. Closed circuit oxygen is pretty dangerous below 30 feet, below the first atmosphere, so

31:30 that was why we had the 30 foot lake. It was safe and we used to dress up in diving suits with oxygen sets on and wander around the bottom of this lake carrying out different things to keep us occupied. We trained there very hard. We would remain dived for 3 hours at a time,

32:00 day and night. I suppose the diving suits were big rubberised suits in one complete piece. The head gear was like the old gas mask with round glasses. They had a big slit in the stomach where you had to crawl in and get in there.

32:30 You would get your feet through and down and then your arms through and then the big metal clamp... the thing was folded backwards and forwards, this clamp was put on. You were in there then, you couldn't get out. Anyone with claustrophobia wasn't considered. They didn't last very long.

33:00 These suits were fitted with an oxygen bottle and incidentally the early ones came from German aeroplanes. Their oxygen bottles were better than the English. Your set comprised of a big rubber bag on your chest which had a CO2 [carbon dioxide] absorbent in it.

33:30 So you could unscrew your oxygen bottle, fill your bag. You breathed through your bag and you had a nose clip on it. So you didn't breathe carbon dioxide back into your mask. That wasn't a real pleasant experience because it was very drying on the throat...protosorb powder used to get in your throat and goodness

- 34:00 knows what. But we built up. We went from quarter of an hour up to three hours or more duration until we could do all these things automatically. During the course they altered the diving suit a little bit; in fact they put a face mask on that you could open up and get a breath of fresh air.
- 34:30 **What was the headset like? Describe it for us. You've described the suit, but just more on the head set?**
- Well, these didn't...these were all combined. The whole suit, the head gear was part of the suit. They were made by Siebe-Gorman who were the world's leaders in diving gear.
- 35:00 Hard hat diving gear. You had a valve on top of the head gear which was to let any excess pressure out, because the deeper you went the more pressure you got on your body, and it used to squeeze this suit in very tight...you didn't have a
- 35:30 ...you had plenty of creases but no seams. They were all squeezed out. While we were practicing, while we were learning, some of the boys who were terrors, it was a favourite thing to reach around and grab the pipe into your mouth and you'd get...you couldn't get a breath,
- 36:00 you can imagine how that would make you feel. And when you were just about ready to keel over they'd let it go and....or else you knew who it was. Another thing they used to do was close the valve on top of your helmet, and then open your oxygen bottle and that just flooded your suit, and if you couldn't get to it quick enough the pressure of the
- 36:30 oxygen just put your arms out like that and then you couldn't get at anything. You couldn't bend them. There were some peculiar senses of humour I can tell you.
- These were dangerous jokes?**
- Yes. Very dangerous. They couldn't have cared less.
- How did you deal with pressurising? Did you have to equalise?**
- Yes. Very much so.
- 37:00 I can still work both ears to clear the pressure on them. You do it mechanically. Or with the nose clip. During that 3 hours of diving you wore a nose clip. If you blow in your nose that will sometimes clear your ears, but it's better to use the muscles.
- So how slowly would you go down?**
- Not fast.
- 37:30 Sort of like walking down an incline at that stage. We were only learning diving at this stage. When you were ready we used to walk around the lake with a string tied to us and with a float tied on top and a piece of tin. So attendants could see wherever you were moving
- 38:00 and every now and again they'd give you three on the rope and you'd answer it to say you're okay. While we were there, on one night dive we had a bombing raid on Portsmouth, with bombs landing pretty close. And I can tell you that six divers hit the surface with torches blaring and goodness knows what. It was a bit scary.
- What was going on when you**
- 38:30 **were diving in the bombing raid?**
- We surfaced. But if any had landed in the lake where we were it was small enough to make sure that we were injured. Fortunately it didn't happen.
- How did you know there was a bombing raid?**
- You could hear it. You could hear the bombs exploding.
- What does it sound like under water?**
- Oh the sound travels under water very much so.

Tape 7

- 00:38 **In the break you spoke about the little model aircraft carrier...**
- Oh I wouldn't dare tell you that. That created a lot of problems.
- Can you tell me the story?**
- 01:00 No, I don't really want to. I might implicate the bloke who did it. No, that's a long time ago. But it was one of the latest British aircraft carriers that was being proposed and they had this...I suppose you

would call it a four metre model.

01:30 They had observation points set up in the lake. They were trying to measure the turning circle and what have you of it. You can't just turn a ship like that on sixpence. It takes a lot of miles to do it sometimes. But they could determine that on the model. One of our divers had a little bit of a fiddle with the rudder on it

02:00 and I don't think the scientific reports were too good the first time up.

You were under the water for 3 hours at a time. What was this experience like on the senses?

You were more interested in looking after your own welfare all the time

02:30 so you had to be very observant of what you were doing and making sure that nobody closed your bottle off in the practice runs. This was only in the early days. We progressed. Once that initial training period was over we got into the midget submarine

03:00 era a lot closer. While we were doing this initial training we were able to go to the factory that made our suits. That was Siebe-Gorman in London who were well known diving manufacturers. Of course mostly their suits used to be the old

03:30 hard hat and copper top hard hat. That was a different type of diving altogether too, where they're actually connected to an air supply. But on ours we were operating closed circuit oxygen sets and we used those because they didn't give bubbles. So it didn't betray your position. If you were in an enemy harbour

04:00 there wasn't a row of bubbles or anything like that following you. To offset that though, the deeper you dived on oxygen the more dangerous it became. The oxygen enters your blood stream and you tend to black out, vomit into your mouth piece and black out. During the training

04:30 they used to put us into a chamber where they could increase the pressure equivalent to deeper water, and they'd take you up to the point where you were ready to black out and you had a pretty good idea of what your condition was like.

And what's it like being under water being essentially cut off

05:00 **from the world for 3 hours at a time?**

Well, there was nothing much to do. At that stage we were just purely diving and wandering around and trying to ride an old iron bike and that sort of thing and those sort of stupid things under water to occupy your time.

05:30 But as I say we were training then and everything was new.

Is it a strange experience having only been in your own head for 3 hours to have someone talk to you immediately you get out of the water?

Well, the water is so cold over there; you tend to want to go and get dressed up and get warm again. Up in Scotland

06:00 and those places we could dive for a couple of hours and we had no feeling in your hands for another couple of hours after you had surfaced because your hands were exposed. They weren't covered.

They weren't covered at all?

No.

What did you wear on your feet?

You were in the suit. The suit covered your feet.

06:30 Flippers weren't available in those days. We used to use a rope sole canvas shoe that had lead inner soles in it to help you walk around. It kept the weight down and kept you upright. If you didn't have those you were likely to fall over.

What sort of sights would you see on the

07:00 **bottom of the lake?**

Not much. Night time was the time when you saw most of the fishy creatures. We had water proof torches which we used to shine all around the place to see where you were going. We would get the occasional eel which was in the water. He would come to have a look at your light or have a look at your face.

07:30 **Was it ever a bit creepy being down there at night?**

Oh yes. It was creepy in a way. We were all glad to get out at night time. You can't see anything. It's just like being absolutely blind unless you shone your torch, which we tried not too. It was absolutely black.

08:00 That was part of the training and you had to get used to it. In later times of course we had to cut submarines through nets and that sort of thing, in the dark and purely by feel.

Were there any sort of nicknames that were given to the divers by the other guys?

No not to my knowledge. No.

08:30 **You mentioned that as things went on you would have to cut submarines through nets and things, can you tell me about some of these training exercises they would do?**

Once we had finished the diving course we were sent then up to Scotland where the base for the midget submarines were. That was at a place called Rothesay.

09:00 Opposite Rothesay was a loch, Loch Striven. We had a base, Varbell [HMS Varbell] it was called. So we had one at Rothesay, Varbell one, where the navy had taken over a family home, a lovely big old family home and that was...we used to operate the midgets between those two bases. They chose

09:30 Scotland because it was sparsely populated and the people that were there didn't come and go very much, so security was...whilst it was...we wanted everything secure, it was much easier in that area to keep people from talking.

10:00 No doubt they saw the midgets on the loch and what have you but to our knowledge no one seemed to blab about it.

Tell me about the kind of training that was taking place there?

Well, there we were introduced to the submarine itself. We started of course...we then had to become proficient in operating the midgets

10:30 and we were then allocated to a crew.

Just tell me about the midget submarine? Can you walk me through it, describe it for me?

I couldn't walk you through it because they're not big enough. I'm sorry that sounds corny doesn't it.

11:00 The early ones...again, these were being developed. They were based on some of the operations that the Italians had done out in the Mediterranean. They used what they called 'chariots' where a diver sat on like a log and all he had was his diving suit. The British developed the midget submarine. It was the same as a large submarine

11:30 but on a miniature scale. The early ones we had for training were different to the operational ones. The first operation was the six they sent against the Tirpitz [German ship] to try and do damage to her...of which three got through.

12:00 and they did damage the Tirpitz. The next model was a bit improved on that because they had a fair lot of problems with those.

What sort of problems?

Sea problems. Damaged periscope. Leaking in the battery compartment. Periscope motors. Little things that mounted up

12:30 Don't forget these weren't capable of travelling all that distance themselves. So they were towed by a parent submarine, and the parent submarine may have been on the surface or it may have been submerged. And the midget is sitting out on 600 feet of rope.

13:00 It had to carry a crew to operate it up or down or whatever was necessary so it would tow all right. But tremendous forces on them. Tow ropes broke. A 600 foot tow rope the size they were using would just sink to the bottom if it broke at the parent sub. The midget couldn't get up again. It wasn't buoyant enough.

13:30 **Had they started to remedy these problems by the time you...**

Well, every time there was anything go wrong with them they altered the thing straight away. They went through the manufacturers, the people who made the submarines. If there was a problem with any of them, they didn't muck about with them. They fixed it.

14:00 **So what model were you introduced too?**

Well, there was ...all these were known as X craft and my first introduction, first craft, was X24 which was...the skipper of that was an Australian called Max Sheenan.

14:30 He's still alive, living in Perth. I had no sooner joined him than he went off on an operation. He didn't want the diver so I was left at home and he went and carried out the operation in X24. It, incidentally, is on show at Portsmouth. The next models after that were the

15:00 XE craft. The 'E' standing for 'Eastern' and they were fitted with a bit of air conditioning as opposed to the others. They were slightly different in shape and had a few different fittings.

Tell me about the conditions on the X24?

Well, they were all the same. Let me say that the crews used to change around a bit. If there

15:30 was something to be done and a crew trained on one thing then we'd switch around. For instance, we had a very good engineer on board our boat and they had a submarine...they're made up in parts, three parts. There's the battery compartment, the control room and the engine room.

16:00 On this particular craft in the engine room and control room there was a leak. The only way to fix it was to separate the two halves and hand fit with a file and what have you, so it became water proof. And our engineer did that, but that was a different sub to what we were actually on.

16:30 That was X25. When that was completed, we took it for a deep dive in one of the lochs. A deep dive was 300 feet, and it didn't leak where the leak was, but it did crack one of the observation ports and we got water in.

17:00 So we got out of there pretty quick.

Can you describe how the control room is set up?

Yes it's ...the battery compartment is forward which takes up all that forward room. Then there's the wet and dry compartment where the diver got

17:30 in and out when it was underwater.

How?

Well, you filled it up, opened the hatch and went out.

How did it drain away again?

You drain it back into a tank but you've got to have the hatch closed of course. That was part of my job. The forward part of the control room was for steering so the chap who sat in a

18:00 seat there actually steered the craft and he had control of the main valves for diving. So if you want to dive a submarine you open a valve and the water rushes in and it gets heavy and it goes under. When you want to come up you close the valve and blow all the water out with compressed air. So he did that particular job.

18:30 Immediately near him was the periscope which was about 6 or 8 feet long, extended. Very, very tiny and very thin. Not much thicker than a pencil. Very difficult to see.

I was going to ask that. What kind of clarity to you have through a periscope?

It depends

19:00 on the height. You can't see a great deal. It depends on the height you put the periscope up to and from what depth you're diving the boat at. For instance you could be on the surface and have the periscope extended right up, then when you dived you might be say 6 feet under the water. So the periscope's only up 3 feet you know.

19:30 The next position aft which was near the engine room is the man on the diving planes. He was responsible for up and down, and he could do this by altering the planes or he could do it

20:00 by pumping water forward to aft or aft to forward. He would get a different balance on the boat. He also controlled the electrical power or started the diesel engine from there. So on a submarine you've got Group Up or Group Down, that means you've got a low volume

20:30 of electricity or high. So if you want to go faster, you switch over to Group Up and run that for only a short time obviously.

And then after him?

Well, that's the engine room. There was no room in there for anyone. That carried a small diesel engine.

21:00 The diesel engine was the same they used on the London buses. They were 42 horsepower, I think, from memory. We had the gyro compass in there. We had the motor controls where you switched from diesel to electric and

21:30 that sort of things, and the air conditioner. If anyone had to get in there they had to thread a needle and crawl under hot exhaust pipes and this sort of thing.

What do you mean they had to thread a needle?

You had to be...there wasn't any room. You had to just work your way around, squirm and that sort of

thing to get at any thing.

22:00 **Was it noisy on the sub?**

Not if the diesel wasn't going. But when the diesel was going you had a bit of noise yes.

Where did you sleep?

You're kidding! We didn't sleep. I went from ...when we did our particular job out in the Pacific, I was resting on top of the batteries in the forward battery compartment.

22:30 And I had to put my diving suit on and what have you while I was stretched out lying on top of them. No, there's no room. You couldn't even stand up in one. They had a ...they were about 6 feet in diameter, but of course you had your floor and all the gear around you. All I had to do was shift from the battery compartment

23:00 into the wet and dry which also had the toilet seat in it. So I would sit on the toilet seat, close the valve, start the pump and it would pump the water up out of the tank and completely immersed you in that little...you were then able to open the outside hatch and gain exit from the sub. So as soon as you got

23:30 out you had to close the hatch again so the people inside could drain the water back if they wanted to. But you would leave it full until you went and did the job, whether it was attaching a limpet mine or cutting a cable. Then you would go back, open the hatch, hop in, close the hatch, let the water drain back into the tank,

24:00 and you're back in fresh air again.

What's it like sharing such a small space with so many people?

I think everybody understood that. There was no problem. See, on an operation like that you didn't have duties much other than what your speciality was.

24:30 Mine in the case of diving...I was there from the time we changed over with the passage crew until you get back to the parent submarine, you don't sleep or what have you. You go the 36 or 48 hours or what ever it is. You don't eat or anything like that.

How do you keep on going for all that time?

25:00 I don't know. I guess you just keep going. You get used to it. This is where your training comes in to it of course.

Just talking a little bit more about training. You said we were going to talk about some of the different exercises that you would do at the midget sub training when you had to cut nets?

Yes.

Can you tell me about some of these training manoeuvres that you had to do?

Well,

25:30 the main ones of course was cutting a submarine through the nets, through anti submarine nets.

I don't really know what that is?

No, well mostly if they had...and the Tirpitz had these all around it. They suspend...if it's vulnerable to submarine or torpedo attack they drop a big net

26:00 right around the ship so a big submarine can't go through it. Or they put down what they call an anti torpedo net where a torpedo can't get through the net. So that's some protection for a ship that's at anchor because it can't just get up and shift or what have you. So with the midgets

26:30 it's possible to run it into net, keep the buoyancy and everything intact, a diver gets out with a hydraulic cutting and cuts a hole in the net so a submarine can pass through it.

What's the net made out of?

Like steel hawsers.

27:00 They don't use them as much today, I don't think, as they did in those days. The Tirpitz was surrounded by nets in case torpedoes were dropped by aircraft and this sort of thing.

Were they only used when the ship was at anchor?

Yes. That's the only time you can rig them.

What do you mean rig them?

Well, they've got a line of buoys that take the weight and it's just like a great big tennis court net

27:30 just dropped down around the ship.

Does it go around it or is there an underneath bit?

No just around. It doesn't go under the ship. It just drops straight down and forms a barrier.

And it goes down to the bottom of the sea bed?

If it's shallow enough, yes. That's the general idea.

Can something hop underneath it?

Well, our boats against the Tirpitz did that. They

28:00 didn't have divers on board to cut their way through, although the people on board were probably capable of it, but they wouldn't have been operational in the craft.

So in the training what sort of tasks would they give you to practice this?

We had actual nets all rigged for us and we used to go out regularly on that.

28:30 One instance. We were requested to put on a demonstration for one of the admirals. He was up above the net in a boat and he was dressed in a diving suit. As soon as we went into the net he was going to come down and have a look how we did it.

29:00 But a lot of people were a bit sceptical about it. Anyway we ran into the net. That was the clue that he had to come straight down. By the time he had come down I had cut the submarine through the net and we were off. So the poor fella didn't see anything. He was a bit ...he had reckoned we had gone through a previous cut. But that wasn't right.

Would a ship be aware that a midget sub had run into the net?

29:30 Hopefully not. They would have to be vigilant. The submarines were quite noiseless and they were very light on the touch so they couldn't drag these buoys or anything like that unnecessarily.

Had they been aware that

30:00 **a sub had run into the net was there anything they...**

Well, they would immediately put out their own boats with depth charges and what have you. There was talk of having opposing divers in case a diver got out you could have two opposing side divers battling it out with a knife. That never happened.

30:30 It was always on the cards I guess.

Being in a submarine when it dives, can you feel the incline?

Generally not. They generally just go down parallel. That's the idea of the tanks. If it's a crash dive they will put everything down and you can certainly feel everything then.

31:00 **And when it moves down parallel can you feel the movement?**

No. You don't have the sense of movement. You can be dived at 300 feet and you wouldn't know where you were if you hadn't looked at the gauge or what have you.

Did you ever have a sense of irony that previously you had been listening so hard?

31:30 Well, that's a funny thing. Of all the people...there were three Australians when I was there, and the three of us had gone through the school at Rushcutter and three of us had switched from chasing them to being part of them. That was quite remarkable actually.

32:00 There were two other Australians killed in the Pentland Firth, they were part of a three man crew that was under tow by a big submarine, and the seas washed the skipper off the bridge, and the second officer

32:30 sort of was right on the spot and he turned the parent submarine around to try and pick up his skipper if he could, but in doing that all the tow went off the midget. She surfaced and the big sub rammed it and sunk it and killed all the blokes.

33:00 That was an unfortunate accident.

How vulnerable did you feel on the midget sub?

No, excitement I think. I don't think we felt inadequate or anything like that. They were a real sneaky weapon.

I guess not inadequate but there was such a reliance on the parent submarine. Was it a vulnerable

33:30 **feeling?**

You know again, it's a matter of training crews. You train someone up enough in one thing. We had actually three crews to each submarine. We had an operational crew who actually carried the work out, the result. We had a crew who went in the midget

34:00 when it was being towed whilst the operational crew stayed in the big sub, and we changed over about 100 miles off the target.

How do you change over?

With a rubber dingy or jump. We would come together on the surface depending on the sea conditions and what have you.

And did you say jump?

Yes, it's surprising how far you can jump sometimes.

34:30 **What was the purpose of having this other crew in it while you were...**

Well, they looked after everything and they got tired...otherwise if you towed for 2 or 3 days under those conditions and believe you me it takes a lot of keeping the trim on the midget submarine. You don't just chuck a rope out

35:00 and it gets towed along. You have to maintain the depth. You have to bring it to the surface every now and again to vent air and chuck any debris overboard or whatever you have to do. You have to dive it again. So they were quite an experienced crew. They were all specialists such as engineers or electrical or

35:30 what have you. They were top people. Then we had a third crew who used to augment them and look after the sub while it was in the depot ship.

In the where?

Well, we were attached...if you had a flotilla of say six midgets, we were attached to a depot ship.

36:00 The depot ship slept you and fed you and did everything whilst you did the practicing and the training and so forth.

Was there ever any rivalry between these three crews?

Very much so...well not those three, but a lot of rivalry between midget subs.

How was this expressed?

Oh well. "I want the job, not you." "You can jump in the lake."

36:30 If they could get a job...if someone could get a job in front of someone else, it was all, "I want to be in it".

Was there any sort of hierarchy between the three crews that would work on the same sub?

No. The submarines...submariners are very close people. There isn't a lot between ranks. You've got a

37:00 job to do and you work as a team and everybody else's life could depend on what you do. So it doesn't matter if you're a lowly sailor or an officer or what have you. You each...everybody knew the other bloke's job and you had to be spot on.

37:30 **Was your crew a happy crew?**

Yes. Yes very happy.

Can you tell me about some of the people in your crew?

Well, the skipper, as I say, was an Australian. He spent the first part of his years in the war on

38:00 a corvette crossing the Atlantic, pinging away. He was in charge of the ASDIC set on his little corvette. And they rolled and were pretty rough to ride in.

So his job was the one who sat in the front of the control room and drove it?

Oh no, no. You're talking about back in the midgets, no. He was the periscope man

38:30 or whatever. He could do any job on the submarine. His main job was making sure that everybody else did the right job. So if the fella on the front steering or the bloke on the hydroplanes wasn't up to date, he'd pick on them straight away. He made the decisions, which is pretty true right throughout the navy.

39:00 **What was your relationship like with him?**

No problem. We were all officers in one mess. We had 65 officers on the depot ship. That's nearly everybody in the crew, apart from the technicians, were officers. And I think that was because they wanted that

39:30 camaraderie and no back biting and what have you. The man on the planes he was a Scotchman. A very devout Catholic. I shared a cabin with him on the depot ship. Whenever he went ashore,

40:00 he never went home or go anywhere, he went straight up to the convent and spent his time with them. A very devout fellow he was. A nice guy.

Tape 8

00:37 **All up how long were you training on the midget subs before you went out to seek action?**

Well, I don't think the training ever stopped. I would say 14 months for me.

01:00 It wasn't that we didn't want to go out on action or anything, there just wasn't the targets about that we could actually go and perform on. These submarines carried two side charges each of two tons of RDX explosive. That's quite a big amount. We could

01:30 run in under a ship that was anchored. We could do it when it was underway or anything. We would pick the target that was anchored in port or something. We could go in and put on positive buoyancy and go up underneath the ship's bottom which is almost flat. The EX models had little arms on them that

02:00 could be extended and they would go up like a fly's leg. You could run around the bottom of the ship if you wanted to. They also carried a side cargo of six limpet mines if needed. If you wanted to use them instead of a big charge.

02:30 **So tell us about waiting for operations? What were your circumstances once they had decided you were trained up well enough?**

We were never trained well enough. It was training all the time. With the oxygen divers, those who dived everyday were much fitter and much more secure in the operation.

03:00 We lost two divers because they jumped the gun on a job. They wanted to go on a job and instead of letting the divers do it they undertook the task themselves and lost their lives. That was here in Australia. That was up at Hervey Bay.

You also had a nickname, Acid? What's the story there?

03:30 That goes back to when I first was made an officer and transferred to the submarine training up in Scotland. And the first job of my arrival was to take the parade. Somebody new, give him a go.

04:00 Anyway the parade used to be the whole crew of the midget submarines. They paraded as one group. And of course everybody was proud of their own crew. I've got my crew paraded and they were two short. Anyway about half a minute later, these two fellas who

04:30 were obviously were working in the bowels of the submarine and took a longer time to get on parade, they turned up in old overalls and the necessary white jumper that the submariners wear, and being new to the job I didn't quite know what to say or do. I tossed this over in my mind and thought, "that's not very good

05:00 if I've got two blokes showing up as if they don't care". So I gave them a bit of a dressing down before reporting everything as correct. From then on, after that date, whenever we were doing anything and we got a bit closer, and I got a bit closer to the crews, whenever you would ask them to do anything they'd say,

05:30 "Right ho Cid. You'll be right Cid". Of course I had to grab someone one day and ask, "What's the meaning of this 'Cid'?" And he said, 'Well, do you remember sir, the first day you were up there and you dressed them down?' I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, that's where you got the name. Short for acid."

06:00 **So tell us where you went after Scotland. Did you participate in any of the D-Day ...**

No I didn't personally, but we had two X craft on the D-Day job. One of them was crewed by an Australian,

06:30 Ken Hudspeth. He lived in Tasmania and has subsequently died. He and another English crew one, they used to take the commandos...and this goes back to the midget I saw at Portsmouth. They were leaving Portsmouth and going over to the Normandy beaches and setting up lights

07:00 and taking depth soundings and all this sort of thing for the invasion. They carried a couple of commando type people with them. Quite a dangerous job it was. Then on D-Day they went over...

because the weather was rough and the place was cancelled, they had to sit on the bottom for

07:30 24 hours, but then they put the commandos ashore and these fellows set up and lit the lights to guide the landing craft to the beaches. So they played quite an important part there.

Were you involved in any missions up around this theatre of war at this stage in the mini sub?

In the Pacific?

No, the Atlantic?

08:00 No, no. I only did one mission on midgets and that was in the Pacific.

So tell us...you were in England...tell us about receiving the orders that you were to go to the Pacific?

Well, as D-Day and that

08:30 went ahead and obviously the jobs for the midgets were fewer and fewer, they decided to send them out to the Pacific. They were equipped with refrigeration for the Pacific theatre. So I guess we had to use them. They were loaded onto our depot ship Bonaventure. And away we went.

09:00 On our own. We weren't in a convoy or anything. We travelled from Loch Cairnbawn, the big submarine base up in Scotland. We had that place to ourselves when we were in the early days of the war. So we went to the Azores and refuelled there. Then onto and through the Carrabeen and Trinidad,

09:30 through the Panama Canal, San Diego, Honolulu. From Honolulu we came back to Brisbane through the Gilbert and Alice Islands, Manis and a few places like that. But when we arrived out here there were no jobs for us. We couldn't rustle up any. The Americans didn't want anything to do with us.

10:00 They of course were in charge of everything and doing what they wanted to do.

Why didn't they want to make use of the subs?

They couldn't appreciate just what we could do. They just said, "No, no, no". Anyway our captain of the Bonaventure, the depot ship

10:30 he went hither and dither and worked his butt off to make it known to everybody around the area just what we could do, and eventually one of the American admirals said, "Do you think you could do so and so", and that was cutting these communication cables.

11:00 **You mentioned briefly before that you went to Australia.**

Yes, we came to Brisbane on that trip and took two days leave. That was all I could get. I hopped from Brisbane...we were anchored at Pinkenba. Went to Glen Innes to see my parents, the first time in four years or so; I had been away that length of time.

11:30 **What was that like?**

Marvellous except it was hard to get there. There was no train, no buses from here. No train that I could catch and get home and back. So I hopped on the train that went through Grafton, got off at Grafton and caught a cab.

12:00 Talked a bloke to take me from Grafton to Glen Innes by cab in the middle of the night and I knocked on my parents' bedroom door at half past one the next morning. I only had a couple of hours there before I had to catch the train up through Wallangarra and back on board ship.

Did they ask you what you were doing all this time?

12:30 My parents? I just had to tell them it was secret and that I couldn't tell them. We were sworn to secrecy and at that stage I didn't even tell them what I was doing. I just told them I was on a ship that was going again. They were quite happy that I had seen that part of the war out without any injury.

And did you do anything more in Australia before you left?

13:00 Yes, we were trying to fill in time a little bit while our captain was trying to get information here and there. We finished up...we went up to Townsville and then we had a bit of time there so we had a week over in

13:30 the Whitsundays as a crew. All our crew of the XE4 which was the one we were on. We had a week there of just rolling around an island that wasn't inhabited. So that was a good bit of R&R [rest and recreation]. We

14:00 were asked then if we could do this particular job, cutting under water cables. There was a cable going out from Monrepose Beach [?] which went over to French Noumea. It wasn't in use. It had been abandoned so we set up our craft. We put special drags on them and what have you and

- 14:30 eventually found a way of locating and cutting the cable. We said, "We could do it", so the Americans said, "go". They wanted them cut because they were in the process of getting ready to drop the atomic bomb, and they had the Japanese codes but they wanted to make
- 15:00 them send all their broadcasts from radio so they could monitor them in case things were not as they should be. When we said yes, we set off and went up to Borneo; we were actually based in Labuan in Borneo, and we got ready for the missions from there.
- 15:30 Two of our craft went to Singapore and attacked a cruiser there that was in the harbour which was not seaworthy but the guns were capable of being fired. XE4, we went to Saigon and cut the cable from Singapore to Saigon and Saigon
- 16:00 to Hong Kong. Another one of the boats went to Hong Kong and that cut the end down there.

So take us through your mission from Singapore to Saigon. Can you take us through it step by step. You were taken on board your ship and how did you get there?

Well, we had all the midgets

- 16:30 on a depot ship and we had available to us English S Class submarines which are not big ones but bigger than our midgets of course. They were attack submarines. We, each of the midgets, was allocated one of these and they were to tow us to our particular job.

Take us through the

- 17:00 **day of the mission and what you went through?**

We had to line up all the ...we carried limpet mines. One cargo of limpets and one of RDX, the two ton one. We were taken in tow by the...the submarine was Spearhead. She towed us with the

- 17:30 passage crew on board. The operational crew which included myself went in Spearhead. We were towed within 100 miles of Saigon and in the middle of the night changed crews. The operational crew then took over and we then navigated in on our own while the parent submarine went and had a bit of rest at the

- 18:00 bottom and just did a bit of reconnoitring. We were due to go back in a day or so and link up with her after she had done the job. Once we slipped from the parent submarine we rigged up the dragging arrangement and away we went.

- 18:30 We navigated into the Delta, into the Saigon River, which is now Ho Chi Min of course. We had a fairly accurate layout of where the cables were and we started to drag the grapnel for them. We came up hard as if we had grabbed one.

- 19:00 I went out of the submarine and found out it wasn't, that it had been caught on a piece of coral. So I released that and went back into the submarine, kept on the sweep. The next time we came up I went up and we had hooked one of the cables, so I went ahead and cut that with a special cutter, a hydraulic cutter.

- 19:30 I brought a bit back into the submarine to show I had actually done the job. Then we went looking for the second one. So that was a repeat performance on that. So that was the job. There was nothing there...we had a message that there was nothing in the harbour that we could attack by putting out limpet mines or anything on them. So we went and rendezvoused

- 20:00 with the submarine again and went back to Labuan.

Were you using torches during this time?

No. That was done in daylight. You could see in the water all right. We changed submarines in the dark, but oh no, you don't use torches.

- 20:30 **How dangerous did this feel at the time when you were doing this?**

It was just like training. We had been through this so many times that it had become second nature. It wasn't anything new or what have you. I was surprised when I opened the hatch to get out of the midget that the water was so light. I expected it to be darker. So it was fairly clear at that stage.

- 21:00 **And how was your navigating of this 100 miles? How did you manage the navigation of the sub directly to your point?**

We had a compass bearing and you travel there. And in this case there's a lot of prominent mountain peaks around Saigon, so you could get a sighting on them and pin point your position exactly.

- 21:30 In addition to this there was a known wreck in the Delta. A ship had sunk there years ago and was a rusted hulk. So we had it exactly charted on the chart and we actually ran into that on purpose, tried to find it. Once we were there we knew within a foot where the other cables and that were.

22:00 So it was a matter of sweeping over them waiting for the grapnel to hit one and goodbye.

About how shallow was this water you were in?

I think it was between 35 and 60 feet. It varied a little bit. In the dangerous area for an oxygen diver.

22:30 It didn't worry us.

How did you feel once you had cut these two cables?

Your thoughts then went to – I hope I can get back to base safely. We had done one job but we had to do another one yet, we had to get home. We'd only got back to Labuan when of course they dropped the first atomic bomb and

23:00 we thought then, well, this is it, it's nearly all over. The job at Singapore was botched a little and they were going to send us back there to have a go at one of the cruisers again. There were two there and only one was attacked. They wanted both attacked and we actually had the side cargoes on board and running to meet our

23:30 parent submarine when the war was declared over. So that wasn't necessary.

And how far away was the second cable?

Again, they were reasonably close. Within a short distance...say 200 to 400 feet, because they were both...one went in and one came out,

24:00 and they were coming from the same telegraph station as it were, so they weren't too far apart.

How strong was the Japanese naval presence in Saigon that you were aware of?

They were still active. We got into Labuan and they were still fighting there, but they were right at the end of their tether.

24:30 **So how did you feel when you heard the news of the atomic bomb first, and then the declaration of peace?**

I think elated, yes. My attitude was, "Serve them right, good on you".

25:00 You know when you saw some of the atrocity and what have you that they had performed around the Pacific, you didn't have much conscience for them.

So what did the crew do when war was declared?

When it was declared over?

Sorry, yes, over.

I thought we were going to start again.

25:30 **So what did you do as a crew?**

We fired off every pistol we had and what have you...but no, great jubilation. But in all of this, there was something that I regret a lot was that I was never part of the peace celebrations in Britain nor in Australia because all the celebrations were over

26:00 by the time we came back.

What was it like to return?

A bit chaotic. But I think that by returning to Glen Innes where there wasn't a lot of activity helped me slow down a bit and find out in which direction I was going.

Was it hard to settle back into civilian life?

26:30 Yes, I fought it. I thought the only way I could do it was work, and work hard because I realised it would be very easy to let go and trade on your experiences. It wouldn't get you anywhere of course.

What were some of the things that were hard to deal with, changing things...wartime life to civilian life?

27:00 I guess the camaraderie, the friendships. You had to start all these, all over again, with completely new people. I was indoctrinated. I was a bit pommish when I got out of the navy.

27:30 Anyway it was a case of get a job, knuckle down and see what you could do.

You mentioned you received some honours, medals as a crew? What were they?

I received for my effort on the cable a Distinguished Service Cross.

28:00 The skipper, he received the Distinguished Service Order, and also the Americans they offered us their

Distinguished Service Cross. The British wouldn't accept it but eventually they gave it to our skipper for his efforts. So

28:30 he has an American decoration as well as his order.

How did you feel receiving this decoration?

Very proud. Still am very proud. It's not for bravery. It's more for a job well done type of thing which the British are prone to do. They do a lot of it.

29:00 It makes you feel good.

So coming home, what job did you get into? What kind of job did you do after?

Well, starting off I got a job with a British company called British United Shoe Machinery and I joined them as a mechanic, a trainee mechanic I might add, earning less money

29:30 than I was in the navy. So that was bad. Anyway in 1952 it was make or break for me and I had an opportunity to go and manage a shoe factory in Sydney and I would mention his name because everybody knows him...it was Alan McGilvray.

30:00 He owned a shoe factory, he and his brother and sister. It was a shoe factory in Sydney. They wanted me to go and manage that but I knew I wasn't capable of doing that because there was a lot in that side of the thing that I didn't know. Anyway the firm countermanded that and made me branch manager of their Perth show.

30:30 I was there for 7 years and then went back to Sydney. I was in Sydney for the same period, came up to Queensland as branch manager and then eventually went back to Sydney and went out to one of our other companies still owned by British United. So I had a service of 38½ years with them

31:00 and retired with them.

When and where did you meet your wife?

When my mother used to go to Sydney she used to stay at a place opposite Beach Road in Rushcutters Bay with a lady there who was a good friend. And after the war

31:30 I called into see her...just a courtesy call, and she was living in a type of ...it wasn't a boarding house, more like a bed sitter. And she introduced me to my wife Doris who had another bed sitter at the end of the house, and one thing led to another

32:00 and we eventually married.

Were you able to tell Doris or your parents or anyone immediately after the war about your experiences?

Oh yes, but no body was really interested in those days. People ...there were that many war stories about and people trying to cash in on them of course. There

32:30 were books and goodness knows what being written, and claims being made. And the public didn't actually want to hear about them. It didn't worry me. I just forgot about it.

Did you ever have any bad dreams or lasting effects which weren't good?

I still get them. Yes, funnily enough. Every now and again I come up with a karate chop on the bed or something.

What do the dreams involve?

I don't really know. I think it's just something that happens. Like when I'm talking to people, like I'm talking to you, I could have one of those dreams tonight.

33:30 It brings back some flash of memory.

How do you deal with this when this happens?

Just let it go. There's nothing you can do. You don't know when it's going to happen. It's not serious. It doesn't send you around the twist or anything.'

What are your best memories from your wartime experience?

I would think the travel. Being a young impressionable bloke who hadn't been away from home, I think the travel was something that I enjoyed. You know the Mediterranean had some bad times but also you're cruising around in a beautiful sea on a motor launch. You

34:30 could dive over the side and have a swim. They were very pleasant memories.

What are the worst memories you have of your wartime experience?

Hard to put them down. They were all bad or they were all good. I wouldn't want to go through a lot of them again.

Do you march on Anzac Day?

Yes I do.

35:00 **What does Anzac Day mean to you?**

Well, I've always marched with the wife's father on Anzac Day for many years, especially when I was based in Sydney. He was a First World War digger and I think we honoured those people much more than we did from the Second World War.

35:30 **What do you think of the representation of submarine servicemen in TV [television] and movies? Is it accurate?**

I don't think so. It's hard to pick reality. No

36:00 I've got a video of a German one and it's absolutely raw stuff. It's called The Boat [Das Boot]. That's a bit frightening. It's about a German U-Boat crew. But anything like that, obviously they never show you much because a lot of it at the time was secret.

36:30 I've been on and over a couple of the American nuclear subs. I've been over the Australian sub, but you don't see anything even though we're submariners. There's lots of stuff they won't show you.

Why have you been over an American nuclear sub?

We were invited. Those that have come into Brisbane. As an

37:00 association, submariners association, we sometimes get an invitation from these people. The last one I was on was the San Francisco.

Just because we're getting close to time, one final question, do you have any final words to say about your experience or your life?

No, except that I

37:30 wish I had done an interview like this many years ago when my memory was good. Terms and that sort of thing...I haven't used correct terms in a lot of instances, naval terms and this sort of thing which would make the story perhaps a lot more interesting. No I've not regretted my life.

38:00 I haven't been sick or that and have enjoyed pretty good health. I've been looked after since I retired.

That's good and I think your details were terrific.

Yes, but to anybody who was a submariner or someone who was on Fairmiles, they would cast a critical vote.