Australians at War Film Archive

Roy Bennell (Benny) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:31 **So Roy could you give me that condensed abstract of your life that we were just discussing?**

I was born in Red Cliffs [Victoria] which was a soldier settlement for ex-servicemen from the First World War. I went to school at the Irymple South School, which was, I walked there I am told. Then I went to Mildura High School. I was there until the

01:00 end of 1940. Left Mildura High School when the family moved temporarily to Melbourne. And I worked in the aircraft production commission for six months, in the meantime I had made an application to train as an aircrew trainee because I turned eighteen on the 29th of January 1941 and while I was waiting I worked at the Aircraft Production Commission with a couple of other fellows from

01:30 Mildura High School. And I was called up on the 15th August 1941, went into Somers camp. And from there I was classified to train as a pilot. From there I went to Benalla to fly Tiger Moths. Tiger Moths, the Japs came into the war and there was a hiccup and we were held up for a month and then I went to Wagga and learned to fly Wirraways [training planes] and that only lasted for a while and

02:00 and then I went to Deniliquin where I completed my flying training on Wirraways and got my wings and became a sergeant pilot. Embarked on the 14th of August 1942 to go to England. Went to England via Durban, Cape Town, we were held up and had some stopovers over to England. And got to

02:30 Avonmouth or Bristol in about November 42. Went into Bournemouth which was a holding depot for all Australia and New Zealanders and other bods who were aircrew people until we could be absorbed into the training system. And as it was winter the training system was slowed down considerably in England so we had to fill in for some months

03:00 having fun actually. The Poms were very good, the RAF [Royal Air Force] were very good. And we became members of the RAF when we got on the boat. So we were in the RAF from the time I left Sydney. And we went all over the place. We had leave passes, we had rail warrants. We had cards for food, whatever they call them. The rationing cards was the word I am looking for, until

03:30 such time as we were called to join the training system. And as we hadn't flown for several months we started off on Tiger Moths again. We went onto Miles Masters [training planes for Spitfires] and then we went onto an OTU which is an operational training unit which is your last training unit. Having completed that on Hurricanes and Typhoons, we were posted in my case to go to India. And there I joined an RAF squadron, 20 Squadron.

04:00 And we were then moved into Burma and I spent my war shooting people in Burma. Came home in, there were other things in between, but brief, came home in November 45, the war was over, everybody had forgotten about war. And going from an eighteen year old, to a twenty-two, twenty-three year old I was expected to go back into civilian

04:30 life and know what the hell I was doing which I didn't. That was one of the most confusing times of my life trying to assimilate into society after having been out of it for four and a half years. So that was a very difficult period. And I worked in Melbourne for four years 1946 to 50. I had made application for war service settlement on land. And I went to

05:00 Renmark and grew oranges for thirty-eight years. Which was a wonderful time, it was the freedom of being on the land which I enjoyed, I came from the land I enjoyed going back on the land. I had married in Melbourne before going up to Renmark and we settled well in Renmark, had two children, until divorce in 1975. Do you want to go into further

05:30 detail? Okay. So then I share-famed the property for three years from 1977 until 1980, came down to Adelaide specifically to find a partner because you don't find them in the bush. And I went to a funny course WEA [Workers' Education Association] called creative divorce. And there were women who were divorced and men who were divorced and I found a very attractive lady who

06:00 was divorced and she was prepared to go back up to Renmark with me. And she lived up there for eight years with me until such time we reckoned I was sixty-five, it was time I retired. Came down to Adelaide and lived happily ever after. That's five minutes.

Beautiful, well done. So now we'll go back to where it all began

06:30 **how long were you in Red Cliffs for?**

Until I was seventeen.

So you can remember quite a lot of that, can you tell me your earliest memories of your childhood?

My memories are not good of that period of time. It was a good life, my father was an industrious man, worked hard. You will recall, or you won't recall the Depression started in 1929 and things were really grim from the Depression right through war.

07:00 But we always had sufficient. We had cows, we had WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, we grew our own vegetables. He was a fruit grower, he grew dried fruit, apricots, citrus, anything that could grow, so we always had all of the fruit that we wanted. And I had quite a blessed life. We went on school trips, I had a bicycle all those which was the most wonderful thing that any kid could have that lived four miles out of town.

07:30 Red Cliffs was a very small town and it really only had its beginning with the soldier settlement in the early 1920s and there was a whole mixed bag of people that came from all walks of life, ex-soldiers. And I made friends in fact one of them that I made friends with at school called on me yesterday. So we still have contact with those going back that long. So I went to the Irymple South school until I was into the sixth grade,

08:00 we had sixth grade. And from there I went to Mildura High School and I was at Mildura High School until I turned seventeen, which my father was very much a person who said you could be educated because he had been educated himself. So contrary to my wishes like most stupid boys who don't apply themselves through school, nevertheless I got through to leaving

08:30 which I didn't do at all well in because at that stage there was a lot of fellows who had been in school coming back in uniform, the navy the army the air force we weren't very interested in schooling at that stage. So I left Mildura High School when I was seventeen. And the family had moved temporarily to Melbourne and I joined them there, I had to board for a while in Mildura until the end of the school year in 1940, and I turned

09:00 eighteen in the January of 41. Having moved to Melbourne I got a job with the aircraft production commission at Fishermans Bend in Melbourne. As did a couple of other fellows from Mildura High School. And we had all made applications, because I was very interested in model aircraft, I had made balsa wood model aircraft. And at that time, 1940

09:30 was the Battle of Britain and the newspapers were full of Spitfires over London shooting down Germans and paper trails and all of this sort of thing, and that was more of interest to me.

So there was some romance around the idea of being a pilot or the planes?

Yeah I wanted to be a fighter pilot and I am forever eternally grateful that I was never a bomber pilot. I think they had the worst horrible life of anybody, over Europe anyway.

10:00 Those poor fellows but I will talk about that later perhaps.

Going back to Red Cliffs can you tell me about the make-up of your nuclear family and the character of your parents ?

Well they came out from England in 1921, my father and mother. They knew each other in England, he came out on his own. My mother came out with all of her family,

10:30 which was ten or eleven kids I think. The grandmother came out on her own with these children because the grandfather was deceased so I never knew him. They as they said they settled on soldier settlement property. What was the other direction of your question?

The personalities of your parents?

11:00 My father was well educated. He had been to a school in Canterbury called the Simon Langdon School and he had a good education and he was well read and he read books and he encouraged me to read books he was in the carnage of France but he never ever talked about that but he gave me a book called, All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Remarque but that gives a full detail of the carnage and the losses of men in France and Belgium. So

11:30 I guess he didn't have to talk about it, and he never did talk about it and I never asked him about it. My mother had from a larger family, found it and did find it extremely difficult coming from England into the harsh climate of Red Cliffs into pretty basic accommodation. They had to start a fruit property from scratch, sure the

12:00 government gave them some assistance to help with various things to establish themselves but it was hard work. They worked with a horse and plough and very basic implements. However they grew dried fruit and the dried fruit was successful for some time and eventually things got tougher presumably finding markets for dried fruit. However as I said he was very hard working, very industrious

12:30 and encouraged me all of the way to learn. Which as I said I didn't apply myself as I should have done. And he lived there until after my Second World War when he retired down to Bendigo. But my mother she died relatively young at sixty-five. I have a sister who is still alive. I have a brother who was killed in a motor accident in 1948.

13:00 So there is only myself and my sister who are still alive. She was seven years younger than me so I really didn't know much about her, sisters who are seven years younger don't sort of enter into your life. And my brother was younger, he was still at school when I went off to the air force so I really didn't know much about my siblings at all.

13:30 I went off into another world which consumed me for some years.

So if you weren't very close to your siblings in age or in terms of your relationship, what were you doing in the country with your spare time?

Well I had a bicycle as I said and a bicycle as I said was the most wonderful thing because you could go off with your friends. The swimming pool in Red Cliffs for summer was

14:00 the centre of attraction. The family used to go for picnics down to the river. The extended family on my mother's side formed quite a group of people and I have got heaps of cousins that I have never seen from that side of the family because they are over in Victoria, I had a Daisy air gun which I shouldn't have had because I shot birds.

14:30 The other basic things that a kid wants growing up that time was a watch, so okay I got a watch. And the other thing that was a big deal as you grew up as a boy was I had long pants, you know long pants was really something. When a kid got his first pair of long pants that was really an occasion. So really I had most of the things that one thought of at the time as being pretty good.

What was so great about long pants?

15:00 I don't know we had short pants and I guess it was a growing up phase, a ritual phase that you got long pants. And there were various other little things like a certain type of swimming trunks which I forget the name of them now and these were the things that kids of that age thought were pretty good so you wanted. And you probably harped on your parents until you got them. Which fortunately they were able to do. There wasn't a

15:30 lot of excitement. You mixed with other boys. And as you got older you noticed that girls were different and you took an interest in girls. And I can remember going to the matinee in the Roxy theatre in Red Cliffs with Thelma Newie I can still remember it, and perspiring like a pig because I was sitting next to a girl. Those were the days when boys were very inhibited, very embarrassed. I don't think they're like that anymore.

16:00 I can recall that was one of the memories I had of growing up. I did go on school trips with groups of people when I was sixteen when we went to places like Lorne, Lakes Entrance, Cowes, so you learnt to socialise with females then. They're probably my dominant memories and they are superficial perhaps but they are the ones I remember.

Your father obviously had seen

16:30 **difficult times in the war and he didn't discuss it with you but did you ever have a sense that he was perhaps carrying a burden?**

Not really, I never really saw that he was carrying a burden. I wouldn't say that he was a person that unburdened himself at all. He was very conscious of getting things which were

17:00 new. We had a new wireless set which had a battery and you had to go and get the battery charged every so many weeks. Of course television wasn't thought of. And the other thing he was very keen on was a septic tank so I remember he installed a septic tank which was quite a thing in those days. He had books, used to come from Melbourne library to Red Cliffs railway station, I used to

17:30 occasionally go down and get the books because he was always reading, always encouraging me to read, and I always encourage people to read because if you want to know anything about your language you have got to read because the more you read the more idea you are likely to have some idea of your language. And I try to encourage my grandchildren to do the same. I don't think they take that much notice of me anyway. He was an interesting man, he was very much dominated by his experiences in the army. He joined the militia, he enjoyed the ritual

18:00 the pomp and ceremony of the Pommy-style army anyway which I don't think was replicated in the Australian Army, we don't operate the way the English army did. However he was active in the militia, trained people and became a regimental sergeant major. And tried to get into the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] by putting his age down.

18:30 Which they didn't accept, you can still see in the records on the War Memorial where they have got people's details, that he enlisted twice and you have got two different ages. But he was rejected from the AIF so he joined the, just the home army and he trained people at various training camps in Victoria. So yeah he fulfilled his life that way.

19:00 But he was progressive as a fruit grower. We got a tractor and implements which in that era, through the Depression was most progressive. He was the most unmechanical man I could ever imagine. He knew that if you turned a key in the car the engine should start but if it didn't start well that was too bad, because he didn't know what to do. But we only had a T Model Ford and then an A Model Ford. And then he got a Buick ute

19:30 and then he got a Chev[rolet] and another Chev so he always managed to stay abreast of the times. And I can recall asking why one of the neighbours up the road had this beaut new car and he said, "He doesn't own that the bank owns that." So that was another strong thing which I carry to this day. Don't get into debt. And it is something that I have lived by, it may have been to my detriment I don't know but that was one of the things he imparted in me, don't borrow money.

20:00 So I lived by that means and it has never hurt me really. So there was some of the basic things that he imparted in me as a kid. My mother wasn't as influential. She was a good cook, she was a good mother, she looked after us but I think it was a pretty tough life for her.

Was it a loving family?

As a kid you don't notice these things. It certainly wasn't overtly

20:30 loving, it might have been covertly loving but no I didn't, they're things you don't think about as a kid particularly as a male kid anyway. My sister has a different attitude I know, but then she thinks I was the first born so she thinks I was the most fortunate and no doubt I was I think the first born in any family has advantages over the other siblings. He is a novelty, well it is a bit of a novelty.

21:00 **So your father was quite the modern man keeping up with the times, how was it for your family during the Depression?**

Well I can remember the Depression, I can remember the picking season in Mildura and Red Cliffs when thousands, it might have been hundreds I don't know. They were trained up to the stations and they went out and

21:30 picked fruit and that was really a tough life. The living conditions which the grower provided were very basic. But generally they ate with the family. And there was always a lot of drunkenness because these fellows earn their money get paid on the Friday and blew it in the pub on the Saturdays. And that's still something I have in my mind.

22:00 I was always afraid of drunks. My father didn't like alcohol, I don't really like alcohol. I will drink it socially, and that was another trait. That applies to cousins I met in England, my own family, it must be a gene you're either an alcoholic or a social drinker or anywhere in between. But I think you're influenced maybe genetically maybe by family training. But there were certainly some riotous times in

22:30 those towns. Mildura and Red Cliffs through there in the picking season when the pickers who were pretty desperate people because they didn't have very much. But generally speaking they were quite a happy bunch. People in poverty are often much happier then people in affluence, as a general observation anyway. But it doesn't seem to apply today. People are not happy when they're

23:00 getting social security. In those days you got sustenance which I understand was an authority to buy food, I don't think you got money. I think it was called sustenance and that's basically what it was. People who were getting just enough to eat and live seem to be much happier than people who get social security, that's my judgement.

What about the drunks that scared you?

23:30 Well I wasn't accustomed to that, they didn't scare me because they did anything. I just thought that wasn't a sort of behaviour that I thought was desirable behaviour. I don't think they did anything, they weren't anti-social, they were just alcohol influenced.

And these men had come from all over Victoria?

24:00 From the cities, what was it thirty-three percent unemployed in the Depression years I think, so there was a lot of hardship. People lived in bag humpies I can remember people living in bag humpies which was fertiliser bags which had been tacked to a wooden frame, white-washed, corrugated iron roof, no electricity, kerosene lamps.

24:30 And they were the lucky ones in some cases. You would probably have to read more deeply how Australia lived in the Depression. Our population when the war began was only about seven million. So in that period there was only about five or six million people, there weren't a lot of people in Australia in that Depression era.

How do you think it impacted upon your family?

25:00 I don't think it had any impact at all. We were living comfortably and we had all of the food. I didn't have to go to school without shoes on and there were kids in my time, Irymple South School, without shoes. Some people had great difficulty.

Were you friends with any of the children who were doing it tough? Do you remember their family situation?

No I was living in this fruit growing area and the neighbours next door

25:30 they were doing as well, and the people were doing reasonably well. So the people who were friends were the people who were neighbours who were all doing somewhat similarly well. Maybe some of the kids came from labourers who were working on fruit blocks and who really weren't making much money anything above basic sustenance. But

26:00 that's my view on it and that's just one tiny little part of Australia at that time.

Towards the end of your schooling you said it was becoming less and less interesting to be a school boy and you could see these men coming home in uniform, can you tell me about the feeling amongst the young men and the boys at that time?

Well this was at the Mildura High School and we are talking 39 when the war started,

26:30 and I was probably fifteen then and as I say I was influenced by the newspapers. And newspapers are full of propaganda, join the services and serve your country. And the Japs weren't in the war at that time, it was the AIF who had gone over to the Middle East to fight the Germans and the Italians. And there were some guys, I can

27:00 remember one guy came back, he had joined the air force and he went over to England. And I think he was killed in Malta actually, he would have been twenty, maybe twenty-one. But he was one of the very early fellows that had joined the air force and they would come back to the Mildura High School in uniform and of course it had a very unsettling influence. That's the boys anyway, I don't know that the girls took any notice,

27:30 it wasn't going to affect them. Girls didn't serve in the services then, they did a little later. So yeah it was unsettling.

Was the air force particularly attractive for the romance?

Well to me it was and I think as I was one of the relatively early fellows who went into the air force I had met other fellows

28:00 who were kids at school who were a bit younger than me who have said, "I went into the air force because you went into the air force." And they thought it would be glamorous too. And there was three of us, those three that I mentioned that had gone from Mildura High School to Melbourne and worked on the aircraft, we three joined the air force and the one who was here yesterday, he became an air gunner and served up in New Guinea, in the islands, not New Guinea.

28:30 The other one unfortunately became an alcoholic and died. So that was just three boys and that's three stories of three people who were at Mildura High School when I was there. He became a pilot, a very good pilot but the alcohol got him. I was fortunate because I got what I wanted out of the air force because everyone wants to be a pilot, and most want to be fighter pilots

29:00 and I got what I never dreamed I could ever attain. As an eighteen year old kid.

Can you tell me about your boarding just before you left Mildura?

I was boarding with a family who, he was living in Mildura he used to live in Red Cliffs and he was the music teacher. And my father had great desires, he was a lover of

29:30 music and he wanted me to learn the piano and I hated the piano. And I used to go through all of the motions of going into Mr Thompson and playing the Norwegian Cradle Song and really not liking it. I don't think I was a very nice kid actually. And when it came for me to spend the few months at the high school when my parents had moved to Melbourne,

30:00 the Thompsons were living in Mildura so I went and stayed with the Thompsons. And the Thompsons had a daughter about the same age as myself, Mary. So I learnt a little about what females looked like. But at seventeen I went as I say to Melbourne so I was only there for a brief period of time.

You had a brief romance with Mary?

30:30 I didn't know what the word meant. No it was living in Mildura which was the big city at the time. I enjoyed being, whereas at Red Cliffs I was four miles out of town on dirt roads, living in Mildura for that period of time was very interesting living in the big city. But as for Mary she is still around I see her from time to time.

31:00 As I say I didn't know what the word romance meant but there was an attraction, I guess a physical attraction but it certainly wasn't going to go anywhere with her mother around.

Then you headed off and went and got a job, can you tell me about that?

Well I went to Melbourne after the end of the school year I don't know how I got the job frankly. The Aircraft Production Commission "wanted office" in the planning department and they had an office in

31:30 Collins Street at the time and I went into the office and worked in the planning department working with the various engineers, just taking one plan from there to there or just seeking out plans that they wanted. Because all of these plans had come from Bristol, they were building the Bristol Beaufort aircraft, so all of the plans for that aircraft came from Bristol.

32:00 And then the office moved down to Fishermans Bend and the production was down at Fishermans Bend. I worked in the planning office, lived at a place called Elwood which was not far from the beach which was very pleasant. And then the other fellow that joined me came from Red Cliffs and my mother said that she would look after him. So Dewar and I, the one who later became an alcoholic unfortunately, as an eighteen year old

32:30 seventeen year old he was then. We lived with my mother in Melbourne in Elwood, and we both worked in the aircraft production commission. So it was good fun it was good company to have someone there the same age as you. And in the meantime you were required as an aircrew trainee to go back to school and do what they called sixteen lessons.

33:00 Which were lessons in maths and things which would equip you to do navigation and other things that the air force required. But having just left school well that wasn't very difficult. So we completed that course and waited until we were called up, which I was called up in August and he was called up in September. I went to the Somers camp, he came over to Victor Harbour actually.

33:30 Then I met up with him in Benalla, he was in the course behind me when we learnt to fly Tiger Moths.

Where was your father in this period of time when you were living with your mother?

He was at one of these army training camps which I forget the name of out from Melbourne somewhere.

34:00 So my mother looked after the three of us plus this friend from Red Cliffs just for that period of time, eight months or something.

Was it a novelty to be earning money?

Oh yeah from going from pocket money earning a shilling a week or something to earning thirty-five

34:30 shillings a week that was marvellous. You had your own money at eighteen.

And what were you spending it on?

I don't know, no doubt a certain proportion went to my mother. I can recall we used to go boating on Albert Park lake, have you been to Melbourne? Well we went boating on Albert Park lake. We had bikes. Probably things that kids spend it on, lollies, ice creams and things.

35:00 Novelties which we could afford without having to ask.

What were you hearing about the war?

Well we are now into, the Battle of Britain was on in 1940. I was still at school through the Battle of Britain so it was just something that was taking place and was well reported. In 1941 I don't remember any particular highlights

35:30 except El Alamein and the battles in the Middle East where the Rats of Tobruk were honoured for all of their defence that they put up there. General [Erwin] Rommel in charge of the Germans in the Middle East who were advancing across North Africa and then getting beaten by [British General Bernard Law] Montgomery, all things that you have probably never heard of.

I have now.

36:00 **So these things were in your mind and you were hoping to get into the air force during this period of time?**

Yes.

And what were the requirements other than doing these school subjects?

We liked to think that they were pretty stringent, that you had to be physically okay, that you

36:30 had to be mentally okay. I guess they judged you mentally I don't know. But you went before a board of course a selection board, before you were accepted into aircrew training. They wanted a reasonable education, at least the intermediate certificate. I guess you were young and enthusiastic, so long as the attitude was all right.

37:00 And you had a reasonable education you were accepted.

So what was your first training?

Our first training was at Somers. We were told to report to some place in Russell Street if I remember correctly and the intake for that month was marched down Swanston Street with people cheering, and where am I? In some place of great celebrity or something. It was

37:30 a bit hard to get your mind around the fact that you were going to go off to war and all of these people were cheering. So we got into trucks and we went to Somers Camp, now Somers Camp is out of Frankston. Somers Camp was started by Lord Somer for kids who were in the Mallee who could come down for a holiday. So the camp was extended to take in the air force.

38:00 And we went into air force as raw recruits we had the rank of AC2 [aircraftsman]. We wore a little white flash on our forage hats to indicate that you were aircrew trainees, and we thought we were pretty good of course going into aircrew trainees. And there you were medically examined and they were talking about VD [venereal disease]. Now what the hell does VD mean? Because I didn't have a clue what VD was and you were examined for VD and I found out what it was. Venereal disease.

38:30 Which was quite foreign to me and all of the other guys because we were all eighteen year old kids. We were pretty callow youth in those days, we were pretty ignorant we didn't know much at all. However we were formed into squads in the air force, it was very alphabetical, all of the people I knew were from A to Gs, anyone that had a surname starting with A through to G was in our squad.

39:00 So they're the people we really got to know well, they were in our squad. And the air force really stuck to that anyway when you went from flying training you were from A to something, wherever to get the required amount of people in a flight or a squad. There we got thirty-five, we got five bob a day, which was back was thirty-five shillings a week, but there you had all of your food provided, any health needs, which you didn't have health needs then.

39:30 And you didn't have any outgoing at all actually, you didn't have to pay for anything so you had thirty-five shillings to spend on you. And I first met Coca Cola in that funny bottle, and pineapple juice, that was quite new to me to be able to buy those things. We went to classes, we went to drill instructions where you had sergeants bellowing at you.

40:00 You had WOD [Warrant Officer Discipline], who was warrant officer, disciplinary officer bellowing at you. Because they wanted to take the cockiness out of these eighteen year old kids, and they did that pretty well. So we had rifle drill, never used a rifle, never saw a rifle after that. But we had to go to navigation classes, we had to go to all sorts of classes which I forget. Air force law

40:30 and a whole lot of things. So we were instructed in the basic law of the air force and the requirements of the air force. It was a lot of fun. We lived in huts with twenty people in it. The most amazing thing that happened to me was to see a Salvation Army captain get down in front of everybody at night and say his prayers.

41:00 That took a lot of guts I thought as eighteen year olds, but he did that always. And that was to me very amazing. I had never experienced anything like that. Because my father was not religious, he had,

Tape 2

00:41 **You were just talking about your training, what did your mother and father think about all of this?**

Well initially of course they had to give permission for an 18 year old, and as I say as they both had army backgrounds that was normal that the son should go

01:00 into the services. So they had no qualms about it at all.

It's interesting given your father's experience?

Yes. I can remember neighbours because in Red Cliffs they were all ex-army people and I can remember old Jim Hughes saying, "You don't want to do that, they shoot you." Didn't deter me, this was adventure and you weren't going to get any adventure, in fact I really shudder to

01:30 think what would have happened to me if I'd remained in Red Cliffs for the rest of my life because the air force took me out of myself. I was insecure, I was under confident, I had really little confidence in myself, but the air force made me realise I could do just as well and of course these were a lot city slickers that went to the air force and they were the smart guys who supposedly knew everything but they didn't and you could compete with them and do the things they could do so for me it was a great

02:00 awakening for me. I really began to believe in myself and I didn't greatly believe in myself prior to that. My parents were quite happy to see me go off and after all I didn't want to be in the navy and I didn't want to be in the army so I was going to be in something, I figured, so I may as well go into where I wanted to go.

Why not the navy and not the army?

Well I wouldn't want to be in sea and I wouldn't want to be walking in the army so

02:30 I figured about the best thing you could do was to get into an aircraft and fly that was going to be a preferable life and as it transpired from my way of thinking if you had to be in the war the best thing to be was a fighter pilot. That's how it worked out for me, anyway.

So if your father hadn't encouraged you to pursue your education that may not have been an option?

03:00 It may not have been an option, no it may not have. I might have been a 15 year old farm labourer or something with no eduction but I doubt it I think something would have come to the fore that would at least spur me on and my father wouldn't have condoned that anyway.

Were the requirements different for the air force than they were for the navy or the army?

Oh yes. After the

03:30 Depression a lot of people in the army said this was the first decent meal as they went into the army that the army fed them their first decent meal they'd had for ages. They were cruel, cruel times for people who are on the wrong side of the railway track.

Was the air force seen as an elite option?

Why ask me the obvious? Yes of course it was, you wore this little white flash

04:00 and the envious ground staff used to say to the girls, "Don't go out with them, they've all got VD that's why they've got a flash in their cap." So the story goes, I don't know if it's true or not. We were young and cocky and as I say it was a revelation to me, a complete revelation for me to be able to go with a group of men. And in Somers camp we learnt the basics of the air force and eventually you went before a category

04:30 selection board after you'd been there for a few months or six weeks, or something, and as I said everyone wanted to be a pilot so fortunately that was a wonderful day when the category selection board said I could be a pilot because nobody wanted to be an air gunner, I can well imagine why they didn't want to be an air gunner. There was an unofficial story around the camp, if you do brilliantly in your exams,

05:00 and we had exams and were tested you'd become a navigator because you were bright, if you were pretty dull and you were down the other end you became an air gunner, but if you stayed at centre you stood a chance of being a pilot. So I got 87% so that was enough to not be brilliant and not be too dumb. I became a pilot trainee. We had leave, we went up to Benalla,

05:30 which was a Tiger Moth Elementary Flying Training School where you went from a AC2 to a LAC [leading aircraftsman] and you went to 10 bob a day, 10 bob a day was big money. We learnt to fly Tiger Moths and my instructor was Flying Officer Johnson and he, on my first trip, took me up to about 3,000 feet rolled the Tiger Moth on its back

06:00 and petrol streaming out of the tank because the petrol tank's in the top wing and looked at me in the rear vision mirror to see whether I was doing a panic and I'm hanging there on my straps, my first flight ever in an aircraft. Anyway he landed and he said, "How old are you?" "I said 18." He said, "I'm sorry that I did that." So that was my introduction to flying. He was a good instructor.

06:30 Do you mind if I refer to this because I have a log book here which tells me when I went to Benalla and when we trained and all the rest of it, and I guess this is not the first time you've encountered a fellow with a log book. It's getting a bit tattered because it's old. Went to Benalla in November first flight November 13th and it was summer of course and the Tiger Moth was a light aircraft and

07:00 it got booted all over the sky with the air currents, the summer current. So we used to have to get up at five o'clock and go out to a satellite airfield called Goorambat and fly in the cooler air and come back and I think we had a sleep or we had breakfast or we had something. Then we had a rest and we did lessons, because you were still doing navigation lessons, air frame lessons and learning all about aircraft and the theory of flight and all

07:30 those sort of things.

That's a lot to learn?

Yeah well it wasn't taken lightly. We were told if you don't perform you're out. You had no option. They were along the training course there was what they would call "Scrubbos" in other words you were scrubbed, you weren't making the grade, you weren't adaptable, you weren't performing so there was always that fear that I'm going to be a scrub pilot.

08:00 So you didn't mess around. You really applied yourself. We flew at Benalla we did cross countries, did instrument flying did all the training things that one has to do until the Japs came into the war. They came in in December. We were still flying through all of December to January and when

08:30 the Japs came into the war it was Christmas time. I flew on December 24th so we were still flying right up until Christmas Day. You weren't allowed to go any further than one hour's travel from Benalla and somehow we knew that the high school teacher we had at Mildura High School had been transferred to Wangaratta, Mr Thompson the maths teacher, and this friend Dewar who was the course behind me

09:00 we'd both been at Mildura High School we were invited up to Mr Thomson's for Christmas lunch which was very kind. So we stayed at Benalla until such time until the middle of January we'd finished our course and because the Japanese had come into the war and the government's deciding and the population at large were talking about don't send any of our men overseas,

09:30 the Japanese are up there we need them all here. So the air force had to decide if it was going to honour the Empire Air Training Agreement with Canada, New Zealand all the dominions and the RAF to supply a certain number of aircrew for the RAF. They had to decide whether they were going to do that. So we were held up for about a month. We went up to Bradfield Park out of Sydney and went surfing for about three

10:00 weeks or a month or something. Then they decided they were going to continue with the Empire Air Training Scheme and sent aircrew overseas. I went to Wagga and learnt to fly a Wirraway, went solo on the Wirraway and then they decided Wagga was going to be used as something else and they split the course up, half went to Uranquinty and half went to Deniliquin. I went to Deniliquin. I learnt to fly Wirraways

10:30 which were a very good aircraft to learn on because they had some nasty habits. I started flying Wirraways in March 10th I flew Wirraways until I completed my SFTS, Service Flying Training School, on Wirraways which I said were very good aircrafts because you had to be careful

11:00 with them. If you held off too high they dropped a wing and you'd be in trouble. One fellow held off that high that he dropped a wing and right over on his back. Therefore you learnt to be a very careful pilot, I think you learnt to be a very careful pilot on a Wirraway. There we did instrument flying, cross country flying where you'd often fly a triangle.

11:30 **Were you flying solo at this stage?**

You were initially with an instructor, I'd gone solo, but the only reason you had an instructor at times was you were under, instrument flying was you were under the hood, they put a hood over you and all you had was the instruments, but you had to have somebody there at the back to make sure you were doing things sensibly. Instrument flying was very difficult I find instrument flying quite difficult, you've got to concentrate like mad because all you've got is this set of instruments and you're flying this aeroplane. You're

12:00 taking it off and you're flying the thing, pull the undercarriage up and all the rest of it. It required a lot of concentration. The only time, there's a thing called vertigo and if you're flying in cloud and you're not flying on instruments or if you're flying at night there's always a tendency to think you're doing this, that or the other, other than flying straight and level. You really have to follow your instruments.

12:30 You really have to glue yourself onto the instruments, particularly night flying when you're in an aircraft on your own. Anyway we did this training and we did re-training, we did bombing training at Deniliquin. In the township were very supportive, they really entertained us and they had Wirraway House, I think it's still there actually, where the trainees could go

13:00 and have some social activity, a barbecue, and it's sad that in the Deniliquin cemetery that there are still men buried who, 18 who got killed, 19 killed in Deniliquin because that's where you start to have losses on Tiger Moths. I only remember one casualty on Tiger Moths where an instructor disobeyed rules, flew low over a friend's farm and chopped his

13:30 head off with a propeller, or hit him with the wheel or something.

That's phenomenally low?

It was phenomenally low, yeah, it was what you were not allowed to do and this instructor did it with a pupil and killed this friend who was a farmer, I'm assuming my memory is still working correctly. Anyway Wirraways as I say weren't so forgiving and people were killed in Deniliquin, a lot of people were killed in training.

14:00 I have been to a reunion back there where we went out to the cemetery to see these young guys who were killed on Wirraways. They were still a good damned good aircraft.

It must have shaken your confidence a little bit when accidents like that were happening?

No. There was a saying and it was very true, "It never happens to me, it won't happen to me," and you live by, "It won't happen to me." Well I think that was the general attitude. The training was

14:30 very good the instructors were very good and some of them were RAF people, our flight commander was an Englishman who was a RAF guy. There a lot of people were scrubbed and there was a person who they named the chief flying instructor was Squadron Leader Scott and he was known as Scrubbo

Scott. Because if you weren't performing or your instructor didn't think that you were up the mark they'd give you a flight with the Chief Flying Instructor

15:00 and he'd check you out. If he didn't reckon you were any good, you were out. Therefore we really worked damned hard.

It was a life saving decision?

Or your ego, everything was on the line. We did get leave, I can remember six of us and I couldn't drive a car at this stage, I'm flying Wirraways and I flew right through the war and I didn't know how to drive a car until towards the end of it. There was one of the fellows who was

15:30 a bit older and a bit more adventurous and he can hire a car, I remember we went down to Melbourne, the six of us, in an Oldsmobile with Colin Gilmore driving it because he knew everything, he was a bit older. We went down and had leave and came back and that was a bit exciting. We used to go to the skating rink at St. Kilda which was called something, I forget what it was called. Do all these

16:00 things. Melbourne catered for servicemen wonderfully well. There was the Dugout, there was Powerhouse, all sorts of places you could go and be entertained, be fed, we were looked after very well, all servicemen were looked after.

You're earning decent money, you've got your flash uniform and you're 18 and you're pilot trainees I'd imagine you'd be reasonably popular with the girls when you got to Melbourne?

Yeah but reasonably popular, but girls scared me. I was always scared of girls.

16:30 Really. I met some, I met a lass who came from Caulfield and I remember her taking me home to her mother and she was an only child and her mother and father were very cautious, you be in by a certain hour or else. Mum was waiting on the door. So, females scared me they must have been pretty fragile things when the parents were so concerned.

17:00 **You weren't frightened of the Wirraways, you were frightened of girls?**

Oh yes girls scared me. They were always so, all my junior life, they were so neat and tidy, they wore hats, they weren't scruffy and of course in those days they wore very loose uniforms because they didn't have any shape and their mother's made damned sure they didn't have any shape, except when they got in the swimming pool, and then you could see that they did have some shape. This

17:30 was intriguing at the time. However.

You've said a couple of times that being a fighter pilot was the ultimate and that was what most people wanted to be. Why was that such an envied position, as opposed to being a bomber pilot?

Probably I was speaking my own thoughts, no not everybody wants to be a fighter pilot some of them wanted to be bomber pilots.

18:00 At Benalla you were again classified, I've gone a step ahead of myself by going onto Wirraways, at Benalla you were chosen to go on the single-engine aircraft which were Wirraways or you were chosen to go onto twin-engine aircraft which were [Avro] Ansons and Oxfords. And there you parted from your friends that you'd joined the air force with and you'd trained with at Benalla and they went off to learn to fly twin-engine aircraft

18:30 and you went off to learn single-engine aircraft.

That was the distinction between being a fighter pilot and a bomber pilot?

Yes. It was a distinction that generally prevailed, but if in England they were short of bomber pilots they'd convert you over to bombers. That happened to some of them that trained with me on single-engine aircraft. That was my wish not necessarily everybody's wish.

19:00 **What were you basing your decision on?**

Seeing Spitfires over London. Really didn't fly Spitfire, I flew one Spitfire because I was going to not come home after the war not having flown a Spitfire, so I borrowed one once and flew a Spitfire. No I flew Hurricanes predominantly. Anyway we are ahead of ourselves. We were at Deniliquin and we got

19:30 our wings there and then we were given final leave and we were in Melbourne and then we were shipped up to Sydney and we got an old tub and there were about eight or nine hundred odd pilots, navigators, air gunners that were training and going off to England and this damned old Dutch tub Westernland left Sydney about 12 months after I joined the air force about the

20:00 15th August I think it was. There you became a member of the RAF and it says in your pay books that from here on in all currencies are in [pounds] sterling, so we became members of the RAF. The boat went down from Sydney south of Tasmania into the Roaring Forties, where it tossed and turned, it was on its own because it wasn't in convoy then and we slept in

20:30 hammocks and underneath the hammocks were trestles and you ate there, you folded up your hammock

and you ate down below on some pretty rough old food too that we didn't really enjoy, but we ate. Then we pulled into Perth, we left Perth and picked up the convoy of a couple of navy ships, a Dutch destroyer I think, and the

21:00 whatever vessels they were and we went across the Indian Ocean and we changed over in mid-way and another convoy took us over and the others went back to Perth. The boat was having difficulties with its engine so we went to Durban and we were given leave for a week in Durban. That was quite an eye opener to go into a country where the blacks got off the pavement to walk in the gutter, that was my first introduction to coloured bars

21:30 and colour discrimination. But Durban was great fun for us, we never went back to the boat, we had enough money to live in the hotel and sleep four in a room or something and go down to the beach, Marine Parade, I think, and I've got photos of that, photos of riding in a rickshaw with a Zulu all done up in his gear. So 19 then it was great fun.

Very exotic place?

Very exotic. Not only were we on 10 bob a day

22:00 we'd become sergeant pilots on17 and 6 a day which was a heap of money, we were pretty well paid. From there the boat went down to Cape Town where it was decided that it was unserviceable and therefore we had two and a half weeks in Cape Town, which was again great fun.

No responsibilities, keep up your training at all?

Nothing. We disobeyed all the rules. You were supposed to stay in the camp, but we didn't stay in the camp

22:30 we went out and again this character Gilmore was there who hired a car at Deniliquin, he could hire a car in Cape Town too, he could talk his way into anything. So we drove around in cars and we had a lot of fun. And again still 19 and it was very exciting. They eventually put us on a boat called Highland Brigade and we slept in our gear on Highland Brigade because we were going up U-boat [German submarines] alley,

23:00 you slept in your clothes, you had a life-jacket here, your water bottle there and your emergency rations somewhere else because if you got torpedoed you didn't have time to get dressed.

U-boat alley, where is this geographically?

This is going up the west coast of Africa where the U-boats came down and shot and sunk a lot of vessels. So we're in a big convoy and we had to do submarine watch. You had to get up in the false tunnel of this boat we were in

23:30 and look out to see if you could see submarines.

Were you starting to get a bit worried at this stage? Was the reality of war beginning to hit you?

Reality of war never hit me until I started shooting people. We're still kids, it's still exciting. It was all fun, it was all excitement. You'd hear depth charges going off and destroyers would scream around and drop depth charges,

24:00 I don't know if we lost any people in that convoy or not. We stopped at Sierra Leone and we were given a whole heap of ointment because the mosquitoes, even they were anchored off Sierra Leone, mosquitoes would come out and you'd get malaria possibly.

It must have been a fantastic time and the sense of being a young boy and you wouldn't have known much about Africa would you?

No. Nothing at all.

24:30 The whole thing was a learning process from the word go. We eventually went around the north of Ireland and we saw for the first time the barrage balloons. Do you know what barrage balloons are? OK. Over the cities they had these great balloons with cables so that when Germans couldn't go and strafe things and if they tried to well they got caught up in the cable of the balloon. England was barrage balloons all over the cities.

25:00 We used to say, "If they didn't have barrage balloons the bloody country would sink," with our sense of humour. We came down to Avonmouth in Bristol and there we saw our first Spitfires they were flying over the Bristol Channel. Wonderful, Spitfires. Real live ones.

Why did you take that route?

I don't know. No idea. Ours was not to reason why. We did what

25:30 we were told.

Maybe the activity was a bit heavy?

Could've been. I don't know. From Avonmouth were welcomed into the country with brass hats and bands, how wonderful to have all you fellows over here to fight.

How many of you?

About eight or nine hundred or so, quite a group of us on this boat.

These are all air force guys?

Yes. Air gunners, navigators,

26:00 pilots and they put all that many people on, all that much of investment and training in one boat which was I thought "What a waste." However after all the brass hats told us how wonderful it was, and I think of that when I go back to England and I'm a foreigner and I've got to go through the "Foreign" that you didn't worry about that in 1942. However we got into a train there and we went from Bristol down to Bournemouth.

26:30 That was the most wonderful trip I'd ever done.

Why was that?

Because I'd been brought up on English magazines, the Illustrated London News, here it was, England is beautiful, is superb country except the cities, but the countryside is so beautiful.

Just like in the magazines?

Well it's even better than the magazines, they never do it justice. When you see it all, and from Bristol to Bournemouth which I don't think has a train now,

27:00 we went through all this beautiful country into Bournemouth which was a depot for Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians. We were billeted in Bathill Court, a new block of flats which were built in Bristol and we slept in the kitchen. We had a mess hall down the road a bit and Bournemouth is a very pretty place, very nice.

27:30 As I say we got there in winter and we couldn't be absorbed in the training scheme, but they used to do chip and run raids in the Focke-Wulf 180. They couldn't be detected by the radars, they'd sneak over the Channel and they'd bombed Bournemouth. They bombed several places along the coast and killed a few of our guys in the pub of course, which they bombed.

Were they able to fly quite low?

Very low, yes.

28:00 **Were they quite quiet?**

They were very fast, it was a beautiful aircraft the Focke Wulf 180 the Germans had really a pretty looking fighter.

They didn't get entangled in the balloons?

Bournemouth didn't have them, it wasn't the big city, it was just a small country town, coastal town. We were in Bournemouth, later all the Australians went to Brighton,

28:30 the year I got there. The 19 course was a reasonably early course. I still know people who were in eight course and they're pretty much a rarity, very much a rarity. Bournemouth was the place where you had to fill in time, we Australians have a degree of anti-English feeling and we went there with a degree of anti-English feeling.

29:00 We gave them hell. We'd be taken on route marches, they'd take you off for a march through Bournemouth and they'd drop off to all the pubs until the poor old guy in front ended up with half a dozen people, we weren't co-operative. We learnt to be co-operative when we realised that England was really at war and they weren't as bad as we thought they were, but they were still patronising to a degree, the upper-class, the opposite class and I was a sergeant at the time,

29:30 they were still a bit patronising. We grew accustomed to them, we towed the line pretty well.

Were you doing any training in Bournemouth?

Nothing. Sorry, we were doing aircraft recognition classes. Where they'd flash the various aircraft up on the screen and you had to, we had to do aircraft recognition classes and it's about the only course we could do and we did do. We were given a lot of leave and ration cards,

30:00 and as I said previously a lot of away pass to go and see places, which we did. I had a friend Gates who was in the A-G bracket, John Gates who lives up at Bowral at the moment who I see and my father's cousin lived at Bexhill-on-Sea so we went down to Bexhill-on-Sea where he was a baker, Fred Thompson, Thompson and Dewhurst Bakers,

30:30 49 Amherst Road Bexhill-on-Sea. We'd go and stay there and they were very hospitable, but we learnt

the funny English custom, come five o'clock they'd have supper and we thought, "Is this all we're going to get to eat?" It's rationing and things are tough, and eight o'clock they had dinner, which was peculiar, it might've been dinner and supper I forget. This was an English custom, I'm sure they wouldn't do it today.

31:00 **What was supper? Cake and tea?**

Yes cake, and we thought is this all we are going to get and we then had dinner and we woke up that's the way they lived, the way they operated. While we were in Bexhill I recall we had an air raid, the first time I'd ever hear the air raid siren go and I didn't know what it was. They had a couple of bicycles there and used to go out cycling, because my

31:30 father being the only member of the family who left England I had cousins and aunts and uncles who I did visit. One was at Swansea, one was at Helensborough, Glasgow and these people down at Bexhill-on-Sea. So there were family there to visit and we as I say were filling in time until we were re-absorbed into the training system because it was winter.

32:00 We saw the damage to London, we went to Bath, we went to Bristol. I went to Bexhill and Swansea. We saw a lot of England. The people were very hospitable because everybody was in the same boat, there was a war on, they knew we were there as was millions of others, Yanks,

32:30 Canadians, they absorbed us. The organization was fantastic, that they could take all these people in, feed them, house them amazing people when there is adversity on, absolutely amazing.

How did they seem to be dealing with it? This was a time when the bombings were quite regular?

No that was 1940, we were there in '41, I didn't get there until '42 I was at school in '40,

33:00 training in '41 got to England in '42. They were pretty well accustomed to adversity, shortages of everything, the bombings that had taken place when the Germans were carrying out their air raids… but in large measure there wasn't a lot of bombing, there were tip and run raids, nuisance raids which were very damaging.

33:30 The German air force had sort of realised they weren't going to have the freedom of the air they expected to have, which they did have to a large degree in 1940 when there was shortage of fighter aircraft, fighter trained crews and all that sort of thing. We filled in in Bournemouth. One of the things they did to us was send me up to a place called Whitley Bay, a group of us to Whitley Bay

34:00 which was north of Newcastle-on-Tyne in January. The ground was frozen, it was icy. We were supposed to go up there and do a commando course just to keep us active to get us out of Bournemouth. So we did that. We were billeted in houses which were vacant. So we burnt all the picket fences just to keep warm, pinch coal from the

34:30 cookhouse area, so we did that, filling in time. Eventually we were absorbed into the system we hadn't flown for many months and I think it was from the time we left

35:00 I'd last flown in April 29th the end of April in Australia, no that's incorrect because I was training on Wirraways all the way through that. I last flew in Australia in June, the end of June1942 and here we were in England and we hadn't flown for months,

35:30 so we then went to fly Tiger Moths again so we hadn't flown from June until February.

A long time.

A long time. So we had basic training on Tiger Moths in a place called Shellingford which we did quite a lot of flying on Tiger Moths and then they sent me off to a place called Watton in Suffolk and we flew

36:00 Miles Master aircraft. The main thing that troubled us in England was navigation. In Australia there was one river, one road, one town and over there you'd be flying and you used to fly by map reading and you'd work out a course to fly but you'd look at the place and think I'm on course I'm flying over the right place, but in England there were too many railways, too many roads, too many towns. I

36:30 can remember looking down after being flying for a certain period of time and there was water down below and that wasn't where I was supposed to be. I was over the North Sea so about turn and found the first aerodrome and landed and rung up the instructor and said, "I got lost, come and get me." So he came and got me.

So you're still not working with crew at this stage?

No. No we're never a crew. We were just flying, we had an instructor, it was twin-seater

37:00 single-engine aircraft. We did night flying, in fact night flying was difficult. We did night flying in the day. They had sodium light flare path and they had sodium lights on the cockpit instruments and they put you under the hood and you flew night flying during the day with sodium lights. Which was one way of training us I suppose. Anyway we completed that.

37:30 Then we went to an OTU [Operational Training Unit], I say we actually the one thing that was a drawback to a certain degree. Army units stay as units, navy people are on a boat, as a pilot you were sent off as an individual. They didn't worry about whether your friends were there, you were sent off as an individual. I was an individual, I wasn't with anybody that I trained with, I was with English

38:00 people, Canadians, anybody who was over there in aircrew. I was sent up to a place called Millfield.

Tape 3

00:31 **So you were continuing about Millfield?**

Millfield was the next training centre that we went to after flying Miles Masters in Wootton. And Millfield was an OTU,

01:00 an operational training unit, your last training, that was it you were trained for operational training duties there. And Millfield was at the base of the Cheviot Hills which was not far from Berwick-upon-Tweed and not far from Alnwick actually. Little village and it had a school there where you learnt to fly Hurricanes and Typhoons, and at this stage of your training you don't have an instructor.

01:30 You get into the aircraft and you familiarise yourself with the flaps, undercarriage, throttle, pitch and all of the rest of it. And then they blindfold you and say put you hand on this and that so then you know where the things are and you don't have to take you eyes off where you're going. Next is, "Okay go and fly it." So you haven't had any instruction, you just get out and fly it, you have had enough hours to be able to get in the thing and fly it without any instruction. And a Hurricane is a beautiful aircraft it was very stable.

02:00 And the training at Millfield was very good. We did air-to-air gunner where a Fairy Battle would trail a drogue out over sea, we were not far from sea. And you were told how to attack the drogue and they would paint every pilot's bullets different colours, a drogue was a thing like a wind sock

02:30 which towed behind this aircraft. And you would fire on it and if you hit it your bullets would show, you were the red one etcetera, etcetera. So we did air-to-air gunnery and I enjoyed that. And you did fighter pursuit training, the instructor would take off and he said, "I am sitting on your tail now you get on my tail." Or vice versa I would be sitting on his tail and he would be in front of me and he would say, "Now you try and stay behind me."

03:00 And he would throw the thing all over the place and you would be upside down, you were just following him. It was pursuit to tail an aircraft. And you had a camera gun, which you would fire when you thought you had him in your sights and the camera gun was at the base of the wing. So they would take camera shots of you pursuing this aircraft and they would analyse it to see if you would have shot him down and things like that.

03:30 You still did aircraft recognition it was very important to be able to see a fleeting glimpse of an enemy aircraft or friendly aircraft and know what particular aircraft, naval identification of naval vessels, things that you might encounter in operational flying and operational flying means combat flying. And

04:00 one of the interesting things about the RAF was when you got onto a RAF airfield all pilots were given a bicycle, so you could ride everywhere, you could ride all around the place. Airfields were by nature, so the Germans couldn't bomb them, dispersed. So you really had to travel great distances out to where the aircraft were or where the crew hut was so you really needed the bicycle and you used to store your parachute out in the aircrew hut so you knew where your

04:30 parachute and helmets were. And we used to have great fun on bicycles too. And there were WAAFs [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] on this course too and they were very attractive WAAFs and we used to go into Berwick-on-Tweed and have some fun in Berwick-on-Tweed which is quite an interesting town as I remember it.

What were the WAAFs doing there?

They were parachute packers, they were in the administrative offices, they were clerks, they were all sorts of things.

05:00 And I think they enjoyed their life. And there was a sergeants' mess, there is always on an air force station a sergeants' mess and an officers' mess. And the sergeants' mess was as good as food as you could get, baked beans and Spam and those sorts of things. Potatoes, the diet was very limited because after all they had to import so much food. And the vast numbers of people they had

05:30 from various countries. As I say their organisation was pretty wonderful to be able to bring in supplies with the U-boats sinking their ships. The only sour note I had from Millfield which I have against RAF too. I happened to touch a petrol bowser with the wing tip of a Hurricane and a bent the wingtip of the Hurricane so I had to write a report on why. I had to try and waffle my way out of it which was absurd it was just an error in judgement. And I finished up, yours faithfully R L Bennell.

06:00 I didn't get a rocket for bending the wingtip, I got a rocket for not finishing the letter off the way the RAF requires you to, to say, "I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient servant." And I wasn't there to be anyone's obedient servant and I resent the RAF for their stuffiness. That you had to finish that, so that's my only sour note on the RAF which is quite a minor one because they did a marvellous job in training us.

06:30 And I flew Hurricanes for so many hours which is in my log book, and training exercises really are not listed as such because they were given numbers. So you went up and you did number so and so and I don't know what number so and so means today. I started flying Hurricanes in May and I flew them,

07:00 we were flying every day two or three times a day, May, June and then towards the end of our period, through the end of our OTU I flew Typhoons. And a Typhoon is a massive aircraft. Had a Napier Sabre engine of two thousand two hundred horsepower and it had twenty-four cylinders.

07:30 And it was a massive thing and you open up the throttle and it would throw you back in the seat. So that was probably the most powerful engined aircraft, and it was very fast. And these were the early model Typhoons which were called Coffin Typhoons because if you wanted to jettison to get out of it it had a funny type door that you couldn't jettison out of. So if you wanted to get out you couldn't get out, you went in with the aircraft. And they

08:00 lost a lot of pilots who spun in with Typhoon. But later on they modified the Typhoon so it had a sliding hood like a Spitfire, Hurricane and all of the rest of them.

Have you ever had to bail?

No never. No I flew mainly with Rolls Royce Merlin engines and they kept on turning. Some of them might have had some minor faults, some overheating, but I have never had an engine cut in my flying career on anything. So I never had to force

08:30 land or bail out or anything of that nature. So we finished our OTU at Millfield and did all of our exercises and were passed out as trained pilots, we had completed our training. And from there I went on leave, my final leave I spent in London .and there I met Ted Crabtree, and Ted Crabtree was a bloke I started at Somers with and went to Benalla

09:00 with and then he went off to fly twin-engined aircraft. So when we went to England we went together on the boat too. He was a good friend. He finished his OTU on bombers and he was waiting to be assigned to a bomber squadron. So I went out on single-engines then to India so I never heard of Ted Crabtree. And this was August 43. Ass I say it was hot as blazes in London and we had a good final leave. And I looked up

09:30 Crabtree on the roll on the war memorial, he lasted one month. One month. And I think the loss of bomber crews was almost equal in my opinion to the loss of World War I soldiers in France and Germany I think. If you ever see the figures the loss in bomber crew was shocking. There is a fellow Don Sharwood who wrote a book

10:00 and he was posted to a bomber squadron, I think he was a navigator and he asked the people on the squadron how many people finished their tour. A tour or operation on bombers was thirty flights. Nobody had finished a tour. They had all been lost, shot down, killed or POWs.

Was Ted apprehensive about being on a bomber squadron?

10:30 No Ted he was, he was going off on the squadron and he didn't worry about things like that. One month, I think that was cruel.

So you had spent the last few weeks of freedom he had before?

Well it was probably ten days or something of leave we had. And I can look up other names that went to bomber command, they didn't come home either. And Crabtree would have been my age about then,

11:00 I had probably turned twenty by then. I was posted to go to a place called, out of Liverpool, West Kirkby where they were assembling people to go out to India. And there we were given tropical uniforms. We were given a 38 Smith and Wesson revolver which we had to sing for of course and a brand new parachute in a parachute bag. And the parachute

11:30 bag was the most useful thing the air force ever gave me because the parachute bag was forerunner of the overnight bag. It had a zip right across the top and you could put all of your clothes in it. And if you were going on leave it was a great overnight bag. But in this case it had a nice new parachute. So we went up to Gourock, Gourock I think. Out from Glasgow. Got on a boat with a pith helmet of all stupid things. And set sail for India.

12:00 **Before you get to India where had you learnt to use a parachute? Was that part of your training?**

You never used a parachute except to sit on.

So you had never parachuted before?

You never parachuted no. In an aircraft you have a parachute and a quick release and, I forget the name of it which if you have got to take it off you spin that and press it. But the four straps came up, and you

12:30 make sure that you bring the straps up the crotch the right way because if you had to parachute out and you didn't have them the right way you lost the family jewels or they certainly got crunched anyway. So you had to put a parachute on a particular way. Then when you got into the aircraft you had the Sutton harness, which again came through and two straps up there. So when you were in an aircraft you had these two lots of straps, you had the parachute straps and the Sutton harness come up to hold you firmly in the aircraft.

13:00 Because you always had to be strapped in securely because if you had to force land well you would have gone into the instrument panel. Anyway we got on the boat and went out to India, we went through the Mediterranean because the Italians had been defeated at that time by 1943, the Mediterranean wasn't entirely clear of conflict but we got through and we got to Port Said.

What kind of vessel were you on?

13:30 We were on the Winchester Castle which was a lovely vessel and there was only a group of thirteen or fourteen pilots under the main group of the British marines. The British marines were all top class sort of army guys, and they used to have drill and we used to sleep in and they didn't think much of us. Not having to partake of all of the drill and formalities that the British Army required. So we had a good trip out to Port Said. And we saw Ferdinand de Lesseps, if you know who Ferdinand de Lesseps is? You probably don't.

14:00 He is this massive statue to Ferdinand de Lesseps who designed the Suez Canal. And they have got this big monument of this great guy sitting there. We were taken off the boat at Port Said and we were put on cattle trucks in a train, mile long, the whole lot of us. No food. They took our money they said they were going to change it, they didn't, they just took the money from us. And we went from Port Said down to Port Tewfik which is the other side of the Suez Canal

14:30 and there we were welcomed by the Salvation Army because we hadn't had anything to eat for I think about twenty-four hours. It was a very slow journey from one end of the canal to the other. I forget how long it took.

So the conditions weren't good on the train?

We were in the cattle truck sitting on our backsides on the floor of the cattle truck.

Was that a sanitary sort of set-up?

If you got off the train when it stopped it was.

15:00 That was rough. And we got to Port Tewfik and the Salvation Army gave us some sandwiches which was gratefully received. And we got on the Orunda Castle there which was another beautiful boat. And we went from there through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean I suppose to Bombay. And the first time and the only time I have ever seen flying fishes. Used to stand up at the bow of the boat and there is all

15:30 phosphorescence coming in the waves and flying fish . And we got to Bombay. The gateway to Bombay is a great big building that the British had built. And we were taken off on lighters into Bombay and have you ever been to India?

Afraid not.

Well you can smell the place as you approach it. And the culture shock of these beggars, deformed and

16:00 horrible masses of people. Masses of smells, I didn't think much of Bombay. Sure it had the Taj Mahal Hotel which is a very nice place, but India at the time was still under the control of the British Raj and if you have ever read A Passage to India by E.M. Forster, what he said in that book was dead right. The arrogant Poms that ran India should all have been shot.

16:30 **So the poverty had shocked you?**

Oh yes I had never seen anything like it. Masses of people, just masses. And I think there are probably still masses, they have about a billion people there I think, anyway we went to a camp outside of Bombay where we were given huts where they had fleas and we had to sleep under mosquito nets on a charpoy.

17:00 And a charpoy is a wooden frame with interlaced webbing across it, that was a charpoy which was a bed.

So you had no mattress?

Well we had to provide our own mattress if I remember correctly as a non commissioned officer. And when you got into India the difference between a commissioned officer and a non commissioned officer, in other words a pilot sergeant and a flying officer, was very marked. They had access to the clubs, they were provided with

17:30 a lot more than we were provided with but that didn't worry us.

So India was more English that England?

In my case it was more, I could find all sorts of adjectives for it.

Before you continue on with that, before we got too far down the track I just wanted to ask you about your opinions of the Hurricane and it was a very powerful aircraft. Did you think you would be

18:00 **flying the Hurricane or the Typhoon again ? Had you been told what you would be doing?**

No we hadn't been told what we would be doing but I knew I wouldn't be flying Typhoons because they weren't out in the Middle East they were all kept for England. The rocket-shooting Typhoons which, after D Day, did a lot of damage in France and the retreating Germans. My friend Gates he flew rocket-firing Typhoons and got knocked down there. Ended up as a POW in Germany.

18:30 No we were going out there, we knew there was Spitfires and we knew there was Hurricanes out there.

So you had ended up in this flea ridden tent?

Well it was a basha, bamboo bashas we were in in Bombay. The thing is made of bamboo and they don't have nails in them or anything, they are all made by the local people and they are what they call bamboo bashas. Buildings, huts, weren't too bad. They had cement floors.

19:00 They weren't too bad as far as things were. It was all strange to us. And we had the beggars around, "Want backsheesh," and they call them the waving palms of India with all of these palms out, wanting backsheesh. Anyway. That's part of India and it doesn't change. Might have changed by now.

What was the attitude of the airmen to all of this?

Just another lot of bodies going through, white bodies we were sahibs.

19:30 Everybody addressed you as saab because you were white. So they were the downtrodden masses who, I don't know how they lived but they existed somehow.

And the attitude of the flying crew to these people?

They were another world. Didn't belong to your world. And even more so as I go along through this story.

20:00 **Were you all, what proportion of this group was Australian, were you the only Aussie?**

No Canadians and English. There might have been one. Jack MacLean was an Aussie, casual Aussie, real casual Aussie. And on the boat with these Royal Marines they had some competitions, high jumping competitions

20:30 and the Royal Marines were all fit muscle bound guys and they were all jumping over whatever it was. And Jack MacLean came out in his shorts and singlet and he could out-jump all of them. He was just one of those guys who was talented and didn't make any show of his own ability. I don't know what happened to him eventually. Anyway we went out to this place out of,

21:00 Bombay and then we went by train up to Poona, which they call Pune these days, P U N E, but it was Poona in my day. Where Gandhi was imprisoned in my time. And to annoy the British they used to ring the bells every hour I think in the town of Poona. And we were on an airfield there where they were siphoning us, a reception depot before you went to a squadron. And we flew Harvard aircraft there,

21:30 first time I had flown a Harvard aircraft there which is an American trainer on which the Wirraway is fashioned to a degree. Nice aircraft. But the RAF was very good they would post on the noticer board, pilots needed for squadron so and so, pilots needed for that and they wanted Spitfire and Hurricane pilots. Well I didn't want to go on a Spitfire squadron because it was a defensive squadron. You had to wait for the enemy to come over and

22:00 you had to sit on standby. They did do some strafing too but mainly it was defending Calcutta. Defending Chittagong, defending Imphal.

Would they have seen less action those defensive ones?

Well I don't really know, I was never in one. I was on airfields with them and they were there to attack incoming Jap aircraft. They did do some strafing but a Spitfire has a very limited fuel load and they couldn't fly that long unless it had overload tanks.

22:30 And six of us, myself, Anderson, Anderson was a Canadian and the rest were RAF guys, British guys. Some of them had trained in America incidentally too. We thought that 20 Squadron read very interesting, it was an army co-operation squadron, it was converting from Lysanders to Hurricanes and we thought that would be worth

23:00 joining so we put our names down. The six of us went off to a place called Kaladan which was half way

down to Bombay and we joined 20 Squadron which as I say was converting from these Lysander aircraft. And it was a squadron equipped with forty millimetre cannons. Now forty millimetre cannon is a big sort of a cannon and two machine guns. And all of the fellows there were converting and learning to fly Hurricanes and we had learnt to fly Hurricanes, so we joined the squadron, six

23:30 pilot sergeants. There were three Australians on the squadron at the time, and the rest were English, Canadians. One from British East Africa and one from West Indies. And one from Johannesburg. There was a whole mixture

24:00 of people worked with the RAF.

And were you all treated the same?

Yeah.

Who paid you?

The British the RAF.

So you were all paid the same?

No the Canadians did better. We came second the New Zealanders and the Poms came last. All doing the same job but they got less money than we and the Canadians did.

What was the rationale?

Just the national requirement. The Canadians were far more demanding of the RAF than our government.

24:30 McKenzie-King who was the prime minister of Canada at the time, he demanded of the British air command what he wanted, and he got what he wanted or he wouldn't send his men over there. So they really had more control over the British and the British hierarchy in the air force than Menzies and Curtin. They just let it slide.

25:00 They did send liaison officers, we did have liaison officers who if you had any grievance you would report to the liaison officer who would sort it out. But the RAAF the Australian people had very good mailing arrangements, I am detracting a little.

That's fine.

They had Kodak House in Kingsway London and all letters were addressed to Joe Blow, Kodak House Kingsway London. And they knew all of the posting of every RAAF

25:30 person over there, and they would get your food parcels and your letters and everything like that sent out to where you happened to be. Which was quite well organised. One of the fellows in that was a fellow from Red Cliffs who I knew. And he was a bit of a raw artist and he did some caricatures of Gates and myself when we visited him in Kodak House London. Anyway to go back to India we joined RAF squadron 20, 20 Squadron,

26:00 which was preparing to go into Burma because the Japanese had gone into Burma in 1942. that in itself is an appalling story of all of the British and pro-British who had to come out of Burma and the only place they could was a place up at Imphal a road into, and they died by the thousands on the road trying to come from Rangoon, Mandalay and all of those places because the Japs either shot them

26:30 or they tried to get out and they died on the way. Anyway we were going into Burma to help the British Army and destroy Japanese transports or whatever. So we went from Kaladan where we were by train, two or three days I forget which to Calcutta, and when we went through Bengal, Calcutta is the

27:00 main city of Bengal, the Bengal famine of 1943 was in force and there was dead Indians everywhere and they would just pick them up and throw them onto bullock wagons. And that was really a shock to see all of these people dying. And R.G. Casey who was an Australian was the Governor of Bengal at that time. Which is quite incidental no reason why you should say that. Anyway

27:30 Calcutta we were told we were not to take into Burma anything but our very basic needs and anything that was surplus to that or that you didn't need you had to pack in tin trunks and leave in Calcutta. So we packed all of our gear, and we had lots of stuff, souvenirs we had picked up on the way. And that was left in Calcutta while we got on a boat with our basic gear and went over to Chittagong. Chittagong is the port of

28:00 Arakan, an Indian territory that is now Bangladesh. From Chittagong we got by coastal boat to a place called Cox's Bazaar. Cox's Bazaar we got in a motor truck and went down to an air strip called George. It's got an Indian name that's a mile long, we called it George. It was just a strip of dirt which was flat. It was right on the edge of the jungle,

28:30 we lived in bashas. The monkeys would annoy you at night. And we operated from there flying in, we were only a couple of minutes flying, the Japanese were not far away and they had been holding the British at that line for some time and they continued to hold it for some time too. And the Japanese were

supplied from the Kaladan River from a port of Akyab which they controlled

29:00 in Japanese held territory, and they would float all of their armaments up by night and we would fly over them in the day at tree top height trying to find boats or anything which the Japanese were using to bring troops and supplies up to this front line. In contrast, when you're taking off you would see a pall of dust where the British was bringing in its supplies

29:30 from Chittagong harbour and you would cross the bomb line and not a thing moved, there was just not a thing there. But the Japanese were there and they held the British there for a long time. And they were supplied by boat and they were masters of camouflage it was very difficult to see anything. And we used to fly the river so they put great cables over the river so you couldn't fly too low, we were flying low enough as it was.

30:00 You flew in pairs generally, so you looked at his tail and he looked at your tail and pairs were way up there. And you never flew straight and level you weaved all of the time. Because if you flew straight and level the Japanese guns could predict that you were going to be there so you weaved, so you just didn't fly you weaved and you would look for targets. But before you took off, you used to have to wear boots, putties

30:30 or things, strips of material that you wrapped around there, the intention was if you were shot down you were not going to get leeches up your pants or anything like that. Because you had long pants on, and it's hot as blazes and then you had to put a money belt on which you signed for and was all sealed I never ever saw what was inside the money belt.

31:00 Then you had an escape jacket, well overalls actually, had a machete and a fishing line, a dozen and one things so if you were shot down you would be able to walk back and survive. I only ever knew of two people that did. But you flew in all of this as hot as could be. And then on top of that you had your parachute with the straps and the Sutton harness. And I used to get prickly heat all across there because you're perspiring like mad.

31:30 So it was uncomfortable. You were hot. And you would fly in that gear for an hour and a half, hour and three quarters, that was the duration. You didn't have to fly far because the Japanese were there, we were here, so you would go up and down their rivers looking for targets of opportunity. We were also army co-operation and there was an army intelligence officer on our squadron, plus our own intelligence

32:00 officer so before you took off they would brief you on where you were going and what you were looking for. And the army guy, if you were attacking army targets would, "There is some Japanese artillery pieces here we want you to attack those." Which would be very heavily camouflaged and difficult to see anyway, you attacked them. Because forty millimetre cannon is equipped with high explosive shells and armour-piercing shells. The guns were known as tank

32:30 busters and they were used in the Middle East against German tanks. And it was a specialist gun, there was only one squadron with them, it was called a Vickers S gun it was slung under the wings of the aircraft and it only had sixteen shells per gun and you would fire them in a pair.

And your control was on the top of your?

Top of your throttle and your machine guns was on the top of your control column, so you had a button there if you wanted to use your machine gun, a button there if you wanted to fire your cannons.

33:00 **Did the Hurricane have any kind of air filtration system where you were getting fresh air?**

Yeah two little holes stuck up there which you could turn around.

And that wasn't enough to keep you cool?

Oh no not when you were flying low. And you were under stress, you perspire when you are under stress anyway.

So the Japanese didn't have an airfield themselves there?

No.

So the British could keep bringing in stuff during the day?

The Japanese used to

33:30 attack Chittagong harbour and that's where the Spitfires were based. And they would send Zeros up to escort them but they never ever attacked us. Well first of all we were hard to see we were camouflaged against the jungle and they mainly wanted to stop the supplies coming into Chittagong for the British Army. And we would attack targets of opportunity. You were sent out on a tactical reconnaissance

34:00 and if you saw anything you would shoot it. And we also had to co-operate with the army and attack things that the army wanted us to attack. So we had those sort of jobs but you freelance mainly, looking for targets of opportunity. Which was the beauty in my case of flying with the RAF as a Hurricane pilot because you had the freedom to go and find your own targets and you weren't regimented to

34:30 any particular line of action.

Can you tell me about the variety of targets that you were looking for?

Well they were river craft which they would mainly camouflage, they would bring them up at night and they would camouflage them under the skirts of the trees and that's why they put the cables over so that you couldn't come down too low. But we used to get them, because we got ammunition dumps because they would stage up this Kaladan River and they would have to store them so we'd

35:00 get an ammunition dump. There wasn't any transport because there was hills and jungle, there was only road transport for the Japs and that's about all they had to bring their supplies up. There was the Mayu River and the Kaladan but I think they used to mainly use the Kaladan River which flows out of what was the Arakan which is now Bangladesh down to the sea of Akyab. It was a very basic primitive country

35:30 no development there. There might have been some local tribesman that had little villages somewhere, I don't know where. And that's why you carried the money belt because if you were shot down you were supposed to be able to bribe the local Burmese that you meet. "Take me back to the British." But I think we were worth two blankets from the Japs and they preferred from what I hear, two blankets from the Japs instead of taking our money.

36:00 Because our guys that were shot down, some of them went in the jungle you never knew where they went, the one who was shot down along the beach area, he ended up in Rangoon as a POW [Prisoner of War], and I met him after the release from Rangoon but they used to go into the jungle and nobody could find the remains. You would fly over the flight path that they had flown. One was an Australian Jack Thompson

36:30 who with a New Zealander they went out and never came back and we could never find a trace of them. The others, likewise, never found a trace of them. They just got shot down. Because the Japs used to send Zeros into the area where we were operating, into their own territory and I think their anti-aircraft was very good. We would get holes in our aircraft, you wouldn't see a big anti-aircraft gun because we were very low.

37:00 But their light machine guns that they had, they were pretty good with them. They would put holes in your aircraft but never put any holes in mine where it mattered, they would just go through a wing or something. So I was never greatly troubled by anti-aircraft fire. And we had armour piercing under the engine, armour piercing under you and armour piercing up the back so anything coming straight up would be

37:30 deflected by the armour piercing. But if you were banking of course you would get shot through. So it is all luck of the game.

Did you ever see Japanese soldiers that you?

Well later on I did but not there. This was the Arakan. We were there from December through to July when the monsoon came over. And we operated there, numerous times. I think I did eighty ops

38:00 down there in that seven months. Over the Japanese territory. And while I was there I was detached up to Imphal, and Imphal doesn't mean much to you perhaps but Imphal was a beautiful valley up on the Burma border and there is a book I have got there, The Air Battle of Imphal in which I am mentioned because we were detached up there because there was some tanks coming in and ours were the only aircraft that could shoot a tank. Hole a tank.

38:30 And we were sent up to Imphal detached, just two aircraft.

That's because of your Vickers?

Our particular armament. And Imphal was a valley under siege, the Japanese were on the Burma border and the Japanese were making their last stand to get into India because there is only two roads out of the Burma valley, on at Imphal and one at Kohima. So the Battle of Kohima and the Battle of Imphal were the major turning points in

39:00 1943. Yeah 43. And they really dissipated a lot of their energy trying to get into Imphal, trying to get into Kohima. And there was vast numbers of Japanese killed there and vast numbers of British and we were sent up there detached. And we used to fly into Imphal in the morning, we were sent out to a little strip out of Imphal,

39:30 because Imphal had to be supplied by air and anybody who wasn't really necessary was turfed out for the night .and we would go and stay there and come in at dawn again and go and attack targets which we were assigned to. The Japanese were coming over the hill into Imphal. And one night we got stuck down there and there was no where to sleep so I slept in an ambulance.

40:00 It was the only bed I could find was in an ambulance. And the Japanese used to infiltrate the airstrips, there was probably six or seven airstrips in the Imphal valley, and the Dakotas would come over regularly with supplies and that's how they got supplied regularly by Dakota aircraft. Biscuit bombers or whatever they liked to call it, and that was their supply and we would come in there and we were

assigned targets

40:30 and we would do our job. We didn't have out ground staff with us so we had to service our own aircraft to a degree. They would refuel them and then we went back down to the Arakan, and we stayed there operating until I got too wet on the strip we were in and we came up to another airstrip which had bitumen and hessian on it which was

41:00 hessian which had been soaked in bitumen and then it had wire netting over it and it was domed so it would shed the water when the monsoon rains came. But it was very difficult flying conditions.

Tape 4

00:50 **If you'd like to start from when you joined the squadron for me?**

01:00 I was going to make an observation that was over two years and we had the training, travel, had a wonderful time it was the most exhilarating time in my life, but if you liken it to a business proposition the government had invested a lot of time, men need transporting, need feeding, need training and when we joined 20 Squadron in India to go into Burma that was

01:30 the end of it, that was payback time. We then had to repay, and I look upon it as repaying all the training, all the money that had been invested in us to go and do the job for which we are trained. Therefore the whole complex of your life the whole attitude of your life changed. You were, as I say, stripped down to your basics to live in a hut, a basha or a tent to fly

02:00 combat missions. Missions is an American word, sorties was a RAF word, combat sorties. That of course initially was exciting, I'd been trained now I'm going out, I'm going to fire these guns and I'm going to fire them in earnest, not in anger. The RAF had a different expression to probably the Americans and maybe the Australians, you were not going out to kill people you were going out to defeat the enemy. This

02:30 was a subtle difference, but then the Poms are subtle.

Before we move on a couple of quick questions. What were you doing with any spare time that you had?

Well in that case we were down at George we weren't far from the beach and the

03:00 Bay of Bengal the beach was quite good. We filled in time, I guess you read if there was anything to read, we didn't have any power at night, you went into the mess and had your meal if it was at night, probably was, they had a little generator two stroke engine generating light for a certain period of time. I don't really know what we did to fill in time.

03:30 We did have a bearer, now a bearer was an Indian in my case he was an Afghan actually, who followed the squadron and was unofficially the strength of the squadron, but not officially, they were there as servants, that was what, they ironed your clothes, washed your clothes did all sorts of things for about 2 bob a day, a week actually, very little.

04:00 But they were very happy to do that and the bearers on the squadron at times they were given a pass to go home and look after their families or whatever and then come back and join the squadron in a menial capacity for very little money. So you didn't have to do anything about that, you didn't have to do your own washing or anything, these people did it. I

04:30 don't know what we did to fill in our time. We read intelligence reports which you got intelligence reports on what was going on and what you'd expect to see in the active area, and swam. People who really suffered there were the ground staff. They had to service their aircraft in the shocking conditions. No protection, no cover and the

05:00 RAF had the most wonderful middle management, flight corporal, flight sergeant who were well trained, competent, could manage men, came from the same social structure and you've got to admit there is a social structure in England and those guys worked terrible hours under horrible conditions and I never knew them to fail in their job.

05:30 We had a form, every aircraft had a form which was a 700 I think they called it, in Australia they called it E77 but I think the RAF called it 700, which the instrument maker would sign "I've checked" sign, the airframe guy, sign, armament would sign, engine guy the two engine he'd sign and then the flight sergeant down the bottom would say, "I've checked that and that's OK," and you

06:00 would sign for the aircraft knowing that every tradesmen had gone through your aircraft and brought it up to the level that was required to be at. The wireless operator they'd all sign that they had checked. So you knew your aircraft was as well tuned and as well equipped and maintained as you possibly could. Those aircraft always went away after 240 hours to

06:30 a major overall. They looked after your aircraft. As I say mine kept turning the “old fan” as we called it, kept turning I never had any engine trouble except with a couple of aircraft that would overheat at times. Nobody knew why they’d overheat, but I don’t know of any aircraft that failed on operations because of maintenance or because of weakness in the aircraft. We were backed

07:00 up very well with ground staff. After all there were a heap of ground staff, we had 16 aircraft, two flights A flight, B flight eight aircraft in each flight and about 22 or 24 pilots or something like that, so there weren’t many pilots but there were a lot of ground staff and back up people to keep 16 aircraft in the air was considerable. By supplying you, feeding you, fuelling and all the rest of it. It

07:30 was a big operations all the logistics must have been fantastic to bring supplies into Calcutta by sea or Bombay or wherever they came into, get them into the front line, magnificent efforts to that logistics when you’re operating so far from the parent company. Anyway we operated out of this strip along the Teknaf Peninsula on the Burma border we were firstly at this strip called George

08:00 and then another strip called Hove where we operated from the beach. The sand was good, firm and that was our strip we landed and took off on the beach. The tide generally didn’t interfere with us.

How wide was the beach?

When the tide was out it was massively wide, it was about three miles long and you could take off from there and it was great.

It was firm enough?

Very firm, very fine and firm sand. We operated from Hove for, the book would tell me, but for so long until the monsoon came.

Did that interfere with the planes equipment having fine sand?

No. It was compacted. It was a wonderful strip until the monsoon came and we moved up to the strip that I was describing before which was covered in bitumen and hessian to shed the rain.

08:30 Flying in monsoon conditions was impossible. We did it and we sometimes got caught but when the monsoon comes it’s massive turbulent clouds and there’s a thing call the tropical anvil and if you’re up and on top and it’s showing a bit like an anvil and the centre is where all the rain and turbulence is and if you

09:00 were caught with a tropical monsoon, you had three options. You went back to your base if you could, you went around it if you could, or you came down and flew at ground level because you could fly under it without turbulence. But to do that you need to know the territory or you could fly into a mountain because Burma’s just a range of mountains and the Arakan was the same a danger of high hills and mountains. They’re inclined to call mountains hills over there.

09:30 When we got caught on times you knew your country well enough, you knew that if you flew long enough you’d be able to see and then you’d come down through the muck and get down to the sea and follow the coast back to your strip. So monsoon flying was difficult.

You were doing your own navigation as well because you’d have to?

Yes. Single-engine pilots have a map or if they know their territory well enough to need anything than after a while you know your

10:00 territory well enough not to need a map. In the Arakan area we were for seven months and when the monsoon became too intense and couldn’t get supplies to us, through to us and it was impossible to operate anyway we were withdrawn to Madras. So we flew our aircraft from where we were on Hove strip up to Calcutta and land at Calcutta and refuel and went down the coast

10:30 to Vishakhapatnam and refuel and then on down to Madras. Then from Madras we went to Tiruchhirappalli which was a little further south and then central and southern India and we were there for a while. Monsoon storms are horrific. The lightning and the thunder and the thunder rolls just above your head and bangs and claps and fantastic noise. It’s exciting

11:00 in some respects. At least you get cool and the only way you could get cool was to strip off and go and stand under the rain, and get the rain pelting on you. I used to get prickly heat and then you get all those fungal diseases under your armpit and the uncirculated or unventilated parts of your body and we used to use this thing called gentian violet, used to paint all these bits in

12:00 violet paint to stop the fungal whatever you like to call the irritation. Anyway from Tiruchhirappalli we came back to Madras and we had a certain amount of flying there.

What were you doing in Tiruchhirappalli?

Just did nothing actually. We just landed there. The only thing I did at Tiruchhirappalli I remember I went in to see a cigar factory, watch all these Indians like that rolling cigars

12:30 up their legs, they’d roll them up their thighs, they’d make cigars. Didn’t like cigars after that, still never smoked them anyway.

Was this still the exciting life that you had seen it as in the beginning?

No. I'd done 87 operations over enemy territory and I was tired, tired. You're not physically tired you're

13:00 nervously tired, you're burnt. You just get so damned tired.

Can you explain that to me?

No. I'll tell you later on. From there we went on leave to the Nilgiri Hills and they call them hills, they're 7,000 feet high, but that's where there were coffee plantations and tea plantations. Beautiful climate, lovely place and the air force had taken over some maharaja's place

13:30 and the aircrew, we were looked after very well as always. We could stay there in marble, have a bath in a marble bath, we had a damned good holiday. Which I reckon we deserved at that stage. We just did a certain amount of practice flying in Madras. But at that stage there was a Canon Diggle, a canon

14:00 in the Anglican Church he had the rank of group captain, he was a pretty high type, about that far off from God, very important guy in the religious world. He wanted to go up to a place in central India, can't think of the name it won't come to me in a hurry, anyway he wanted to be flown up there and I said I'd fly him up there in the

14:30 Harvard aircraft which we had. I'll have to look up the name of it because it's relevant to what else I want to say. Not so easy to find.

15:00 **Just incidentally while you're looking that up, were any of the Hurricanes your plane? That you were assigned to?**

Well if you look down here, no looks as though I flew whatever, because the number of the aircraft is all listed there and you just flew.

15:30 Yes I took him up to a strip in central India called Begumpet, but that wasn't the name I was looking for. Anyway, he wanted to go up there so I flew him up there because he was going to marry a friend of his

16:00 and I wanted to go there because in the topsy turvy world, my mother's brother was in charge, he was a wing commander in charge of some servicing depot and my father's sister was a nursing sister in the same place. So I could introduce my father's sister to my mother's brother and they were both English, which I thought was a bit unusual, that you've got two sides of the family that you can meet.

16:30 Secunderabad was the place. I went up there and I could stay up there for a few days and talk to them and then fly back down to Madras again. Near Madras I got caught in a monsoon storm because the weather report said scattered showers, but as I was part way down there I ran into a monsoon storm. I couldn't go back because I didn't enough, I didn't want to go back basically because

17:00 there was nowhere to stay at a staging strip so the only thing I could do was go down and follow a railway line. I was about rooftop high following a railway line in this filthy monsoon storm, which I flew down to Madras following and then at Madras I knew the railway line went out to an airfield called Arkonam so I followed that out still at tree top height and fortunately the sun was shining out at Arkonam. That's the only time I really got trapped in a bad

17:30 monsoon storm. Anyway we were in Madras until monsoon had finished up in Burma. That was just prior to Christmas and we were going to move back up to Burma. As I'd flown out I was a ground party going back, so all over Christmas and prior to Christmas we were on a train going from Madras to Calcutta. All we got for Christmas as I remember was a tin of Nestles condensed milk and that was the big thrill on this train trip

18:00 going up to Calcutta. At Calcutta the Americans were running a railway along the Brahmaputra River so we went from Calcutta in an American run train up to a place called Gauhati where they were supplying, and you wouldn't have heard of the Americans who flew the hump and flew aircraft from Assam into China supplying the Chiang Kai-shek army and hundreds of Americans died on that trip.

18:30 Anyway this was a line that used to take supplies up to these people to fly over to China. So we went up there and in that train and got off at Gauhati, went across on the ferry, got into trucks and went up through the mountain range into Imphal where we were to start operations. This was in the end of 1944, it was Christmas '44 and we got in at the latter part of '44 into Imphal.

19:00 We operated from Imphal because the Japanese at that stage, the monsoon had finished the British Army had built up their numbers sufficiently and we had lots of aircraft and they started pushing the Japanese back. The Japanese don't retreat really, the Japanese fight all the way. So we had to attack Japanese targets, Japanese anything and that's where you did shoot people and that's

19:30 what I don't talk about because I don't like it. Anyway we flew right down following the Japanese retreat as they'd retreat the army would bulldoze airfields, which were paddy fields, and they'd put up tents and we would fly off these paddy fields, rice fields and live in tents,

20:00 eat baked beans and bully beef and those sort of things. Actually the cooks on the squadron were quite good. They would set up a camp and they'd get a 44 gallon drum and turn it into an over and some of

them were really good, they could cook quite good meals. I should've said that back in Hove where we were before we went to Madras I put in for a commission, I got a commission and I was a pilot officer then.

20:30 With a pilot officer you got all sorts of gear, you got a nice bed roll which had a mattress in it, it also had a frame which you could put a canvas thing in for a hand basin, you could collapse the frame and put canvas thing for a bath. You got paid more money. So I was commissioned when I was 20 down there, that changed life because you could go into all the clubs

21:00 as an officer you went into. India lived by clubs, which were British clubs which were exclusive stuffy things.

What kind of clubs?

Social clubs, they had a bar, they had billiards, they were generally alongside, well up in Ootacamund in the Nilgiri Hills, the golf course was with the club. This is how

21:30 the British Raj lived, the real borough Sahibs as they were called. The top brass who were an arrogant bunch of pigs in the main, but the ordinary Englishman was totally different to those. Being commissioned made life more comfortable. So when we went back in to Burma I was a pilot officer and not to make any difference you still flew an aeroplane,

22:00 basically did the same thing, but you had the privileges on the ground. If you happened to be in Calcutta, and sometimes we used to get leave, we didn't get leave very much but we used to go up to Calcutta and this was from down the Arakan, we had the Harvard aircraft on the squadron and two guys would get up to Calcutta and then two guys would fly the Harvard up and the two that were there

22:30 would fly the Harvard back. So you'd bring back Hayward's Gin and Rosa Rum, Indian spirits because you never got any alcohol. I think we have got a couple of rations of Bangalore Beer on occasions, but there was no alcohol to mention. One of your duties as an officer was you had to censor the airmen's mail. So after you ate your meal you were supposed to sit down and read the airmen's mail and decide whether they were saying anything which was not

23:00 permitted to say whether they were talking about where they were and what they were doing, so that was an officer's job which I never really relished and you'd have to sign on the outside of the airmail thing that you'd read their letter which you didn't, in detail anyway. That was one of your after meal jobs as an officer. If you went up on leave, I interrupted that story, when Jack Anderson and I went up to Calcutta on leave the Harvard

23:30 aircraft was unserviceable and we didn't know how we were going to get back down to the hundreds of miles into the Arakan. So we went down to a ferry flight and we said have you got any Hurricanes going down there. They said, "Yeah. We've got a couple of Hurricanes flying down there." We didn't have a helmet, we didn't have a parachute, but we had this wonderful parachute bag that had all that gear in it so we sat on that put cotton wool in our ears, which was all strictly taboo,

24:00 flying without a helmet, flying without a parachute and we flew across the Bay of Bengal and the aircraft kept turning and we landed at the strip we were supposed to land at that delivered the aircraft, these were the irregular things that you did at times which you weren't supposed to do. That way we got back from leave without having difficulty getting back. The next time, later on when I went on leave we could hitch a ride with a Liberator Bomber

24:30 that was going up to Calcutta. So you used to be able to get a lift with all sorts of things unofficially. However the Japanese were retreating down through the Burma Valley and the Burma Valley has got a broad valley with mountains up there which is India, mountains up there which is China and then the Irrawaddy River flows down the eastern side of the Burma Valley. The Chindwin River flows down the western side

25:00 of the Burma Valley. The Irrawaddy comes down to Mandalay and it turns at about 90 degrees and goes west and the Chindwin comes down and you have the confluence of those two rivers. So we used to, the Japs were retreating so there were many opportunities to catch the Japs at disadvantages as they were retreating. The British were advancing and they were advancing pretty well because they

25:30 had to get the Japs out of Burma before the next monsoon started. We operated progressively down the valley until the strip I last flew off was called Monywah and Monywah was west of Mandalay and we supported the British when they were crossing the Irrawaddy River and if the squadron did nothing else for the whole war we destroyed 13 tanks in one day, which were facing the British as they were

26:00 crossing over the Irrawaddy. As I say, if we did nothing we were justified in knocking out 13 tanks because the British Army had crossed the Irrawaddy with very basic materials and we could've, they would've been sitting ducks for these 13 tanks. So we destroyed 13 tanks in one day, but we lost some men.

How many planes did that take?

I don't know. At that stage the squadron had changed from

26:30 one flight with rockets and one flight with forty mm canons. I started with B flight which was 40 mm canons, so there were only eight aircraft that possibly could attack these tanks. We used to do all manner of things to support the army, if there was an artillery piece up somewhere or another they had got

27:00 a pilot who had experience flying over Burma, they gave him a Jeep and a radio operator and the army would, if they want to attack a unit up there they would fly a smoke shell up there and the pilot on the ground would say, "See that smoke shell up there, just up there," and he could describe it and you could attack that position that he described. The Japs had their artillery pieces camouflaged of course, you couldn't see them from the ground. But with these directions you were

27:30 able to attack these artillery pieces which were firing onto the British Army. Then the other thing we'd do what you'd call cab rank, you'd fly back and forth along the front line tyring to stop the artillery from firing. They figured you could spot them when they fired so you knew where to attack. We used to fly back and forth along the front line trying to stop the Japs from firing their artillery pieces.

28:00 At about that time I had done 110 missions I was burnt out. I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't at all well. I went on leave. If you were interested in I'll read what Andrew Miller said and Andrew Miller was our CO [Commanding Officer], and he was a very good CO and he was a squadron leader the SODFC and was a good leader.

28:30 "We're all a bit jaded about this time." and I'm talking of the time I'm talking about "and I felt as though I was going truly around the bend." He would never indicate, you'd have no idea he was a thorough Pom who you never knew what he was thinking, but as he admits in these memoirs which he wrote after the war he'd had it too. "Group Captain Finley" who was the boss around there at the time

29:00 "I met Group Captain Finley one day and he said 'The war was entering its final critical stage and that we needed a final all-out-effort for victory.' I had been considering that it would be in the best interest of my sanity if I asked for a rest from operations, but in response to Finley's appeal I decided to carry on."

29:30 This poor guy was burnt out, he died in his 60s he was a GP in Benson in England actually, not far from Oxford, and he died in '63 and I have to be convinced that the stress he was under caused, well he got cancer of the liver. Peter McMillan one of our flight commanders he died in his 60s, he died of cancer too. Jock Jenkins, another Australian, there were only three Australians, I've got a photo of

30:00 them somewhere, on the squadron. He died in his 60s of a heart attack. I'm alive, those guys died. He goes on in his report, "Some of the pilots from the Colonies," which really got up our nose when he used to call us the colonies, "had shorter overseas tours than the British," which wasn't true, "and we're now due for repatriation. Dicky Pale left for Rhodesia,"

30:30 which he still lives in because I correspond with him on the internet. "Peter McMillan" was the Australian who died "and Sandy McVale" the New Zealander "I saw Sandy off on the DC-3 from Monywah, he'd been a loyal friend as the Dakota trundled away over the strip I felt a sense of loss." Then he talks about me.

You're not willing to read that?

31:00 No. He knew I'd had it too. Anyway there I was given three weeks' sick leave and I went off with another guy the Nilgiri Hills again for three weeks. And I met an Australian woman who lives still just down here in Pearce Street who was a coffee planter's wife. She came from Adelaide so they took me into their house for a week after the other guy had gone back. I was always grateful for that and I look after her if she's got any problems now

31:30 because she's just down in Pearce Street. While I was there I was promoted to a flight lieutenant and given command of a meteorological flight in central Nagpur which was three aircraft, three pilots and a strut on the wing with a wet and dry bulb with a thermometer on it and given a pad there and you climbed up at dawn and dusk as far as a Hurricane would go, which is 23,000 or something and you'd be on oxygen

32:00 and you'd record the humidity, the wet and dry bulb thermometer records, so I did that for the last part of the war which was May to August until the Japs surrendered. We did it after that so I was still flying after the surrender of the Japs. Then we were posted back to an embarkation depot out from Calcutta

32:30 and again we got into a horrible boat and came home on the Sante and we would have come home in a rowing boat anyway. At that stage I'd had dysentery twice, I'd had all these fungal diseases in the non-circulated parts of the body and I was burnt out. I was feeling horrible. So I was quite happy to get home. We didn't get back

33:00 until October or November '45 when the war was over and nobody was really interested in anyone coming home, you know come home and become a civilian. I'll have a rest.

Tape 5

00:40 **We were just talking then about that not many knew that the Australians were up in Burma in World War II. Why do you think that is?**

Well we were in the RAF and the RAF serviced its squadrons wherever they were needed

01:00 and at the time we went to India to Burma there was the build up. The Japanese had captured Burma, the British held the line and at this stage there was a build up, they were going to kick the Japs out of Burma. So they were building up the squadron that I went on was converting to Lysanders, there were other Hurricane squadrons being created. There were a lot of aircraft coming into the country. They were ferried in, whatever means. There

01:30 was a big build-up to get the Japs out of Burma. The funny sideline to that is we were defending the Indian continent against the Japanese invasion. When the Japanese captured Singapore all along there they captured thousands of Indian troops who were serving in British regiments and those Indians elected to become the Indian National Army under a fellow called Subhas Chandra Bose who's honoured in India today

02:00 and evermore. Chandra Bose was always anti-British he was the Indian National Congress leader who was imprisoned by the British, got away etc etc and he formed the Indian National Army in Singapore and along those countries. So here we are Japanese have all these Indians fighting with them and we're up there keeping the Japanese out of India to save India. So the whole thing was so positively absurd when you

02:30 look at it in that light, and I don't think that is generally known that the Indian National Army fighting with the Japanese to kick the British out India and how we are fighting the Japanese to keep them out of India. How crazy, but India got its independence in 1947 and achieved what it wanted, I don't blame them in many respects because I don't think the British served them well. They certainly served them well in creating railways and all sorts of things,

03:00 infrastructure, like that. They weren't nice people. However that was just a little sideline on the absurdity of war. War can never be justified, but war can never stop from the day that man didn't like his neighbour, they're fighting around the world now. This is a homo sapien that is the nastiest animal on the face of the

03:30 earth in my opinion. They should all, you and I included be exterminated.

The day is coming.

Who's going to be the great exterminator?

As long as it's not George W Bush. How far west did the Japanese get ?

They advanced to the front that I was serving on the Arakan on the border which was the western border of Burma,

04:00 where it joins Bangladesh, joined India at that stage, and up through the valley to Imphal and Kohima and that's as far as they got. They couldn't get any further, because the British held them where I was initially on the Arakan front, the British held them on the other two fronts. Then from there on they'd exhausted themselves and they'd extended their lines of communication, their logistics

04:30 couldn't serve them and couldn't give them enough food anyway. After all they could live on a handful of rice, they were fantastic enemy.

You had a respect for the Japanese?

Respect for their system as it existed in that time they were so obedient to their Emperor. They would have these kamikaze

05:00 guys who would fly aeroplanes into American ships who would just advance regardless of how many were being mown down. They were a determined enemy.

Were they a skilled enemy?

Oh I think they were extremely clever. Their camouflage was amazing. They could camouflage so many things that we couldn't see. They'd resort to anything

05:30 to camouflage their activities. On one occasion I saw a bullock cart being driven through the plains of Burma when the retreat was on and we were told to shoot anything, south of that line, that moved or didn't move for that matter. I shot this thing and there were high explosive canons that blew all the wagon off and there was a piece of artillery. They'd just had a poor old Burmese guy

06:00 supposedly driving his bullock cart, his bullock wagon, but it was a bit of artillery. They were very clever I thought.

Did you know of what was going on in the prisoner of war camps?

No you didn't know anything about that. No. It was only after the war when I was at Nagpur in that period they were bringing the prisoners of war out of Rangoon and they had to land

06:30 at Nagpur to refuel and then I met the guys who had bee on our squadron. They didn't talk. We weren't allowed to give them any food. Nothing.

Why was that?

Well their stomachs had to be served either food which the dietician said you give them this, that and the other, and not in their best interest to give them that so we couldn't give them anything. We didn't see them for long. They flew up to Delhi from there.

07:00 **There must have been quite a few things that were revealed after the war that people were ignorant as the war was happening?**

What sort of things?

The atrocities by Japanese soldiers.

Oh yes. Well that was more confined to the Burma railway, whilst I say Burma, people think of the right up north, they were right down

07:30 bringing stuff across from Singapore via railway into service the Japanese army which was a long way from us. It was way down south.

Do you remember the day you heard the news that the war was over?

Oh yeah I was Nagpur on that occasion. We got a signal from the King and as I was in charge of a unit the signal came to me which is up in Canberra, I gave it to Canberra. The King

08:00 saying "Ra ra ra" did we have a King or Queen then, I forget? Anyway "what a wonderful blah blah blah" so I kept the signal.

The signal?

Yes the actual piece of paper with this stuff on it.

Was it a day of jubilation where you were?

God no, everybody was so tired and sick of war. Do people know it lasted six years? Did you know it lasted six years? You would. That was a long time.

08:30 What was it was a week short of six years. September some time, August finished, a long time. People were tired.

Can you remember ever thinking "will it ever end?"? Could you see an end in sight?

Well having moved out of Burma and having the Japs half way out of it by the time I got out, well it had to, from that point of view,

09:00 but that didn't mean that the Japanese Empire or Japanese homeland, it had been bombed by Jimmy Doolittle once with a couple of bombs but nobody contemplated anything as violent, horrific I suppose, as the atom bombs. I have no qualms about the atom bombs. Kept thousands of people alive, might have killed thousands of Japanese, but after all they

09:30 were the aggressors and it kept thousands of our people alive and got them out of a war. Terminated the war. But as it has been projected if they tried to capture the Japanese homeland that would have cost thousands of American lives and British lives and whoever lives. So it was a happy ending.

You must have an empathy with the people who were flying those particular planes?

10:00 Those planes were massive powerful planes at great height, but the people who flew the Hiroshima, Nagasaki flights no, but I still have a great empathy for those who flew over Europe. Those who flew over Italy out on the North Africa had a better run the bombers, than the fellows who had to go repeatedly over Europe.

10:30 **You mentioned earlier about the high fatality rate with the bombers. What were the reasons why?**

Because the Germans had fantastic, they had searchlights and they had fantastic anti-aircraft guns, and as somebody said joking, if you can make a joke, "You could almost walk to Berlin on the anti-aircraft shells" you know, it was so concentrated.

11:00 That is as I read, I haven't experienced, but I do know people and I talk to people who did it, who flew across the anti-aircraft guns, well the Germans were very clever with guns, and their anti-aircraft was very good. They had night fighters and the poor old Americans who flew in daylight they got shot to pieces too in their Flying Fortresses, because they did the daylight raids so the British did the night

raids.

11:30 **They didn't like the night raids?**

Well no matter where you were raiding over Europe to go into German targets you were going to be subjected to heavy anti-aircraft fire as I was told, I wasn't there. The Germans fought with some good equipment. Their aircraft were good, but of course eventually they couldn't keep it up.

12:00 **What did you know about Burma before you got sent there? Did it mean anything to you?**

No. I don't think I learnt anything about Burma at school, it was one of those countries up there. I didn't know anything about it. I'd heard the song on the radio "The Road to Mandalay" if you look at the song the words the road to Mandalay they're not geographically correct by a mile.

12:30 **I know the song.**

Do you? Good. "and the sun comes up like thunder from China across the bay." China is not across the bay, there is no bay and China is to the east and the sun comes up over China, but it doesn't come up but that's just a minor technicality.

You'll have to get back to that song writer.

Well [English novelist and poet Rudyard] Kipling's been dead a long time.

Have you been back to Burma?

13:00 No.

No interest?

No. I don't want to go into any tropics I don't wear the tropics very well. I still and it's just minimised my hands and feet have peeled every summer for years.

As a result of the fungal infection?

Oh I've been to the medical people, they don't know why. They give you ointments and those sort of things, but it's only a minor peel this year but previously it used to peel back seriously

13:30 and my work was manual work and my hands used to get a bit sore.

So when the war ended you were doing the meteorological runs. What happened after that, the war ended? Where did you go?

The war ended. Then we went to an embarkation depot out from Calcutta, but before the war ended I achieved, well I think I mentioned it to you earlier.

14:00 I always wanted to fly a Spitfire and there happened to be a ferry flight and they had a Spitfire Mk VIII so I borrowed the Spitfire Mk VIII and flew a Spitfire because I wasn't going home to Australia saying I didn't fly a Spitfire. So that was the end, pull the curtain down on flying. We went to a camp called Dubhalia I think, where I got dysentery again, I had dysentery before. We came on this old tub

14:30 the Sante from Calcutta to Fremantle. Fremantle around to Adelaide or Melbourne I forget which and that was the beginning of another war. Going from an age of 18 a kid to come home at 23 having had some authority, rank and that you were like they say I went from

15:00 a rooster to a feather duster. But it was worse than that, how do you adjust? You've missed four and a half years of socialising with people, you've been out of your community, you never really were in your community because you'd virtually just left school and everybody thinks you're OK you're fit, you're healthy, you look all right, what's your problem? Well you can't tell them what your problem is, because they wouldn't understand. That was a very difficult period.

15:30 An extremely difficult period to adjust. I went home to Red Cliffs and my father thought I'd come home and work on the block. I don't know where his imagination was, but I hacked that for two months, I think, out of a degree of loyalty. I said, "I can't stand this. I've got to go." So I came down to Melbourne and you know the value of support group, you've got your friends, your church or whatever, I didn't have a soul, I didn't have any support group.

16:00 **What about other men that you'd flown with or other air force men or servicemen?**

You didn't run into them very much. The only time I ran into them there's initially when I came home I went to, which used to be the air force hotel, The Australia Hotel in Collins Street and go upstairs and there were guys there reliving the war. I didn't want to relive the war and I didn't want to drink beer. OK you cut yourself off. A lot

16:30 of men did depend upon alcohol to get them through and they, if they didn't become alcoholics, they used alcohol to adjust or forget themselves. Generally they returned to their own little support group and I didn't have a support group. I found that very difficult. I worked in the control tower in Essendon, in air traffic control because I could go straight in there with my experience.

17:00 That entailed me going from Elwood out to Essendon which was a hell of a long way and there were jobs galore in Melbourne at the time anyway. I then applied for a job with the manufacturer's rep in an importing-exporting company in Queen Street Melbourne.

Had you been discharged?

Oh well I suppose I should go through the discharge section before I get to this point. We were staying at Exhibition building, that's where they housed us in Melbourne.

17:30 I had my teeth done, checked over by the medical people and filled in time for probably two months which was probably OK, that was a let down, you were still getting paid, you were still being fed and accommodated. I was not really well. I couldn't get a cup of tea up to my mouth because I'd spill it.

Did you notice that there were other people like that?

I didn't really look

18:00 for them. I don't know whether there were or not. I went to the medical people and they said, "You'll be all right in six months." Forty years later I think I was getting better. They had no conception of stress. I don't think anybody has a conception of the power of stress. You don't get a wound, lose a leg, you don't get a bullet through you, you have no outward evidence of any problems arising from war service.

18:30 **So therefore you don't get the ease of understanding?**

You don't get that. "What's wrong with you? You're fit, you're strong"

Pull yourself together?

Yeah. Yep.

I would have thought your father would have had a clue?

No he didn't really have a clue and it was only when this uncle, I mentioned who was in the RAF, visited Australia. Now this uncle incidentally went from Secunderabad where I met him and introduced him to my aunt to come up to be the wing

19:00 engineering officer in the wing that my squadron was in and he knew what was happening to me. He went back and told them, my parents and my aunts and uncles that really I wasn't as fit as I looked. He explained why and the little bit of the service life in Burma. So they should have understood, but I don't know that people can understand stress related problems.

19:30 I really have a bit of a laugh when a teller gets held up by a revolver and he's got to be counselled for the stress. I think, "Jesus Christ what do they think happened to us four and a half years of service" and all that. People who discharge you said, "You'll be all right in a few months," but I don't know that they knew any different either. So people should be made

20:00 aware that war and being shot at and being stressed is a hell of a disease problem for the person who's got it. I don't want see anybody go to war because stress is not recognised really because it's not visible.

It's incredibly or entirely debilitating.

Oh yes. You're irritable. You don't sleep. You have nightmares.

20:30 No it's very difficult to live with.

I don't know how people going through what you went through could not be stressed. You're operating at a level of high adrenaline every day, perhaps even wondering if this is the day you're going to get it?

No you never wonder that.

Did you never wonder that?

No you never wonder that. You're just too tired and exhausted to worry about that. You're out doing a job, you do your job

21:00 because you've been doing it for some months, you don't worry about if there'll be any accidents or mortality or fatality you're just tired, you've mortgaged all your future adrenaline for years that's what you've done, you've burnt it up mortgaged your mental health or stress level for years.

I think too when you get that tired, there must have been men who were quite happy to die?

21:30 Well having read from Miller's, the CO, memoirs he said he was stressed beyond all measure and in the bit I didn't read he said we took risks that we shouldn't have ever taken, in that strip of paper that I've got there. And we probably did.

22:00 You just, eventually you don't function well. I wasn't well functioning well. I came in one day and

landed, drove it and put the aircraft in dispersal and my ground staff came up and said, “You’ve left your pitch in course Sir,” well you never leave your pitch in course. Your pitch is the pitch of the propeller and you always have it in fine when you’ve landed because if you want to go round again it’s like putting the car in top gear and expecting it to go forward, it doesn’t. I thought, “God I’m not even functioning, I’m not sleeping and I’m not

22:30 at all well and I’m not even performing.” That’s when I went to one of the senior Mos Medical Officer] there and said, “Look I’ve had it,” and he asked me all the questions, and he said, “OK stop flying,” and sent me on leave. Well after three weeks I went back to flying not in a combat situation but just flying an aeroplane up to get the weather reports.

That was reasonably understanding behaviour?

23:00 It was because I don’t think bomber commander in England was at all considerate of people who said I am burnt out I’m not going to fly. They were charged with LMF, if you know what LMF is?

Low moral fibre?

Lack of moral fibre. They were humiliated. I thought that was extremely cruel that they did that. I did

23:30 know of people in Burma who would, they wouldn’t charge them in Burma they just post them off somewhere. If somebody was down you would say, “Where’s he gone?” “Oh he was posted.” Because it can contaminate the rest of the people, I think. So they’d immediately post them off somewhere. Take them out of operational flying.

These are still young boys we’re talking about?

24:00 Oh yeah, 20, 21. So yeah it’s tough wars are tough. OK so on balance if you asked me, “Did I have a raw deal?” No, I had a wonderful deal but I had to pay for it. I think they got good return for their investment. OK so I’ve had problems from that period on, but I would have still gone through it again for the opportunity

24:30 to do the things I did do.

Which were fantastic?

Well there were lots of other guys doing all these same things. As I say some of them died much younger than they should have died. So I got home and I worked in as I said in the control

We were talking about the discharge?

Yes well the discharge,

25:00 I got discharged in February 1946, yes ’46 I suppose it was by then, and then I had to, I came for two months to Red Cliffs and then back to Melbourne and then I had to work, prior to going to the war I knew the lass next door to where we had moved in Melbourne. She was a bit younger than me, but she proved to be supportive, I

25:30 did marry her which was for all the wrong reasons. She did have two kids who were nice kids so she was nice in that respect. She lives out at Kensington Gardens now. So she probably had a difficult time with me. I’m having a difficult time with myself. We married in Melbourne, having gone through that once I’d never go through that again.

26:00 Just the ceremony, anyone I don’t want to discourage your friend about getting married, it’s not fair.

I think she’s impossible to discourage.

Good. Anyway I worked there and in the meantime I applied for War Service Land Settlement in South Australia. There was a system in Victoria, but I didn’t want to go on the Victorian one because they were growing vines, sultanas like my father and I didn’t want to grow those I wanted to grow citrus.

26:30 South Australia offered the opportunity, gave an opportunity to go onto a property, not on a property a piece of bare dirt to grow citrus. So I had that application in eventually I had notification that yes there was a property available, I inspected the property and you put in application for certain properties and both in Loxton and out of Renmark and eventually then I got notification, “Yes you can have property so and so”

27:00 Section 255, 256 irrigation. That was great. Great because I could go back on the land which I always had a feeling for and I like growing things, but more importantly than anything nobody was telling me what to do. I was my own boss. That was worth a fortune to me I’m that sort of person, I don’t, I could never hack working in the city in the time that I worked there. I was so unhappy working in an office. You had this

27:30 office bitchery, this office politics, oh my God and I’d think, “How can people behave like this?” but they do. So I was quite happy to go up to a piece of bare ground and a house which they provided which was very good of them in 1950 because there weren’t too many houses around and it wasn’t easy to get a house built in the post-war shortage of things. There was about 30 acres of land there.

28:00 It had irrigation facilities on it, you had a plan of the angles of rows and you planted it up and it was very hard work. That was just what I needed. Hard work.

Physical labour?

Physical labour because it was tough and it was tiring, but that's what I wanted. Something that would make me tired, nothing makes you sleep better than physical fatigue.

28:30 **If you are physically tired you don't have time to think?**

Probably.

How did you cope with taking orders during your war service?

Never had to take orders during my war service. That's was the wonderful thing about the air force you were flying an aeroplane on your own, you had to do what you were told to do, you did what you were told to do, but you did it in your way. The only time when it was irksome was when I bent the wing tip and I had to be your honourable servant.

29:00 We never had parades. I can't, the only time I can remember being on parade was in Madras when Lord Louis Mountbatten visited us and we had to line up in a line and shake Lord Louis's hand and tell him where you came from. I told him that I came from out at Mildura, "Oh I know that place, fantastic memory," he said, "I was there with" one of the Royal family I forget which one it was

29:30 I think it was the guy who married Wallace Simpson actually and so he had a fantastic memory this guy. He was a leader in a million. He went around to every unit and spoke to people. Spoke to the whole mob if it wasn't individuals, he met the officers individually but he spoke to the whole mob. He told them jokes, he was an inspiration. Amazing inspiration Lord Louis Mountbatten. Who the Irish [Republican Army] blew up. So that was about the only time I went on parade.

30:00 So we didn't have discipline. You were trained enough and sensible enough to do to what you were supposed to do.

When you were in operation you were by yourself in the plane. Did you have any songs you'd sing to yourself or anything you' say to yourself? It's stressful and you're doing it by yourself?

30:30 You're doing it by yourself, you're busy you're weaving and you're looking, you're busy, you're occupied. When you're flying you're almost sitting on the edge of your seat and you know what sitting on the edge of your seat is, you're screwed up. You're tense. No.

31:00 The only time I ever had any resort to prayers, I didn't have a resort to prayers at all actually was when I got caught in a monsoon going back to Madras. Some inner voice said to me "Do this, do that, do something else" and I did that. The immediate reaction is panic "What the hell am I going to do?" but there is some second brain or some inner voice that says this, and it swears like mad at you "Go down and do this"

31:30 I did that. That's the only time people can say yes that was the answer to your prayers, it wasn't that's a load of, I am not and I have no belief in the supernatural. So that was the only time I had, I was really in a jam and this inner voice told me how to get out of the jam. But otherwise it was routine flying which was stressful.

Did you ever got back to flying?

No.

Never considered it as a career?

Oh god no.

32:00 I was a single-engine pilot if you were a multi-engine pilot yes a lot of them went back and flew with one of the airways. But I didn't want to fly again. I'm not averse to flying but civilian flying if you've got to buy it it's too dear and secondly it's too controlled because we weren't controlled we didn't have air traffic controllers or anything just use common sense. I never saw anybody get into trouble with common sense.

32:30 **So you got your land and how long did it take to the citrus in?**

We got there in June and you planted your citrus in July, August little trees, apricots, peaches, vines it was a lot of hard work. You put in posts and you had to irrigate 24 hours a day so my neighbour and I were using portable

33:00 pipes that you moved every six hours so I co-operated with my neighbour. In between the rows of citrus we planted peas, this was before the advent of frozen peas and canned peas before they mechanically did it. We made a lot of money growing peas on vines. The days when you could get labour, itinerant labour that worked from Queensland down through the various crops, to picks peas and them back up again.

33:30 They were hard workers. Damned hard workers. They were hard drinkers too, but they worked hard.

They'd pick peas, we made money and sent them up to the Sydney market or the Melbourne market, wherever. Then later on you'd grow your pumpkins or tomatoes in between because the trees were only small and the rows were 24 feet apart, the trees were 24 feet apart. So you did those sort of things and eventually you invested in

34:00 thick sprinklers and overhead sprinklers and minimised your workload on the irrigation anyway. Then the apricots came into production and you had to cut apricots, cut and dried which people don't do today because it's too labour intensive. In those days university students used to just love coming up during the apricot season which was December they were on holidays to work. Well they don't do that anymore. It was a different world.

34:30 They were only too happy and you would still strike professional men around Adelaide who would say, "Oh you came from there, I went up there and I used to cut apricots," and it was a big feature in their life. Not any more.

You were just telling us about students coming up to help with the harvest.

35:00 Yes particularly the apricot harvest. They'd stay on and pick grapes if it didn't interfere with their work, but otherwise there were a lot of migrants coming into the country at that stage who from Baltic [States] were probably first, then the Italians and they were all good workers and they all wanted to get somewhere. They wanted to see if in Australia so we had good labour.

35:30 So it would change, we had Greeks and Vietnamese it depends what the inflow of migrants was at that the time and they worked hard. It is hard work and it's dirty work, it doesn't pay a lot but it paid sufficiently for them. Most of it was done on contract per unit of picking whatever the case may be, it may be apricots, the cutting of apricot trays

36:00 so it was so much a tray, so it was all piece-work rates. These people worked hard. We could do all right with apricots because the Turkish apricots didn't come into Australia at that stage. Now you get, if you know the difference between the yellowy Turkish apricot and the Australian apricot they don't look alike and the certainly don't taste alike either. So we did all right. Yes it was quite good.

36:30 Eventually Michael was born in, I went up there in 1950 and Michael was born in '53 I think, something like that. Jennifer was born in '56. So that put more stress on life looking after kids and Jennifer was born in 1956 when the flood was on in Renmark and she had to go to the Mater Hospital because

37:00 Renmark Hospital was flooded out. Jennifer was born there and she got a clot in the leg and had to be taken from the Mater Hospital down to the Adelaide Hospital, the Memorial, and that was a hair-raising trip because we couldn't go on the road, because the roads were flooded so we had to go through the back blocks over to Morgan, I was in the ambulance with the driver. So we brought her down, if she was

37:30 stirred up the clot could have moved, so she came down to Adelaide and Jennifer came with her of course, so that was all a bit more stress at the time.

How old was she at that time?

She was born.

Brand new?

Born in the Mater Hospital in '56 the year of the flood. It was about September I think her birthday is.

38:00 Otherwise I was growing fruit. I was still having problems with nightmares and irritability. The children were growing up which was good, they were going to the Renmark North primary school. Then they went to the Renmark High School, for a couple years and then I sent them down to Michael went to Westminster and Jennifer

38:30 went to the MLC for [Methodist Ladies' college] leaving and matric which they passed down here. Michael went to university and Jennifer did medical technology down there. But that provided an opportunity for my current wife then to come down and look after the kids, because she didn't like Renmark. So she was only too happy to get down here and look after the kids. The kids didn't particularly want to be looked after anyway, they were quite happy in

39:00 boarding school. There she met a fellow who she has lived with ever since. I think that's great, as long as she's happy, because she certainly wasn't happy in Renmark. So it was just as well she came down here and found somebody that she's happy to live with. Do we go on through all the gory details?

No you don't have to. I was wondering if you had taken to fatherhood?

39:30 Oh it was, I think one and a lot of people these days have the option of going through life without children, well no on balance I OK I had enough problems without having children, but on balance these are nice people these two children. They're capable and they're nice and they're supportive therefore yes I would say whilst it might have been a bit more of a strain at the time it was certainly

40:00 well worth it. The opportunity to go through the schooling the kindergarten, the schooling I think it's still an essential part in a person's life to become a rounded person to have the responsibility of bringing up a child teaching a child, guiding a child as much as they will be guided, and then see them

become responsible adults. So yeah it's

40:30 quite satisfying I think.

Tape 6

00:45 **You were talking before about people not flying at night, did your ever fly at night?**

On operations yes we did

01:00 a night flight once. It proved to be non productive we lost a couple of aircraft, I did a night flight, I don't think we achieve anything or I think what we achieved was the Japanese did most of their work at night and as we flew over all the lights were doused and they discontinued doing what they were, they fired. It was very interesting

01:30 these things were traceable coming up at you because you know there's three or four in between each tracer. You can see them coming up, you can see the lights and see them approaching, they come up in a lazy spiral at you. They didn't hit me, they were just firing at the noise anyway. It's always of course you don't have many aids, many navigational aids, you've got to get back to your air strip which is lit by what is called "goose neck flares" which

02:00 are just Hurricane kerosene lamps with a wick down them and you've got to take off and land on those which is ok we could do that. But I don't think it achieved very much as I say. We lost two aircraft or one pranged and the other one lost. So it was not a very, it didn't achieve very much so we didn't continue them.

What were they really expecting you to achieve?

Just stop the Japanese operating.

02:30 We really couldn't attack anything at night with 40 mm canons anyway, I've never fired the 40 mm canons at night, but I'm sure the flash of it would kill your night sight and you couldn't really sight onto a target because you couldn't really see a target. And as I say the Japanese turned all their lights out and we didn't see anything. You could just say it was an interruption for a quarter of an hour from their activities and

03:00 another aircraft would come along behind you and interrupt them again. It was a non-productive operation.

So it was just a distraction technique?

Yeah.

An expensive distraction to put a plane up?

Expense was never considered. War is a horrible wasteful expense. It is, I don't know how man can justify the expenditure of all the money and machinery that's just

03:30 destruction that causes destruction, is destruction, destroys people. The money that is wasted today in Iraq, I mean it could feed thousands of people, is it being wasted? Has it achieved anything? I don't think past wars have achieved much anyway. From the first great war we had the League of Nations, which achieved nothing, we've got the United Nations which might be achieving something but I doubt it.

04:00 War's wasteful of everything.

Did you feel like you had made an impact in the Second World War?

At that time no, this is reflection looking back at a greater age and just saying what did you achieve didn't bring peace to the world. There are still continued wars going on all around the world, on the face of the globe, whether

04:30 it be South Africa or Africa or Afghanistan, Croats and the Serbs and that area of the world they still fight and kill each other. So it's the nature of the animal.

You think it's an inescapable part of human nature?

Yes. Well it's from the history I learnt at school is there ever peace?

05:30 They had a Hundred Years' War, they had the Crusades, they had the Punic Wars and all that I learnt at school was a litany of wars in history. It's still goes on.

Do you think that educational focus on war as the defining points of history encourages a sense that that is the only way to overcome problems?

Wars were there for political reasons. They were just offshoots of political reasons. Political reasons haven't ended. So I guess wars won't end. There's always cause and effect. All wars have had the, or come about as a result of political upheaval, in my understanding of it. I guess you can exceptions to that statement. If it's not political, it's inter-

06:00 religious wars or inter-tribal wars there's always a cause. It's either tribal, religion, territory doesn't come into as much as the other factors. Everybody's got their own little god working for them and their own little god is right. So they go to war to support their own little god.

06:30 Which is crazy.

Do you feel like in Burma had you not been there it would have been worse? Do you feel like you did some good?

No. We did no good whatsoever. The Japanese were defeated by the atom bombs and if they hadn't been defeated by the atom bombs we may have been

07:00 able to push them out of Burma and the British Army did push them out of Burma virtually, but that didn't mean that they were defeated. Whatever would have happened if they didn't drop the atom bomb and cause the Japanese to surrender it's only a matter of conjecture what would have happened. But Burma having been freed from the Japanese and in the process be freed from the British Civil Service

07:30 that ran the place, now run their own country don't seem to be making a very good job of it, according to all reports that we receive in the press. So I don't think we served a purpose. I don't think we achieved anything. So it was an interesting waste of time. It cost.

If you could take those years back and have spent them doing something else, would you?

08:00 That's something I've pondered what I would have been doing if I hadn't gone into the air force. It's an imponderable, you don't know. As I said I have looked at it on balance and the price I paid was a price which I gained a lot from paying that price I gained a lot in the way of experience, I gained a lot in knowing myself, in testing myself

08:30 I didn't intentionally test myself but I was tested along the road. I came out the other side all right. You got to know yourself, you got a great degree in your own self-reliance and that's important to be self-reliant and I achieved that. Therefore if I have some after effects I think, on balance, I would still have gone through what I did.

09:00 **Even though you feel it was a waste of time?**

Yes but it was going to happen in any case. My opinion of whether it was a waste of time or not as an after thought is not going to alter the face of the world at all or the outcome of the world.

09:30 **Only a couple of nights at night and not successful. You mentioned that you got dysentery twice. When was the first time?**

I got dysentery first in Nagpur actually in Nagpur, where I shouldn't have got it because we were back at the base which had good kitchens. I had never had dysentery when I was in the forward front line areas where the cooking was

10:00 done on very basic things, but they were British cooks. In Nagpur they were Indian cooks and I don't think their hygiene was so good. Dysentery is endemic in India anyway. But on that occasion I was given a sulphur drug and cleared it up in no time. The second time I got it I said, "I'd like some of that sulphur grenadine," he said, "You're not getting that again." I had to go to this slow dose of

10:30 eating, drink rather concrete, which was a very thick substance in a fluid, like drinking powdered chalk actually. That was the slow cure, but it did cure it eventually, it did stop it but it was unpleasant at the time. I didn't get malaria fortunately because that would have been far worse.

What was the rationale for not giving you the sulphur for the second time?

I don't know why. He said,

11:00 "I'm not giving it to you," so I couldn't twist his arm and say, "I want it." Maybe the body tolerance to two doses of that drug wasn't good.

What was the medical support like?

Oh the squadron had a doctor. He looked after all the men there were a lot of men, the ground staff and the aircrew.

Even on the front?

Oh yeah there was always a squadron doctor.

11:30 I don't know his capability, he'd been a police doctor in Ireland. When I wanted the doctor I didn't go him I went to the senior doctor in, there's a squadron, a wing and group and that's the structure of it. The squadron is one unit, a wing is so many squadrons and a group is so many wings, so I went to the

next rung up to the doctor there, he

12:00 was very professional.

So the chap you had with you wasn't up to much?

Well I don't think Doc O'Brien was much as a doctor, no.

What were relationships like between the pilots and the ground crew?

Oh you had to have a good relationship with them, they were your life-line. Gee you don't stir them up, you don't upset them. There's no reason for wanting to upset

12:30 them, they serviced your aircraft and they were nice, friendly guys. As I said earlier they worked under deplorable conditions, horrible hours you couldn't get people I suppose you could get people do it, but for the money that the RAF paid its ground staff was a pittance. The Poms didn't pay really good money for people who did a lot of the grunt

13:00 work. They were good people. I rescued one of them from we were down the coast from the early times, this fellow got into difficulty out in the sea and the Canadian and I went out and got him. I'd learnt rescue and resuscitation at high school, you know, you do this and how you release from them, that didn't work out there, so we got him by the hair and pulled him in. That was the

13:30 most, I would never try and rescue anybody again. That was so thoroughly exhausting. We brought him in, we used the old system of pumping his lungs out, 100, 200, and we did pump his out and all the water came out of his lungs and he lived. But I'd never do it again. Someone could go and drown before I put myself at risk to save somebody.

You felt like you might drown as well?

It was so exhausting.

14:00 There was a whole lot of ground staff and we yelled out to them form a chain, so you can help us pull this guy in and they stood and looked at us. A lot of English people couldn't swim. So Anderson, the Canadian, and I dragged this guy in and pumped him out. Never heard any more about it until many years later and I omitted this section of my history, post war history, I went back to a

14:30 a reunion, a squadron reunion, and I went to three squadron reunions. On one of the reunions was the fellow sitting and they always called you "Mr" "Hello Mr Bennelll, you rescued my friend from drowning." That's the only reference I ever had. This was on a trip to Laarbruch in Germany where our squadron the 20 Squadron were still operating with the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] force. This fellow could remember, in that respectful English attitude, "Mr Bennelll"

15:00 which I admire in many respects. I also went back to a reunion at Kettering when the squadron had a reunion there when it was flying something, I forget what they were flying. It was nice to go back to the reunions and see the English fellows that I knew, those that were left. I went back earlier and I even stayed with the CO in Benson, where he was a GP, with his wife. So yeah

15:30 my trips back to England have always been very enjoyable.

Is this the same CO that wrote his memoirs?

Yes. This is before he died. Then his widow came out to Australia because her son was a doctor up in Sydney. I invited her to come down and stay with us in Renmark. So we picked her up at the aerodrome in Essendon not at Essendon, Tullamarine I think it was. Drove her up, we stopped overnight at Bendigo because it hadn't landed

16:00 until about four o'clock so we stayed in a motel. Then took her up through the Mallee, I think the shock was too great going through the Mallee. We went through a grasshopper plague, we went through a dust storm and we eventually got the poor woman to Renmark. I don't think she could ever imagine what it was like to go up through the Mallee onto a citrus grove. Anyway she spent a few days with us and went back to the UK or wherever she went to. But that was when she was a widow and

16:30 Andrew had died. These are the interesting things and the pleasant things that are aftermaths of a war that you make friends with people and it's the friendship you don't need any reintroduction to them you just go along and they know you and you know them. You worked together.

And yet immediately after the war you weren't interested in those kind of associations?

No. Because there was nobody really here

17:00 with whom I'd flown. Peter McMillan could have been found, but no I was in a very uncertain state. It was all wrong.

The ground crew and the pilots got along quite well and there was mutual respect there?

17:30 Oh yes, they were very good. After all there were only 20 pilots or something, 16 aircraft so there weren't many people to get along with. The only other officer was the adjutant who was, you'd call him

the chief administrative officer of the day, you had an intelligence officer, had an engineering officer and outside of that the only other officers were pilots.

18:00 Some of them non-commissioned pilots. I still have email contact with the intelligence officer who was a Scotsman, who now lives in Florida. It's nice to talk, to have emails from him. Even at this late stage I still have people who knew you in those days in wartime.

18:30 **You mentioned that there was a period of time where you didn't have crew, you had to look after your own planes.**

Oh yes that was on detachment when we went up for a week or something and this was called the air map of Imphal and it was a time of great pressure. The Japanese were, got to the point of almost overrunning the place and it was being supplied by air which limited the amount of stuff that could come in. It

19:00 was a panic station, the Japanese would infiltrate the airfield at night and put grenades in aircraft and it was period of great consternation, this was the Japs' last big push. Both in to Imphal and into Kohima a little further north of Imphal. So you had to look after yourself to a large degree. As I said

19:30 there was no bed, you could get a meal of bully beef and stuff but I slept in an ambulance because it was the only bed that I could find. We used to fly out at dusk and fly in at dawn, just so we didn't put pressure on the food or whatever, I couldn't see the economy of the action, but that's what we did because we're burning up petrol which I would have thought would have been better if we stayed at Imphal.

20:00 However, Imphal I would like, that's about one place I'd like to see post war because it must be beautiful. It was set in the range of mountains, not far from the border with Burma, it had a lake in it and it was elevated, it was cool, it's a beautiful spot I would think in peacetime. In war time it was just full of airstrips. There were a lot of aircraft on it.

20:30 **How had you and the other pilots been trained to look after the planes?**

There are basics. You go around and check all your controls, you run your engine up and see that it's performing, Rolls Royce aircraft engines have got two magneto in other words two sources of electrical sparks and you check those and see that they are forming correctly. You make sure that the fuel is in the tanks. You could get free fuel.

21:00 That's about basically all you could do.

You'd been taught that some time ago?

You are supposed to do it at all times, check it, check the controls, check that the elevator elevates and working freely and go around the aircraft and see that the tyres are blown up and just do an external check and then run the motor, to see that it's performing correctly.

21:30 **So that was part of your job as well as the people that signed the check sheet?**

Well they weren't there at this time. This was an emergency and in an emergency you don't really, can't always follow all the instructions.

Had you had a crew would you still be expected to check your two magnetos and walk around the plane?

You always do that before you take off. You always warm up the engine and check these things, and that's all you do before you take off, just making a check that the engine is performing.

22:00 properly. You can move the pitch control into course and see that the propeller goes into coarse and fine, check your petrol because you have a drill when you get into an aircraft to take off and it's called, and you still remember, "TMPF&F" trim, mixture, pitch, fuel and flaps, and I can still remember it. So you do all that check before take off.

22:30 You set the trim, you set the mixtures if it's an aircraft engine with mixture not all do, pitch see it's fully fine, fuel see that there's fuel, flaps are up or wherever you want the flaps to be and that the engine is performing correctly and take it into in and take off. It's just the drill.

23:00 **Right. So you wouldn't have been able to patch up a bullet hole?**

Oh no, no. The ground staff would. The Hurricane had a lot of fabric on it from the back was fabric so they'd stick a sticker over it.

They'd just put a sticker on it?

A bit of material. It was covered in a very high quality cloth and they just patch it, put a patch over it. If it hadn't injured any cables or anything inside,

23:30 which you generally didn't. But if it was through the wing, I don't know what they did with it then. If it hadn't gone through a spar or anything serious I don't know whether they put a patch over that or not, I've forgotten what they did.

The wings were metal?

The wings were metal. They were very strong because wings were supporting the undercarriage you had these two 40 mm canons slung under them and wonder how the Hurricane held together under 40 mm canon because the recoil was

24:00 massive.

Could you feel it in the plane? Did it throw the plane about?

Oh yes, yes. If one of the guns jammed you'd slew around and guns sometimes did jam, whereas the machine guns the 303 machine guns they didn't do anything, can't think of the name of the machine gun offhand.

24:30 That was our armament, two machine guns and two canons.

The machine guns weren't giving you any kickback?

No.

Just when you fired the Vickers?

Yes they really booted.

Can you explain for the lay person this tiredness you've been talking about that's beyond physical and epidemic amongst pilots?

25:00 Well I wouldn't say it's amongst pilots and I wouldn't say that any pilot spoke about it either. We're supposed to be tough and young and you don't talk about your problems. You ask any man and he can be nearly dying and he'll say, "I'm fine," because men do these sort of things. You got utterly exhausted and the term is "burn out" and you get burn out. Goodness

25:30 it's got the highfalutin name, post traumatic stress. Well this wasn't post trauma, this was current trauma when you were doing it, but you eventually had post trauma stress. You got tired, you didn't sleep well, couldn't sleep well, you tended to be a bit withdrawn, you could get a twitch, your arm would twitch involuntary twitching. All symptoms of exhaustion, nervous

26:00 exhaustion, in my opinion.

Why would you not be able to sleep?

I don't know. I can't answer those questions because I never did find out. You have, you're having nightmares now what induces nightmares I don't know.

26:30 **Without being too specific to you, are the nightmares in content about things that are actually happening or figments of imagination?**

No. My nightmares were not based on that I'm going to crash, or I'm going to be shot, they were just you were generally in an impossible situation you seem powerless, absolutely powerless, you couldn't move and generally you woke yourself up, yelling out, "Help," and you couldn't hear,

27:00 you'd eventually hear yourself calling for help. It wasn't clear, it was a muttered muffled sound and you eventually woke yourself up. To counter that I did relaxation course and I've done transcendental meditation, I think they're good. They'll help you through stress I think. Have you ever done transcendental meditation? I think it's

27:30 very useful. It's a form of relaxation. You can relax yourself if you practise it and go into a semi-unconscious or semi-state or relaxation. I can't find the exact word, there is a word but I haven't got it, hypnosis is the word.

28:00 A semi self hypnotic state which I practise if things get tough, periodically over the years and there is the form of relaxation where you tense every muscle in your body, starting with your toes and progressively work right through your body, tense it relax, tense it relax, tense it relax, three times on every muscle and that's when you're in real trouble. I've been in real trouble and I've had to go

28:30 through that exercise of tensing all the muscles and relaxing them so that I'd get to sleep. That was going back some years and I've worked through all that now and I don't really have, I will still get an occasional nightmare, maybe once in two months or something, but generally speaking at this time in life it's about time it did work its way out of the system too.

29:00 **For you mainly feelings or nightmares around powerlessness?**

Yes. Well you're caught in a situation where you were powerless.

Did you ever hear that from other people?

People don't talk about those things. I was amazed by Miller's admission that he felt he was in his best interest of his sanity he should have got out of it but he wasn't able to because he was the CO and he

had to press on.

29:30 He hadn't done any more operations, he might have done some more, but he had been through from the time I joined the squadron he was flight commander and shortly became a CO from then so he'd been through the same period as I had, but he had more responsibility than I ever had, because he had to run the squadron. But he says there he would have liked to have had a rest. I'm sure all of them would like to have had a rest. I feel

30:00 convinced that those people that pushed on regardless are the people who died, my Canadian friend in Canada, obviously, Jack Anderson he died in his 60s too. Because I wrote the Veterans Affairs equivalent in Canada that I was trying to trace him. They said that he died in 1982 I think it was. I think these people didn't admit to their state of stress. I think stress induces cancer, heart attacks or whatever.

30:30 I still do believe that. This is real stress, not imagined stress.

Do you think that periods of relaxation, breaking up the intense workload, would have enabled people to have distanced themselves from that kind of stress?

31:00 Within the squadron?

Do you think there are ways around that? Or impossible in battle?

Let's try thinking of giving some of them a rest period. The CO, who I said was a very good CO, he had us trained, we were operationally competent he didn't want to bring new people in, we had to bring new people in for replacements

31:30 for those who were ill, dead, missing or whatever. That always took a period of breaking a new pilot in. You really couldn't say go off for a fortnight and I'll bring a new guy in because he took weeks to train, to fly operationally.

So logistically it would be hard to?

32:00 Yeah it was just not practical to do that because they weren't trained, they didn't understand. And you learnt on the job as you go along.

Had it been possible do you think a break would have alleviated stress?

A, you wouldn't take a break this was your family where were you going, you lived with these guys, you ate with these guys, you were there with them 24 hours a day, they were your family. You wouldn't

32:30 have willingly deserted your family for a period of time because what would you do? There's a great bond of friendship amongst these guys and it's the same with bomber commandos, the great bond of friendship that they belong to a family even though they were being knocked out of the skies some of them went on to a second tour of operations. Because that was their family, that was their job.

33:00 Which was self-destructive in many cases.

Sounds extraordinary to talk about it now?

Yeah it is I guess.

Do you think the tiredness stress that we've discussed contributed to your friend's alcoholism?

33:30 Oh this friend. No his father was an alcoholic. I think it was a genetic thing. He stayed in Australia, I think he flew Catalinas or something, no. I saw him after the war sitting up at the bar at the Australia Hotel and I was told that was where he sat all day, drinking beers or whatever he drank. No I think it was a genetic thing that was handed down. I think alcoholism is a genetically passed

34:00 thing. Just my personal theory.

Did you see many pilots or ex-service people take to drink?

Oh yeah. I haven't any record on it, but I do know and I have heard that did happen. I know of enough people who didn't function properly,

34:30 who sought alcohol as relief from functioning properly.

You weren't tempted?

No that doesn't appeal. I don't like, sure I'll drink some wine, I'll drink socially but I don't really like alcohol. My body doesn't like it. I'd sooner have a glass of lemonade than a glass of beer, but that doesn't mean I don't drink beer on a hot day I'll have a beer. But I don't seek it out.

35:00 We're all different.

What images the good and the bad remain with you from your war time experiences?

35:30 Today I have no feeling on the issue at all. If I meet friends who were in the air force we don't talk air force at all. My friend who came in from Robinvale who I started work with we don't talk air force per se we'll talk about some guy he may have known not air force, not flying, not combat flying, we don't it doesn't come into the mind. People will ask sometimes what

36:00 did you do, well I say, "My first job was four and half years of war flying air craft," but you don't go into the detail of where you were unless they specifically ask, "Where did you go?" and you give them a generalised answer. I don't ever talk in that detail that you recorded on that camera. It's the past. The future is not bad, the present is good and the future is unknown

36:30 so accept what is good which is the present. I'm quite happy with the present. I'm able to play golf, I'm able to play bridge between the lot and have some friends I have sufficient finances to do what I like, so long as I don't want to do anything absurd. That's good. I'm quite happy to be single and I see my friends who are married and they are constantly

37:00 bickering I think, "Oh god I don't want to go back to that." But don't let me turn you off matrimony.

You won't. You mention that London was great during the war. There must have been a few times that you can look back on and say we had some really good times.

London is a superb place

37:30 because it's got all the history that you learnt and we learnt English history and you've got all this historical place and historical buildings. It's got beautiful parks. It's got a lot of beauty. It's a bit filthy and daggy now. The countryside you can never detract from the countryside. To go out in to the Cotswolds and down into that country. Beautiful country. You have been back? You know what I'm talking about.

38:00 It's a lovely country and we'd go up to the Peak district, up in Derbyshire, beautiful mountainous hilly country with streams flowing through it. Of course it's dry and arid here so the contrast is great. That's the old world with all the wonderful old buildings are and where history is. During the war everybody was vulnerable to bombs, bombs were not selective to people so

38:30 everybody was in the same boat and there was a great co-operation of working together of people and these I mean the civilians. If we wanted to go on leave there was an organization called the Lady Rider organization that would arrange for you to go and stay with Mrs Joe Blow and if you were in a strange town you went to the Lady's Auxiliary or whatever it was and said, "We're just calling in here."

39:00 "Oh do you want a bed do you? Do you want to stay with Mrs X?" So you'd go off and stay with Mrs X. They were very hospitable. I don't think anybody abused the wonderful privileges that was given to us by, maybe they did sometimes, but I don't think generally they did. I think they appreciated the hospitality of the English people during the war.

Tape 7

00:44 **We talked briefly about your feelings on war and that now you reflect on it in a different way? Had your son been in your position you would've seen him go to war?**

01:00 Oh I'd counsel him against it. I'd say, what age is my son?

Same age as you were?

Oh mmm depends what the war was, what the cause was, I don't

01:30 know that's too hypothetical I don't get with that.

You probably would have gone yourself, again?

Under the circumstances I was escaping from the bush. I was escaping from Red Cliffs. Red Cliffs was very narrow, very small I was escaping so I would have escaped, yep. The

02:00 refugee from the bush.

Refugee in Burma.

Refugee even to get down to Melbourne.

How do you feel the war had changed you?

Again that's very hypothetical. But basically I can say, and I hate that word "basically" because everybody says basically, I went from a kid to a man, in a very short order.

02:30 The training was good. The discipline we had, even in those few weeks, months in Somers to adjust to other people which is something you don't get the opportunity to go into a hut with 20 people and

adjust to living with other people. See other people's ways, listen to other people's language, listen to other people's views, sometimes see the level of hygiene which one guy who came out of

03:00 one of the leading homes of Sydney obviously had never had to wash a towel or change a towel or anything, to observe this guy with the filthiest towel you'd ever seen. You'd think, "My god where did he come from?" Well he came from one of the best homes in Sydney, so you make observations. You realise that we're all different. You realise that you've got to get along with all these people, not that it was difficult to get along because you all had the

03:30 same ambition, the same aim, I never heard any harsh, nasty words amongst these guys because we were all 18,19 and we were all on the grand adventure of life which we never anticipated, which as I said earlier gave me an opportunity to mature to grow from a callow insecure kid to a somebody who could achieve with the other guys. You did have to achieve as I said. You also had to perform and

04:00 do what the air force wanted and do it in the manner they wanted, or else you were removed from the course. Nobody wanted to be removed from the course for numerous reasons. So it was a big turning point in my life. On balance of course although I may have had some stress and all that it was still on balance worth the effort, worth the experience to travel at 19 to England

04:30 through South Africa and things like that. You don't get that experience otherwise. So you've got to pay for it.

Do you think that discipline has carried onto your later life?

It isn't so much the discipline, it's the ability to mix with other people and realise that everybody is not the same and they don't always have the same view as you. It's made a big imprint on my life,

05:00 a very large imprint on my life. In fact the largest imprint you could ever imagine, going from those ages of 18 to 23, when you're very susceptible to ideas, it was a big imprint. It has been beneficial the rest of my life. Even with the problems that came with it.

05:30 **Is there anything you feel misunderstood about? For examples the fact that Australians didn't know about Australians in Burma? Things like that, anything that is incorrect on the record?**

06:00 No I don't think. As you both said, as Karen [interviewer] said they didn't know people were in Burma, you probably don't know where Burma is, they don't know the history of Burma and I have read books on Burma, "The Burma Story" I can't think who wrote it, anyway, and I don't think Australians know much about

06:30 Burma except what they see as headlines in the paper. Didn't mean a thing to me prior to going there. So no I learnt what Burma is, the physical structure of the country the valleys the rivers and the rice growing areas and the teak growing areas. There's very interesting features of the country, which

07:00 were interesting at the time. They are history now, history to me anyway.

And on your return to Australia other than some bad advice from a doctor, do you feel like the public treated you well?

Well the public in my case, I'll refer to the public being the Department of Veteran Affairs and they've been absolutely wonderful. They had been so supportive. If you

07:30 were genuine that you saw service then they will support you. They give wonderful service. I don't know that anybody can complain about the Department of Veteran Affairs unless they were not genuine. Anybody with a genuine problem can be established by evidence and log books. That's an interesting thing, no medical report came out of the RAF

08:00 concerning my service, concerning dysentery, concerning anything and I think that applies to a lot of people. No medical reports came back to Australia at all. So all the Department of Veteran Affairs have is a statement of my health in the period of time I was in Australia which was 12 months actually, they don't know anything about my health reports, illness or anything that happened

08:30 outside of that period which they have to believe what I say or I support it with evidence, such as a log book, which I've never been called upon to do anyway. So, that's good, the DVA is the public of Australia, they're paying for it.

09:00 **Is there anything else you'd like to add to the record?**

No I think you've ground me right down through every thought I've ever had or haven't had because I don't have many thoughts normally, but I certainly ran through a few things in my mind before you came along. To think what are these people going to ask? Do they want a story or glory and patriotism or do they want the facts of life or the fact of the world as I saw it or the service as I saw it.

09:30 So really you are just hearing a story from one set of eyes, one brain, one experience which is not everybody's experience by any means.

You feel like we've covered this experience sufficiently now?

I think so. I think you've run the subject dry.

It's a pleasure to meet you Roy.

It's been nice to be listening to you, you've been trained well, you're a skilled interviewer and you've done enough of it now to know really some of the sensitivities of people and

10:00 you accommodate those sensitivities. Which you would have observed that I am tender on some subjects and I don't want to discuss some subjects, but you have not pushed on those subjects. So that's good.

INTERVIEW ENDS