

Australians at War Film Archive

Dacre Smyth - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 19th January 2004

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1348>

Tape 1

- 00:45 I was born in England, actually. I was born a Pom I suppose you would say. My father had been British Army all his life, and he thought with the Australians right through the World War 1. So after the war, first of all he got married, as a
- 01:00 retired general, wives were a bit of a nuisance in the services before that. He had three children, and decided, as he retired from the army after World War 1, that he wanted to come to Australia. So I became a migrant, at the age of one. I came out from England in 1925. I was born in 1923. He settled on a sheep station in the Western District of Victoria, where I grew up,
- 01:31 as a youngster. I went to the local state school. When I was too old for that, ten or eleven, I went to one of the big schools down in Geelong. Geelong Grammar. At the age of thirteen, I tried for the navy, still before the war, this was, in 1936. I didn't get in because I had flat feet. I wasn't brave enough to tell my interviewers that my feet were flat because I hadn't worn shoes up until then. My feet had
- 02:00 taken on the shape of the land on which they walked, in the bush. Anyway, I failed in that. I wanted to go into the navy because I was brought up very service-minded, by my father. Two or three years later, war broke out. I was almost finished in school, so in 1940 I joined the navy. That was what they called a special entry, matriculation, having finished my schooling. Which I think was a much better way to join
- 02:30 than the little kids who were going in at thirteen. They had their futures mapped out far too early for them. At any rate, I joined the navy in 1940. I went to sea only six months later, after purely naval training, not academic like the others had been doing. I went to sea in Australia's flagship. I served right through World War 11. I stayed in the navy afterwards, because I had joined the permanent navy and had a chance to stay in. Then I served
- 03:00 in due course in the Korean War and eventually, in a smaller way, in the Vietnam War. Finally I retired after nearly 40 years in the navy, in 1978, since which I have been enjoying my retirement and becoming an artist. That's my life story.

Could you just give us a brief run down of the places you served in during World War 11?

World War 11? First of all, as I said,

- 03:30 I joined the HMAS Australia. A month or so around Sydney, New Zealand, then we took the Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth and Aquitania, the three biggest ships in the British Merchant Fleet, we escorted them from Sydney, right round the south of Australia, across the Indian Ocean, and they were taking troops to the Middle East. We then stayed around Aden, up and down the East Coast of Africa, Durban, East London,
- 04:00 Capetown, doing convoys, searching for German raiders. Interesting incidents that I will mention later. Then we hurried back to Australia when the Japs came into the war. We immediately took convoys up to New Guinea, of troops, reinforcing the very troops we had up there. We served around there, the Coral Sea, culminating in the Coral Sea Battle,
- 04:30 which was the first time, of course, that the Japs were beaten at sea. Left the ship not long after that, went by merchant ship over to England, where I did courses. They were still very much concerned then with the British training system. Nowadays we are much more concerned with the Americans. But then we were doing exchange service, we were doing courses and so forth, with the groups. I did courses there, for a few months. After which
- 05:00 there was no quick trip home, so I asked whether I could get into something smaller than the big cruiser that I had been in. And I had an interesting month or so in the Coastal Forces, in motor gunboats, on the East Coast of Great Britain, in the [English] Channel. Then I came back and rejoined the HMAS Australia. While I had been away, the Guadalcanal actions had been taking place,
- 05:30 and we had lost our sister ship, the Canberra, in the Battle of Savo Island. We were up around those

waters for a bit. I was with the Hobart when she was torpedoed. I was in the Australia and happened to be on watch and was looking at her when she was torpedoed. But she survived. Not long after that I left the ship again and went across back to the Indian Ocean, joined a British cruiser, took passage incidentally on a

- 06:00 small aircraft carrier, from England to India, and joined this cruiser. We went up the Persian Gulf for actions there a bit. And gradually realised that the main task that we were going to do was back in England. We went back through the Med [Mediterranean], one or two incidents in the Med, then we worked for the Normandy landings. I was one of the few Australians probably in the Normandy landings, because we were very with the Japanese,
- 06:30 back here, in those days. But I happened to be the only Australian in this British cruiser and we did the landings, bombarding Sword Beach in Normandy. Then after that became a sort of a mother ship for all the small craft there, during which I spent quite a bit of time ashore with the army, helping them out, because I had been gunnery control officer of the ship, and we had become a mother ship, rather than a bombarding ship. Left the
- 07:01 ship again to come back. But again, passengers were a bit remote, so I had an interesting time. At that time I decided would like to see what the air force did and I joined an Australian Beaufighter Squadron in Norfolk who were attacking German shipping, off the Dutch Coast. It was interesting to see the other side of life. What it was like to be shot at by a ship rather than being in the ship shooting at the aeroplane.
- 07:30 When I finished that I got passage in another naval ship back through the Med to Ceylon where I joined an Australian destroyer, the Norman. I served in her up and down the Burmese Coast, doing the final Arrakan advance down the coast of Burma. With Bill Slim [General Sir William Slim], the general, doing his famous victory procedure down the coast.
- 08:00 When we'd successfully done that, we rushed back around the south of Australia, rejoined other N Class in Sydney, and joined the British Pacific Fleet, went up north with them, operated with the British aircraft carriers who were operating with the American carriers, in an enormous collection of ships by then. We did the Okinawa landings, the Sakashima landings. We were preparing to do the landings
- 08:30 in Japan, which was a worry for us all, because we realised how fanatical the Japanese were. And fortunately, I think still, the atom bombs put an end to the war before the millions that would have been killed in the final struggle. We actually were off the coast of Japan and saw the sunset on the night of what we, the next morning, found out was the atom bomb on Hiroshima. Which was quite an interesting
- 09:00 experience. And that was the end of the war. We then had all the post-war business of running down and returning to Australia. I stayed in the navy then, and it was only a few years later we found ourselves starting the Korean War.

You were also in BCOF [British Commonwealth Occupation Force]?

Yes, we spent two or three trips up in BCOF, immediately after the

- 09:30 war. In fact we took, on the frigate I was then in, the Murchison, we escorted the main BCOF contingent from Morotai up to Japan. And having at that particular time, having to tow an LST [Landing Ship Tank] all the way, which broke down right at the beginning. That was quite a long tow we had to do, to get them there. So BCOF, we operated all around Japan, in the Occupational Forces. In fact,
- 10:00 had done one trip up there in the Battan, in 1949, and were going back for the second trip in 1950, and left Hong Kong the day the Korean War broke out. So we were in Korea, fighting the Korean war, three days later. We were right at the beginning. The first six months of that war were the most active, those six months that we had. And I came back and had all sorts of peacetime activities, until finally
- 10:30 the Vietnam War, when it was on, I was commanding the big fleet tanker, the Supply. We weren't very war-like, we didn't go in and fire guns or anything, but we did a certain amount of logistic support for the ships that were taking troops in, or were bombarding. So I played roles in the three wars, until finally I had a few more peacetime jobs and then I retired quietly in 1978.
- 11:04 **Let's go back to the beginning now, and we'll talk in a lot more detail. Firstly, I understand your father was awarded the Victoria Cross?**
- That came way back. People, when they hear he had a Victoria Cross, they say, "Oh, World War 11?" "No." "World War 1?" "No." "Boer War?" And I say, "No." They "Before that?" And I say, "Yes, the Khartoum Expedition
- 11:30 of 1898." With Kitchener relieving Khartoum, in the Battle of Omdurman, my father was one of four Victoria Crosses. Virtually won on horseback with a sword. I think he was waving a pistol around, too. So that's fun to always have that in the family. I still have the Victoria Cross hanging proudly in my dining room. Because he was a soldier and he spent his whole life
- 12:00 in the British Cavalry, until he became more of an Infantryman in World War 11. I was sort of service-minded from my upbringing. He had left the army before I was born, so I didn't actually see him being a soldier. Although he was often back in his uniform for Anzac Day parades in Western Victoria. Opening

war memorials. There's one down in Portland I always like to have a look at. Opened by, and dedicated

12:30 by, Major General Sir Neville Smyth VC. So I've always been rather proud of that.

So you were born in 1923, how old was your father then?

He must have been about 55. As I said earlier, he retired from the army and then got married. It must have been quite a shock for my mother, who was twenty years younger than him, to find herself marrying a knight and a general and a VC winner.

13:00 Normally you'd marry someone who was in their 20s, not someone who was in their 50s.

So he was knighted as well?

Yes, he was a knight. At the end of World War 1. World War 1 I would like to mention. He wasn't at the Anzac landings, he was then actually back in Khartoum as the Military Governor of Sudan. Which was a funny sort of job. But it was where he won his VC

13:30 seventeen years earlier. The General Bridges [Major General William Throsby Bridges, KCB, CMG], who you may remember was the head of the Australian forces at Gallipoli. He was killed early in May, and one of the brigadiers was promoted to take his place, as the divisional commander, and they didn't want to promote the colonel under him up to brigadier, apparently, he was too junior at the time, and they looked

14:00 around quickly for someone to take over, and there were various other British officers with the Australian forces then, and they grabbed my father from Khartoum, and they rushed him up, at very short notice, and he took over the First Brigade of the Australians on Gallipoli. Where he had a very active time, including, I think, the only battle we really won in Gallipoli, was the Battle of Lone Pine, and he was the commander of

14:30 the brigade that fought the Battle of Lone Pine. I've always been rather proud of that. Then he stayed with the Australians. He went to France with them, after the evacuation of Gallipoli. In 1916 he was promoted from brigadier general to major general, and he then took over the 2nd Division, right through Posieres, Passchendaele, all the nasty battles on the French

15:00 and Belgium area. By halfway through that, he was given the Commander of the Order of the Bath, and he was given the French Partiguere [partie le guerre] [Croix de Guerre] and the Belgian decoration. At the end of the war he was knighted. He left the Australian forces early in 1918, when they finally Australianised, completely, the commands. He was the last

15:30 of the British officers to lead. I think he was.... Well, I like to think he was, the most popular of the British officers amongst the Aussies. Partly because he had a VC and they knew that he was a fighting general, and not of these generals who hid behind the lines and ordered everybody in to be slaughtered. And he was so fond of the people he served with. As I say, there was no question in his mind that when he retired, a year or so after the war, he had been

16:00 writing to his Australian friends and he finally came out. He came out first by himself, had a look around.... I know your head office is in Orange, and the first place he decided to settle was Orange. I found that out when I went there, not long after World War 1. I was the ADC [Aide de Camp] to the Governor-General and I visited Orange, and the very first person I met, he said, "I knew your father. He came here in 1924 and he wanted to settle here."

16:30 He decided, in the end, to settle in Victoria, instead. At any rate he decided to settle in Victoria, then he came back and got us and brought us out in 1925.

Now the various things that you know about your father, is that from him telling you? Or did you find out later?

I think I found it out later. Like all those World War 1 people, he was pretty reticent. He would talk quite a lot, naturally, about

17:00 experiences. But they were never the wartime experiences, they were more, "I remember the time I was in Egypt when I was stung by a camel scorpion, and I very nearly died. But I dealt with it. I had lain down in my stretcher and it had bitten me on the temple. So I picked up my cut-throat razor and I slashed my temple until it poured with blood, and I saved my life that way." He would tell you those sort of stories, but he wouldn't mention that the day before he had been

17:30 slaughtering Dervishes in the final battle to track down the Khalifah Abdallah, the successor to the Mardhir, and that sort of thing. And yes, I've read a lot about him. There's a lot of books where he gets mentioned, the official histories of the war. The Australian official histories. I've never been able to get his biography written. One person was very keen to do it, worked on it for

18:00 ten years, got through almost to the beginning of World War 1.... After all, he had started his actions, his front line service had been in 1890, up in the North West frontier of India. So there was quite a lot before the World War 1 time came. And the chap who was writing it finally died, unfortunately. I've still got his prepared work, but I still haven't found another author yet, to do the rest of it.

18:30 I've got one or two in mind, still.

Can you tell me about your early childhood in Australia? What were your first memories?

It was a delightful life, on a sheep station in Western Victoria. Riding my little Shetland pony, with my sister, the three miles to the little country state school, every morning. Before that, I suppose, we first of all had a governess, because

- 19:00 there was no state school, at that stage, within cooee [Australian call, large distance] of us. I had an elder brother and an elder sister, and the governess would try to look after us, and keep us under control, which was impossible. We had a delightful life in the country. I had my own dog. I'd go wandering around with my dog and my air rifle, first, and then later on a .22 rifle, then finally four ten shotgun, shooting rabbits. I actually shot
- 19:30 a fox one day, which was very exciting. All at the age of about eight or ten. And lots of trips with.... The overseer on our sheep station was an ex-English fellow, but a great hunter. He loved going hunting kangaroos and going fishing. He taught me all the bush boys sort of activities. As I say, I seldom wore shoes. Even riding to school you didn't need shoes, because your bare feet were in the stirrups of the
- 20:01 saddle. So I had a delightful life there. Two years at the little state school, where there were only ten or eleven pupils only. I think the second year I claimed to be the dux of the school, but as there were only twelve pupils, it wasn't terribly clever of me. Then I had to put on shoes and go to school down in the big city. It was a wonderful upbringing. My father, having been a cavalry man,
- 20:31 everything was done with horses. He did all the ploughing, with a horse drawn plough. He even had a paddock which he called the polo paddock. I don't think he ever actually played polo on it, but he had been a polo enthusiast in the army. He had been a big game shooter. We had a house full of stuffed tiger skins and lion skins. As you walked into the hall, there were three lion skins and one tiger skin,
- 21:00 with just the head stuffed, and the rest of the skin lying on the floor, and you looked into these gaping mouths and flashing eyes as you walked into the hall. Those have long since rotted away, but that was the sort of upbringing I had. The next big-game hunter-soldier, who was to me a sort of an automatic hero for a very small boy to live up to.

How big was your sheep station and where was it?

- 21:30 It was a place called Balmoral, north of Hamilton, south of Horsham. The Western District. It had been a very big station, I suppose about twenty or thirty thousand acres. It was taken over, after World War 1, for the Closer Settlement of returned men. As a matter of fact, Indian army officers were, for some reason, allocated to that particular area. Not Indians, but British people who'd been in the Indian army. So the
- 22:00 main homestead was reduced to a thousand acres, and lots of other one thousand acre blocks were set up and houses were built on them. And all these Indian army officers were settled in there. The people who had owned the main homestead, Congul as it was called, were so disgusted at being reduced, compulsorily to a thousand acres that they sold the place, to my father, who had found it for sale when he came out. So we started off
- 22:30 with only a thousand acres. The Indian army officers were partly not on really.... blocks of land that were big enough. Secondly they didn't know very much about running a sheep station. They hardly knew what a sheep was. So by the time that the next war came along, only fifteen years later, they'd all failed and moved to the city and disappeared.
- 23:00 All except one family, I think. And my father, who had gradually brought up two or three of the other ones.... I think we finished with about four or five thousand acres, running merino sheep. Lovely rolling red gum country. One of the nicest parts of Victoria. It's not flat and dull, or bush, it's just big red gum spread park-like, over nice rolling hills with beautiful white merino sheep. My wife
- 23:30 never forgave me for not going back to the farm after World War 11, when I could have gone.... My father had died early in World War 11, but I decided to stay in the navy. I often regret it myself to a certain extent, that I didn't go back. My mother had kept the farm going during World War 11, for me or my brother. We both said, "No." I said I wanted to stay in the navy. My brother had been invalided out of the Welsh Guards after being wounded in Italy during the war,
- 24:00 and he had become a diplomat. And he said, "No, I want to be a diplomat." So the place was sold and we rather regretted it, ever since.

Now your father being an army man, was he a very strict father?

I don't think so. No, he didn't really know very much about children, mind you. I think he left the upbringing of us to our dear mother, who was a good mother for us.

- 24:30 He was a bit distant, I would say. I didn't quite call him 'sir' but it was almost in those days when you did. He was always 'Father' to me. I've still got a letter somewhere. At school, everybody else had been talking about their Dad, and I had been talking about my father, so I finally wrote to him and said, "Would it be all right if I called you 'Dad', Father?" And Father wrote back saying, "Yes son, you are

quite welcome to call me 'Dad'. Actually 'Dad' is interesting. It comes from the original Welsh word 'Tad',

- 25:01 T-A-D, which was first..." And he went on and on in his letter about this. I don't think I ever get around to calling him 'Dad' because I respected him, enormously.

Now you mentioned before that you used to hunt for rabbits. It brings to mind the very tough years of the Depression.

- 25:30 **You would have been around about seven or eight when the Depression started....**

Yes, I don't really remember the Depression, as such. I mean, obviously, it was on. I remember the tramps, who seemed to be more numerous then. They'd come up and ask for something... At its basic, just a meal, but often asking if they could do a bit of work, and we'd try to give them a job as a hand on the place. We only had about one person working on the place

- 26:00 perhaps two. My father did most of the hard work riding around the bush, pointing his swagger stick at things to be done, to the employees, the two men. The fact that he was able to send us all to boarding school surprises me, in retrospect, because I don't think he ever really made very much money on that farm. He wasn't a farmer at heart.
- 26:31 He was fairly impractical. He had a bit of an army pension, not very much in those days. I think even the VC gave him a pension of about two pounds a year, which seemed absolutely ridiculous. But it had been set up in 1856, when the VC was invented, and it had never changed. Two pounds then would have been probably quite generous, but he had something else, too. And it wasn't until he died, and that pension
- 27:00 disappeared with him, in 1940, that my mother had to make the farm run. And she ran it during the war. All of the men of the farm went off to the war. She was running it single-handedly, with the aid of one local dwarf, who was a charming little fellow, but he was only about three foot high. He couldn't even reach up to milk the cows. My mother had to milk the cows and carry the milk buckets
- 27:30 back to the dairy. And later on, he was added to by an Italian prisoners of war, who had been a circus trapeze artist in his peacetime and he was delighted to have been captured. He didn't want to fight in the war. He was a very pleasant fellow. I like to think that perhaps he settled in Australia after the war.

Your mother sounds like an extraordinary woman, can you tell us a bit about her?

Well, she was, I think,

- 28:00 extraordinary, and anybody who remembers her, particularly the sight of her, there were one or two books written a few years ago.... Somebody who had gone there as a Land Girl during the war, at one stage, to help out, knew that she was going to meet Lady Smyth, who she thought was going to be a frightening sort of person. The person she met was wearing very old clothes and
- 28:32 a belt full of knife and shearing sheers and a woollen cap pulled down over her head, riding a horse, saying, "What are you? Oh, you're the new girl. Straight down to the dairy and milk the cows because I haven't got time to do it." And she really did hold the place together. After the war, when she finally sold it, she retired to Portland, it was still well known in the area for being the
- 29:00 sort of 'can do' person she was. I've always been rather proud of both my parents, for different reasons, in that regard.

She was obviously fairly tough, what was her upbringing and background?

She was a Welsh woman. She was (UNCLEAR). She used to speak Welsh if she had to. I never did.

- 29:30 I have been to Wales and met her cousins. Her father was a baronet. Sir Osmond Williams, head of Merry Oldham, the northern Welsh county, I suppose you would call it. She had been brought up very much in the Welsh country. So it fitted her somehow.
- 30:00 I think she probably proposed to my father. He never having very much to do with woman in the army, was attracted to her and they had a lovely story. He finally went to stay with the Lord and Attendant of Mary Onan Shirley, Sir Osmond Williams, because he was admiring the daughter of the house. They went for a long walk on the....
- 30:30 beaches of the Perrin Dydruf [?], area. And when they returned, my mother was all alone and somewhere half a mile behind my future father was trudging along. My mother said, "Well, it's all fixed. We're going to get married." And that was apparently the announcement. My future father sort of ambled in and said, "Yes, yes, we're going to get married." Silly
- 31:00 stories one remembers from one's youth.

Were they religious, your parents?

They were good Church of England goers. I think, actually, my mother was probably Chuppel. Welsh people were Chuppel. I'm not quite sure what it is. It's rather like the Presbyterians, I think. And I know when we've been in

- 31:30 Wales, it's Chappel they go to, very religiously. He was a good Christian, my father, there's no doubt about that. I have a delightful... At his funeral, the Bishop of Ballarat, I have his sermon, his address. Eulogy. I know that we always went to the local church and so forth. But I wouldn't
- 32:00 say they were more than just good solid Christians. The sort of persons I think most of my friends are. They don't go overboard, but they do accept that there is probably some higher authority up there, who somehow put us on this Earth.

So they weren't zealots, but they were believers and practised.

The local church, at Balmoral, I've been back there a few times....

- 32:32 When my father died, we presented a rather nice carved wedge-tailed eagle as the lectern, from which the lessons are read. There's a nice brass plate commemorating the fact that he worshipped in that church, and he's buried in the little Balmoral cemetery. Actually, Bruce Ruxton [long-time President of the Returned and Services League] a few years ago was up there,
- 33:00 and I knew Bruce quite well, and he knew my father had been a VC winner, and he went to see my father's grave, in the Balmoral cemetery and it was in disrepair and he was horrified. He came back and he made quite sure that it was arranged from then on that every VC grave in Victoria would be properly looked after, henceforth, by the RSL [Returned and Services League]. So that was something. We were a bit ashamed. We had been up and cleaned it up a few years earlier, then we'd forgotten about it,
- 33:31 and good old Bruce Ruxton fixed it for us, so now it's being looked after.

You mentioned that you didn't remember much about the Depression, tell me about that time in

- 34:00 **general, though.... What sort of food did you eat? And you went to the local state school, you must have seen other kids that weren't doing so well?**

I don't remember them as not doing well. Every house had its little vegetable garden, where we grew most of our own vegetables. We ate mutton, dreadful mutton.

- 34:30 When the Marino sheep ceased to produce very nice fleeces, you tended to put them in a paddock and called them, "The Killers." You'd kill a sheep, there was no refrigeration, so it would hang in the meat house until it started to smell a bit, then you would kill another sheep, and eat that. Mutton is not exactly like the lamb you have today. It was a bit tough, but I didn't think of that. No doubt, we also occasionally....
- 35:00 I don't think we ever killed.... We only had dairy cows, we didn't have cattle as such. So we probably occasionally we probably got a steak or something like that. I can't remember that. I think mutton was the only meat I understood. But you can do a lot of things with mutton. You can grind it up by hand in a mince-meat maker, and finish up with the equivalent of your modern....
- 35:30 hamburgers. I don't think we called them hamburgers, then. I don't know why they called them hamburgers. They haven't got ham in them, they've got beef in them. We ate what the ground and the land could produce for us. I think all the other families were much the same. We joined with them for various things.
- 36:00 We drank home-made barley water or lemonade. We had lemons. We had an orchard with all the fruit in it, at the right time of the year. I really don't remember the Depression, except for extra tramps, and wondering why there seemed to be more of them. But you know, at the age of seven or eight, you can't really remember much.
- 36:30 I think the earliest memory that I can possibly.... I'm only remembering having remembered, is going down to Portland in the summer on the train for a holiday. I think I was five, but I think I am probably remembering, without really remembering.

Did you eat rabbits?

Oh yes, rabbits were very good. There was no myxomatosis or anything nasty like that in those days. I made pocket money

- 37:02 by selling the skins. Some people, of course, sold the actual rabbit. We sold the skins. The skins brought in a few cents each or something, which was quite good. I used to have a couple of ferrets. I would go out with the ferrets and put them in the burrows, the warrens, there were quite a lot of rabbits around still. We spent a lot of time
- 37:30 trying to deal with rabbits in one way or another. There was some machine that used to pump nasty smoke. We used to drag this machine along with the horse, there was a fire going in it, and somehow we pumped into the warrens. But for those who had to fill in, close all the outlets, in the hope that they would all be exterminated inside, which I suppose it did.
- 38:02 Sometimes I used nets. But mainly I used to stand there with my little four ten shotgun, and waited for the rabbits to bolt out, and I shot them. I was a very good shot in those days. I was never as good when I

graduated to a twelve bore [twelve gauge] shotgun. I was never as accurate as I was with my funny little, single barrel, four ten shotgun.

Did you graduate from your Shetland pony?

- 38:31 Not really. Because once I left the state school and went down to the big school.... There were other ponies. There was a bigger pony that I rode occasionally, but I really haven't ridden since them. In 1973, thirty years ago, I was asked to lead the Anzac march, here in Melbourne. I was still in the navy,
- 39:00 and I thought it would be rather fun, if I got into a naval officer's riding kit, which did still exist in the textbooks. Which was black gaiters and white normal sort of dress-up, buttons, tie, medals and everything, in a monkey jacket. But down below, white britches and black gaiters. And I knew the Chief Commissioner of Police fairly well and I said, "Can I borrow one of your horses and actually ride it,
- 39:30 as the leader of the Anzac march?" He said, "That's quite a good idea, I think I will find you one." Then I'm afraid I went chicken. I thought, "Now I'm still in the navy and the navy is probably going to say I shouldn't be behaving like that, and anyway, I might fall off and disgrace the navy." I hadn't ridden a horse.... So I didn't do it. And I even thought of doing it again three years ago when they once again asked me to lead the march. And I thought, "No, I'm now very much retired, I'm nearly eighty and I don't think I should be trying to ride a horse."
- 40:00 And I didn't.

Actually I will pause there....

Tape 2

- 00:39 **I just want to ask a little bit more about the area in which you were growing up, and the school that you went to, was there a mixture of races and religions at all?**

I wouldn't know the religions. I imagine there might have been an odd Roman Catholic. There were certainly no other races.

- 01:00 We didn't have any Aborigines near there. They were down towards Portland more, where they still are. No, they all seemed to me to be perfectly the same as me. And their fathers were all Major Norton, or Captain Wells. They were all ex-army people, so to me I suppose I assumed everybody was ex-army. And although all of those were ex-Indian army,
- 01:31 Victoria at the time was still full of ex-soldiers. Those that had survived. After all out of one and a half million Victorians in World War 1, ninety thousand went to the war, which is an enormous percentage. Of those, one in five were killed. Nineteen thousand were killed, out of eighty nine thousand, which is a frightening proportion. But
- 02:00 nonetheless, every family.... had somebody coming back from the war or had somebody not coming back from the war. The place was still being run by the old father or the wife or something like that. That's why all these war memorials were built. Every little hamlet, every village, had its own war memorial. In those days, they were still being built. As I say, I remember my father dedicating the new
- 02:30 Portland Memorial. There's a little one in Balmoral that I remember we used to go to, every Anzac Day. It is my sort of memory that it was a post-war country, or state, that one was living in. And as far as I was concerned, even more so because my father had had all those other wars before. He lived in a world of war I suppose. It wasn't that long after that, that sure enough, we were in the next one, too.
- 03:04 **The era sounds interesting, or unusual, in that.... Would you say that most of the kids at your school were from British soldiers?**
- Yes, at my little school that was true. Going a little further away, though, outside the Koonongwootong Closer Settlement area, there were several people who
- 03:30 had fought with my father. Good genuine Australians. A chap called Gus Oakes, a chap called Bill Winter Cooke, who had been with my father with my father. And that might have led him to Balmoral. He probably knew they were living there, and tracked them down when he came back out in 1924. They were all great people. At the time, they just seemed friends of my father. I have since learnt of their own.... Gus Oakes
- 04:01 had a Military Cross. I didn't know much about medals as a boy, I just thought that everybody had medals. But he had a Military Cross, which he got fighting under my father in France. Bill Winter Cooke, his son's still running Murndal, which was about thirty miles away from us, he was the one that brought back.... Not the Lone Pine,
- 04:31 that's a different story. You probably heard about how the lone pine was brought back? The lone pine itself was sitting on top of a little mountain. A single lone pine. A lonesome pine, they called it originally.

And my father, the night before the battle, sketched it and that's the only known picture of the original known pine. But after the battle, it had been blown to bits, by gunfire.

05:00 And somebody picked up a pine cone from it, sent it home to his aunt in Australia, who some years later remembered it was sitting on the mantle piece, gave it to some experts who were able to grow a lone pine from it. And that's the Lone Pine at the Shrine of Remembrance here in Melbourne. There are now lots of grandsons of lone pine. I planted one down at one of the schools in Melbourne, only two or three years ago.

05:31 The headmaster knew I was the son of the general who fought the Lone Pine Battle, and we planted this lone pine, which has now grown up. Bill Winter Cooke, who I mentioned, he at Gallipoli picked up some acorns from the Gallipoli oaks. They're not really oak trees as you and I know, like the English oaks. They're very spiny.

06:01 They're more like a holly. In fact, I call them a Gallipoli Holly Oak. He brought a handful of them home, and he planted them in the grounds of Murndal, one little Gallipoli oak. And the other one in the grounds of Geelong Grammar School, because he had been at Geelong Grammar. And recently

06:30 because my wife's father had been second in command of the submarine AE2, which forced the Dardanelles, on the original Anzac Day.... I was in charge of the grounds around the shrine here where we've got about four hundred trees. About two hundred of them are dedicated to a particular ship or unit or squadron. We didn't have the AE2 commemorated there,

07:00 so I was able to get one of the Gallipoli oaks, which had been again the grandson of the original one brought back, at Murndal and at Geelong Grammar, and I planted that and it's now taller than me. I do digress rather, don't I?

That's okay. I wonder what the Customs Department has to say about all these pine cones and acorns

07:30 **coming back into the country...**

At the time they were welcome. I should think now they would get burnt.

Given this background, the people and the area generally, and the returned soldiers, and in particular the British soldiers, I'm interested to know both through informally and formally at school, what sort of things did

08:00 **you learn about previous wars? Particularly World War 1? What were you told and what did you learn, about what went on?**

I don't think school ever did anything other than mention it in passing. The history we learned at both the state school and later on in the bigger school, was Australian history, but all explorers. Nobody seemed to be anything except an

08:30 explorer in Australian history, as far as we were concerned. My brother was much more intelligent. He was a very good student. He studied Ancient History and European History and Roman History, and he was an historical buff, and he was the dux of Geelong Grammar. My headmaster at the time, only a few years ago before he died, once said to me "Dacre, I do think that your brother Oz [Osmond] was

09:00 the most brilliant mind that ever went through my school in the thirty years I was headmaster." So my brother was an historian, and he would be able to answer your question much better, if he were still alive. No, I think the war was still so close behind, it wasn't history. It was.... what is the difference between history and recent events. But you can probably see what I mean. Now,

09:30 it's history. My own war is now history, because it's a long time ago. But I'm talking then in the days of only ten years after the war. You certainly think of history as something ten years ago.

Well, informally then. Did any of the adults talk to you about your own experiences? Did you have a picture of what war was like?

No, I don't think so. I don't think any of them really

10:00 liked talking about it. They had a much nastier war.... Well, I had a very nice war. I was in the navy. I didn't have to put up with any of the things the army had to put up with. The sands of the desert, or the mud of the trenches, or the mosquitoes and leeches of the tropical forests. I avoided all that. But I think that First [World] War, the trench warfare, the more one reads about it, the more horrific it must have been.

10:31 I'm just reading a little book now, a fairly recent one, all little half page extracts of people actually talking, rather like what you're doing to me now, they extracted all this from people, of the First War. And some of the descriptions, in just a paragraph or two, wading waist deep. Not through mud, but through mud and decaying bodies.

11:00 Well, that's not the sort of thing that little boys would be told about by the people who put up with it.

Were you told of the British Empire, though, and....

Oh, very much. My father, of course, was terribly sort of British Empire minded. He had come to Australia, but Britain was still his home. He never went back. I don't think my mother went back for, oh, thirty years.

11:31 She went back, actually, for the centenary of the Victoria Cross in 1956, the early '50s. They remembered that she was the widow of a VC. That was her first return. So they had taken on Australia, embraced Australia and become good Australians, but they were still terribly British at heart. I'm accused, still, of talking like an

12:00 Englishman, because I was brought up, I suppose, listening to them with an English accent. I don't think I'm terribly English, but you would know better than me. I can't hear myself.

You mentioned that your father was a large figure in your life, He loomed large. He was a hero to you.

12:31 **You must have known something of his exploits when you were young?**

Oh, at some stage I realised that having a VC was something a bit special. All the other medals he had were interesting when he put them on. I can't remember a moment that I realised he was a hero. Or realised that there was any difference between him or anyone else.

13:03 He normally didn't go around wearing uniform. Rather like the description of my mother's clothes. His were all terribly old. If he tried to do the ploughing with the horse, he didn't exactly look like a soldier hero.

But he sounds interesting in that he did form some kind of bond with Australia, and decided to turn his back on

13:30 **Britain and decided to come over here. Do you have any inkling why he might have done that?**

I do remember that to a certain extent.... I have got writings by him somewhere, I think, perhaps when he was writing to his friends over here, saying to them, "I would like to come out because I don't see the future for England." In those days, 1920, '23, he could see England

14:01 going to the dogs. No, he was typical British.... not upper-class, but successful middle-class I suppose. And felt that there was more.... And he was an adventurous fellow, having fought around the world. Not only fought, but did peacetime soldiering. The challenge of coming to Australia, where

14:30 he had so much admired these fellows that fought under him. He did like an Aussie, and they liked him. And they got along terribly well together. And after the war it seemed almost automatic that he would want to come out.

At the school you were at, were they strong believers in the Empire

15:00 **as well? Do you remember such things as Empire Day?**

Oh yes. We used to, every morning, we would, all ten or twelve of us, we would line up and we would hoist the flag. We would salute it. I don't think we sang anything particularly, but we'd have our little ceremony.

No God Save The King?

Oh yes, but not every day. We might have, I can't remember. I do remember that we had

15:32 a sort of routine during that morning assembly, where you had to each say...The first thing you had to do there, there was a roll call. And the first few days I couldn't understand.... They were saying, "Dacre Smyth?" And I was saying, "Presermiss." [Present, miss] And I had no idea what 'Presermiss' meant. It was a sort of a new word to me, but I went on saying 'Presermiss' until finally,

16:00 one of the others spoke it a bit more clearly and I realised he was saying, "Present, miss" to the schoolteacher. Then we were asked if we had anything interesting to report. And there's a chap who I've only recently re-met, who was Major Norton's youngest son, Mark Norton. A very nice fellow. I've seen a bit of him. And this particular morning, I said, "This morning as I was coming to school, I saw a fox."

16:31 And everyone said, "Ooohh, that's a bit special." And my sister said, "This morning when I was coming to school, I saw two foxes." And I rather looked at her, and I didn't think she really had seen.... I had seen one. At any rate it came to Mark Norton's turn, and he had been looking at us with envy, and he said, "This morning, as I was coming to school, I saw a lion." It's a silly thing that you remember.

17:02 **What sort of things did you do with other kids, or by yourself, what sort of things did you do for fun? At the school or at home?**

At home we were very much just the three of us. We got on well together. I don't remember having any real fights. We would do a lot of riding around the place. We had a dam. My father had got a little boat built for us,

17:30 just big enough for the three of us to row around the near dam. The far dam had fish in it, so we used to go fishing there. The near dam we didn't think had fish, until I put a line in, one day, and went back the next morning and pulled it in and found an enormous tench on it. The far dam had English perch, but the tench was a big slimy fish and had obviously been in the dam all that time and we hadn't known. So we caught a few more of that.

Is that a native or...

18:00 No, English tench brought out by somebody. And English perch of course, the red fin, it was imported, too. The dams wouldn't have had any natives. The creeks and the rivers had natives, but again, mainly the English perch seemed to have taken over. The Greenalge River we did a lot of fishing in. We went shooting. Jack Whistler, our overseer, ran a lot of bees. And I used to

18:30 go with him and we'd move the apiary from one spot to another. We'd do all the getting of the honey out of the combs. The extractors. You'd whirl it around. It was sliced off the outer covering of beeswax and then you'd whirl it around so it all flung

19:00 out into a sort of forty four gallon drum, extractor thing. And then you'd take it off. So there were all sorts of country things like that that we used to do. We used to go on picnics up into the Grampians. I remember one Christmas... We normally had a fairly traditional Christmas at home, but for one reason or another we went on a picnic to somewhere in the Grampians.

19:32 We were almost attacked by what we thought were wild cattle, while we were having the picnic. But I don't think they were really wild and I don't think they ever really attacked us. But those are the sort of little memories you have. Very much a country upbringing, and finding your own fun on your own farm, with all sorts of.... Every tree on the home paddock, my brother, particularly, gave it a name. There was one which was the Elephant Tree, because it looked rather like

20:00 an elephant's foot. And we had an elephant foot in the house, which my father had shot in Africa at some stage. Then we found somewhere else, at some stage, that the original settlers of the house, two of them, the two Mailer brothers, one of them had gone out to the far paddock and spent a couple of nights out there, looking after the sheep. While he was away, the other

20:30 brother cut down a tree, it fell the wrong way, it pinned him to the ground, he couldn't get out. He tried to chop his way out, it was an enormous tree, and when his brother came back he found him dead there, with his face eaten off by wild dogs. So we found a place that we thought was his grave, so we dug it up, but he wasn't there. These were the sort of excitements and stories... The homestead that we were living in

21:00 wasn't terribly old, it had been built about 1900. So it was only then thirty years old. But the old homestead had been built in the 1840s, and it still there today. It was a lovely old homestead. The overseer used to live in it. So it, itself, was something to explore. And then of course there was the shearing time and the cutting of the crops in the summer. Once we

21:30 went away to school, we still.... Whenever we came home on holidays we were flat-out all the time, doing the farm work. I remember all the cutting of the crops, particularly when the war came. The bush fires that we used to have to fight in the summer and the dwindling number of men to do the work, whether it was cutting the crops or putting out the scrub fires or the grass fires. It was a country life that

22:01 one remembers, more and more, as one gets older, really, as the greatest way to be brought up.

How did it happen that you went to Geelong Grammar?

Well, Commonwealth State School Number 4462, only took you through to age eleven....

22:31 fifth grade or sixth grade, I think, whatever they called it in those days. So we had to go somewhere. The nearest high school was in Hamilton, forty miles away, so I couldn't of commuted to that, so I had to go to a boarding school. My brother had gone off two years earlier. And of course the nearest boarding schools were in Geelong. Geelong College and Geelong Grammar. And Geelong Grammar, particularly, seemed to be

23:00 the one that nearly all the Western District people.... A lot of the locals just finished. My schoolmates at Kongul [?] State School, I don't think any of them went on to high school. They finished and they went on the farm, where if they failed they finished up in the city somewhere. But those that were going to go and try to get an education had to go to the big city and the nearest big city was Geelong. Geelong Grammar, just out of Geelong was more countrified than

23:30 Geelong College, right in it, so I suppose that was why my father and mother chose that for us.

So how did you find it? It must have been a bit of a shock for you to go from a school of twelve kids to a school of several hundred?

I started in a prep school right in Geelong called Bostock House.

24:00 And it wasn't as big as the big school. It had, probably, twenty boarders, and sixty or eighty day boarders. And it was just filling in the two years between.... I went there at the age of ten and did two

years, I think. I left at twelve and went up to the junior school

24:30 of the big school in Corio. It was a change, yes, certainly, to find yourself miles from home. I don't remember being particularly homesick, somehow. And the other kids weren't too bad. I never suffered at school from any bullying, or took part in any bullying. For some reason it might have been going on. From what one hears, it's still goes on.

25:00 But I was lucky, I always enjoyed school. I got along well with most of the others. There were some people you didn't like and some people you did like. That's life anywhere, isn't it? So I was very happy there. Very shortly after going there we had our annual athletics and I found myself the under-twelve athletics champion, at the age of ten. Well, that put me in a good spot, so nobody was going to pick on me after that. I even set the

25:30 under-twelve long jump record of thirteen feet and two inches. I often wonder whether it still exists, that record. I don't think it does, but it's nice to think it might.

So did you make a lot of friends?

Not really, no. I was friendly with everybody.

26:00 I think I've been right through my life, not close friends with people, in the navy. But in school, the friends I made I then never saw again. Most of them were killed in the war, I think. I went off with the navy and it wasn't until I came back here to Melbourne, for my final posting, really, that I started catching up with a few of them, again. So none of them are close friends. I just like

26:30 to think that I've got lots and lots of friends. It varies with the individual I suppose. Some people need two or three very close friends. I've never had them, so I've never needed them and never missed them.

Did you have any contact with girls at all?

I remember feeling rather frustrated at school, for obvious reasons.

27:01 As one grew up and became a teenager at Geelong Grammar, you felt that you should know something about girls. And we didn't have very much contact with them. We met them during the holidays, obviously. I don't remember having what these days seem to carry on, happen quite early in one teens. Sexual activity. I merely thought about it and hoped

27:30 for it and it never happened. A boys only boarding school.... Now of course, my old school has got girls. It was rather like the navy later on, I think. We had WRANS [Women's Royal Australian Naval Service] in England and WRANS here and finally accepted, but never in any of my ships, did I actually have women serving under me. Now they have them as a matter of course, and the captains I speak to say, "Oh yes, no problems at all."

28:00 I don't really believe them.

Why is that?

Well, because of human nature being what it is, there must be problems. But they apparently deal with them all right. And I suppose it would be the same at co-ed boarding school these days. The masters and the headmasters would have problems to deal with, unless they accept it completely as a normal thing to let people carry on, but I don't know that they would.

28:35 **Did you feel that, given your history, of your family and the other men around you, did it feel that it was inevitable for you to be involved with the armed forces at some point?**

Obviously the fact that I tried at the age of thirteen for the navy.... I had shown an interest in the navy.

29:00 I had hardly seen the sea, actually, but as I think I mentioned earlier on, I must have realised that if I had gone into the army I would have had a hard load to bear, because my father had done so well, people would tend to say, "Smyth can hardly keep up with his father's reputation, can he?" So the navy, perhaps,

29:30 that was perhaps I went more for the navy. I liked the idea of it, and everything I had read about it. Inevitably, once I failed, I still wanted to try again. It was still peacetime then, of course. When the war came, there was no question about it. They had this special entry that they had just introduced to build up their numbers a little bit in the permanent navy. My father,

30:00 obviously, kept his ear to the ground and knew about it. There was no question. I thought it was a great idea to apply. Two or three other friends at school had gone in, just ahead of me. Ian Mackintosh, who died the other day. Tony Sennett, who also died the other day. They had gone into the navy. So even in peacetime, and even as war started, it was the obvious thing to do. Inevitably?

30:30 I would have had to do something in the war, there was no question in my mind about that. My brother and sister were over in England. They had gone over, just before the war. My brother had a scholarship at Cambridge; my sister went to be finished in France or something. They were both caught up in the war there. She joined the WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force], the air force. He joined the Welsh

Guards because of my mother's Welsh upbringing,

31:00 and he fought right through the war. So it sort of fitted in nicely, that we had the navy, army, air force amongst the three of us. So off we went to the war. My father had already had one heart attack by then. He was fairly old, he was seventy something by then. In those days, that was old. He became a bit of an armchair strategist, I think. I didn't see much of him once I went away to the war. Within a year of my going

31:30 away he died of a second heart attack. And in a way, I think, just as well. He was too busy saying, "These young generals don't know what they're doing these days." He was frustrated. He would have loved to have been there, but he was too old to do it. He was probably best off this Earth.

It must have been very difficult for him, not to be active...

Yes, I'm sure he wanted to,

32:00 but he had had, already, one heart attack. He'd been due to lead the Anzac March, for the first time, I think in about 1938, and just before it he had a heart attack, lifting a sheep over a fence. So he never did lead the march, which was always a great pity. I've led it twice, so I've made up for it.

Prior to the war

32:32 **you said that you tried to get into the navy in '36. Did you have any awareness, or what information did you have about what was going on in Europe?**

Well, I think my father could see the war coming again. Not as early as that, perhaps, '36....

33:04 Germany, he distrusted. We had a German fraulein as one of our governesses, a bit earlier than that. I remember going through the family photograph album, years later.... There had been photographs of us sitting on the front steps, with the fraulein as part of the group,

33:32 and he had blackened out her face in all the photographs. I think that must have been when the war had actually started he might have done that. I don't remember the time. He could see war coming. My wife's father, similarly, they both... My wife's father had come out after the war, too. They'd both been British.

34:00 He'd been in the Australian submarine, as the second in command. The two officers were British submarine officers. He came out after the war, and he similarly settled after he married an Australian girl, in that case. And my wife often talks of how he, in the years of the 1930s, he was lecturing at schools, he was talking over the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], and

34:30 warning Australia that war was coming again. He tried to get into the navy, but the Australian Navy said no, they didn't want him. The day he was killed in a ridiculous accident, war had broken out a few days before. And that day he got a letter from the Royal Navy saying, "Yes, we are calling you up and we will appoint you to Singapore. Going to sea, you're too old for that, so we'll put you on the base staff there."

35:01 So he, poor chap, having spent the First War as a prisoner of the Turks, would have found himself in the Second [World] War as a prisoner of the Japanese. But both our fathers were obviously well aware there was another war pending, in those years just before the war. That must have rubbed off on us.

Did you listen to the radio broadcasts with them, or something like that?

I can remember when the King

35:30 died, King George V. Now that must have been about 1935, '36? We knew he was ill. My father was terribly fond of him, having known him. And we knew he was ill, and we all went out and we sat in our new motorcar, which had a radio. And that was the only radio that we had. We didn't have one in the house. And we sat in it. And I can remember that night after my bedtime,

36:02 we heard that the King had died, and my father almost wept. "We've lost a great man," and all that. He was very loyal and British and that sort of thing. So we didn't listen to very many radios, obviously, if there was just the one in the car. Then as the war got closer, we obviously had a radio. And I can remember the night when we heard Menzies [Australian Prime Minister]

36:30 announcement that, "Of course, Australia is also at war." We were all sort of.... oh, how long is this going to last? Are we going to be in it? That was '39, I was sixteen. A year later I was in it, and it lasted six years. Like the people I've been reading about from the First War, they were all so keen to get into the war, because they thought it would be over by Christmas, in 1914. And we rather wondered the same, in 1939.

37:00 But the bastard lasted six years.

Did you have the same excitement about it? Or were you more cautious?

Oh, I think I had been frightened.... cautious, yes. But there was no question in my mind that obviously if it lasted long enough that I would be in it to some extent, and the navy would be the obvious thing.

But you didn't approach it with the same kind of spirit of adventure?

I don't think so, no.

37:31 We had been fairly well brought up that wars were not always great fun.

Where did you find out that it was a bad thing?

38:00 Well, I think we had all read.... If we hadn't been told a lot about the war, which we had, we'd also read a lot and war was not the adventurous thing that my father's early days probably had been. So, he was horrified by the way that World War 1 went. The trench warfare and all that had obviously horrified him because

38:30 he had been happy prancing around the prairies on his horse, and charging and doing the things that, in those days, were probably great fun. If he wasn't chasing people, he was chasing pigs in India. Pig-sticking and hog-hunting, or shooting elephants. It had been a great adventure, soldiering, in his early days. And World War 1 changed all that, for a lot of people. So I don't think we looked at it with great adventure. But it was

39:00 still adventurous, yes. If there was a war on, we wanted to be in it. And we didn't worry, right through the war, really, if we were going to be killed the next day. We didn't have wives back home, we were only youngsters. Somehow we knew we'd survive, a charmed life. I was lucky, I was shot [at], I was never wounded, hardly. It was much better than it could have been. And that might have been influencing me, too,

39:30 into going into the navy. I didn't like the idea of trench warfare from what I'd heard of it, or any army warfare for that matter.

So you must have been influenced by details of the First World War. Particularly of the Infantry....

I think so, yes. It was all Infantry by the end, except people that went into tanks.

40:00 The cavalry had virtually.... Well, in the Middle East war, they were still doing charges of cavalry. The Light Horse of Beersheeba and everything. I didn't mention that just before I went into the navy, I joined the Light Horse. The local Militia at Balmoral was the Light Horse. I applied for the navy, and

40:30 virtually expected to go into the navy, but they were still waiting to accept me, so I joined the Light Horse. I think I was in for fully three weeks, but it's been rather nice to tell the army since that I was once in the cavalry, or the Light Horse. And the Light Horse, of course, is quite a nostalgic sort of memory for a lot of soldiers, who didn't know it when it existed, as it did then.

41:00 Even in the First War, the Light Horse went over with their horses, but they never really fought. Gallipoli, at that awful battle at the Neck, was Light Horse, but they were behaving as Infantry. Light Horse were not true Cavalry Mounted Infantry, that was another description for them.

We better pause there.

Tape 3

00:35 **So now I wanted to ask you about the first time you applied for the navy. Can you tell us what happened? What the process was?**

I think there were about four hundred applicants throughout Australia for this twelve, thirteen year old entry, for which they needed about fifteen. War clouds were not yet threatening too much,

01:01 and they were only taking in about fifteen cadet midshipmen, as they called them, each year. We first of all had to do an exam. I think I did that in Geelong. I might have had to come to Melbourne for it. There were two or three others with me, including David Hamer, who was the younger brother of Dick Hamer [Premier of Victoria, Deputy Premier, Chief Secretary and Minister], the former premier. He was somebody I knew quite well at school. We then

01:30 had to do a medical and then an interview. I didn't get the interview, because at the medical, which I think was conducted by a very naval looking doctor, in a naval uniform anyhow, and he stripped me naked and started at the top and worked down. And everything seemed to be all right until he got to my feet. And I remember him saying to somebody, "I think this young gentleman has very flat feet."

02:00 And I wasn't brave enough.... I think I might have touched on this earlier in the talk to say, "But I've got very strong feet. They've just taken up the shape of the land on which they walked because I didn't put shoes on until I came to see you today, sir." But I wasn't brave enough to say that. They were obviously looking for any excuse to cut that four or five hundred down to fifteen. So I failed miserably and was told that I wasn't acceptable.

- 02:30 David Hamer actually did get into the navy then, and went through the whole four years of academic training. I was rather put off at the time. My father was very cross, because he thought his son should have been accepted into the navy. I suspect he rang people afterwards, but he couldn't do anything about it. But we did then settle down, while I was at school. I was given special exercises
- 03:00 to strengthen my feet. Which I didn't think really needed any strengthening. But anyway, I waded my ankles around quite a lot. When the time came again, going ahead, four years later, they didn't even look at my feet. There was a war on and I was in. But that was the process. There were fifteen who got in, one of them was, as I say, my schoolmate David Hamer, who I have known ever since. He died only last year actually.
- 03:31 **All right, tell us about the process the second time you went around?**
- Much the same, I think. I remember I'd got my matriculation at the end of 1939, my leaving exams, and matriculated. So for the next six months at school, in 1940, I had a lovely time working by myself in the library, getting ready for the exam for the navy. Which I didn't really do very much work
- 04:00 for. I think I had a lovely time reading up all the books that I had always wanted to read. Studying heraldry amongst other things, I seem to remember. At any rate, the exam finally came. Two other people from Geelong Grammar sat for the navy with me. We all got through the initial exam. It was the same process, except that we were four years older. The medical exam I got through. As I say, they hardly looked at my feet.
- 04:30 and they were looking for.... Only a few, but I think the number they finally took in our entry was only seven. Then the interview. The interview I do remember. Not having done the interview the first time, in 1936. It had all the typical questions. "Do you remember the number of the bus you came to the interview in?" No, sir, I came in the tram." "What number was it?" "One, two,
- 05:00 three, four." "Was it really?" "Yes, sir." Because you had been told you had to invent something quickly to give an answer. I do remember they said, "Oh your father..." And they asked about my father and I proudly said, "Yes, he got a Victoria Cross." And they said, "Ahh, what colour is the ribbon of the Victoria Cross?" Well, I had been seeing it all my life.... You saw it just a little while ago. What colour would you call it? I said, "It's a sort of a deep purple." And they said, "No,
- 05:30 no, no. It's crimson." And I said, "No, that doesn't sound right to me. It's a deep purple to me." And I think that almost lost me my chance of getting in. But that is the only thing I can really remember they asked me. Then we had to wait a couple of weeks, then finally I got a letter saying "Yes, you are being appointed as a cadet midshipman, etc." And I rushed around to the other chap, Haslop, his name was, I remember now. I said, "Have you had your letter?"
- 06:00 And he said, "No." And two days later I left school and he still hadn't got a letter, then he rang up another friend and said, "I've got a letter saying no, I've missed it." He joined the air force and was killed.
- Were you given any encouragement or coercion from the school?**
- My headmaster was the famous doctor, later Sir, James Darling.
- 06:30 He was headmaster for 30 years, in 1930. And he had actually been over in England at the beginning of the war. He had been in the First War in the British Army. He got rushed back, and I remember my farewell.... We were all encouraged, obviously. I think the percentage from Geelong Grammar who joined the services was something like 95%. There was
- 07:00 no question that you joined and you fought for your country. I do remember when he was saying his final farewells to me, he said, "Well, great. I'm glad you're in the navy. But at least you might have joined a decent navy like the Royal Navy, instead of the Australian Navy." He had just sent Ian Mackintosh and David Shore and a few others, David Spooner, over to the Royal Navy, and he was obviously felt that was the proper navy to join.
- 07:30 Ian Mackintosh finished up as Vice-Admiral Sir Ian Mackintosh, and he died only a few months ago and we've got a memorial service for him, at the school, next month. So that would have probably influenced Dr Darling a little bit when he said that. But I felt a bit cross about that. He should have said, "Congratulations. You've joined the best navy in the world." But no, he said, "You should have joined a decent navy."
- Was that an option for you, to join the Royal Navy?**
- I think once the same idea had
- 08:00 had been into our navy, that the other one no longer existed. They had joined, I think, probably three years ahead of me. And that was the only way, at that age, that you could get into a navy. As soon as the Australian Navy introduced it, and for instance Tony Sennett, who finished up as the head of the War Fleet Services, a few years ago, he was the first of the Australians to join the Australian Navy, especially.
- 08:30 In fact, he went to England for his training, the same as the others had done, but he was in the

Australian Navy. Chick Murray, who was the governor of Victoria a few years ago, Admiral Murray, he was also in that lot, the first lot. We were the third or fourth lot. In fact, we always say that when they saw us, they gave the scheme away. We were the last lot. They only took seven in our entry. There were three seamen officers,

09:00 Executive as we used to be called, and four engineers. So I was one of only three to be accepted then, out of I don't know how many applicants. It was just a small building up of the permanent navy to replace what they felt they would lose in the war. It was probably about right when you work it out afterwards. Our group, the David Hamer group and all that, probably lost about seven out of their

09:30 fifteen or twenty. So we were the replacements that the navy had put in, in advance. Somebody did their sums well.

Do you remember any posters or newsreels or songs of the time encouraging people to join up?

10:00 No, I don't. There must have been. The old First World War image of Kitchener [Lord Kitchener. Horatio Herbert Kitchener] pointing at you saying, "Your Country Needs You." There must have been things like that. I don't remember any, there probably were. I know there was an enormous enthusiasm for people to join. Whether the people themselves were that keen.... But again, at home

10:30 I remember.... I got leave on and off, and the locals were gradually going off to war. Whether there were sort of recruiting campaigns, whether the sergeant majors came around to the country saying, "We want you to join." I don't know. I was too busy away, trying to be a sailor.

What was your parents reaction then, when you joined up?

11:01 Oh, they were delighted, obviously, that I had finally made it. No doubt there were all sorts of qualms in their minds. But, at the same time, as I say my brother and my sister had both joined, over in England, which was far close to the war, in those days. Long before the Japs came in. But I don't remember anything except pride that their three

11:30 kids were serving. And my father was very proud obviously. I think I saw him once on leave, then I went away. I remember I was in Aden. A signal came through. It wasn't for Midshipman Smyth, it was for Midshipman Sloane. And there was no midshipman called Sloane, and the signal said, "Your father has had a

12:00 heart attack and that he is gravely ill." And they got all the midshipmen in and said, "Which of you do you think this is?" And I said, "I think it might be me." I said, "Let's have a look at that name.... " And I jotted down the Morse [Code] for Smyth, which is dot-dot-dot-dash-dash-dah-de-dah-dah-dah-de-de-de-dit" And then I jotted down the same for Sloane.

12:30 And they were so similar that somehow in the transmission it had come out as Sloane instead of Smyth, and I said, "I think this is for me." And sure enough the next day there was a signal, for Smyth this time, saying that, "Your father has now died." The funny things that you remember. Nobody else had thought to work out the Morse Code.

Not a great way to find out....

No.

13:00 **Tell me then, about your first experiences once you were actually inducted into the navy?**

Right, straight down to Flinders Naval Depot, as it was then called, HMAS Cerberus.... Well, it was Cerberus then, too, but it's main name was Flinders Naval Depot. We were met in Melbourne by one of our own age group who was a cadet captain in the senior year. Guy Griffiths,

13:30 who's still around. I've known him all my life, since then. He took us down in a bus, all seven of us. And we were there about three days ahead of the normal returning.... It was like a school, them being away for September holidays, I suppose. It was September, 1940, then, and we had about three days in getting our uniform, and learning to double everywhere in formation.

14:01 And being told by him and the term officer, who was a Reserve officer, who had been in permanent navy way back, and had gone out and become a chemist, I think. I can't remember his name. But he was our sort of term officer. And Guy Griffiths was telling us all about being a cadet midshipman and how we behaved. And then of course the main group came back and eyed us over

14:30 and tried to treat us like first year. First year, you'd get a pretty fair time. Not quite as bad as the army has tended to do, over the years, when you've heard about bastardisation and things. But they were doing initiations and things, for the first year. And the senior year got us and said, "Now, you are going to be initiated." And we all said, "Wait a minute..." And one of our chaps had been at university for a year or two. I think he was

15:00 twenty one. I was only seventeen. I was the youngest of the group. And he said, "Now, wait a minute. I think I'm older than you. I think I'm bigger than you, if you try anything like that..." They hadn't quite figured out that we were more of a senior group of new entries than the poor little thirteen year olds who would join each year in January. So we avoided all that. We were embraced almost,

- 15:30 although suspiciously. They never really liked it. Even now, those thirteen-year-old entries look on us as, "You were the specials. You didn't go through the four years that we did." We on the other hand, as I say, got out of any initiation. And we didn't do any academic work, really. I think we had a Naval History and Trigonometry. Spherical trigonometry, because you
- 16:00 needed that for navigation work. But mainly we were doing gunnery and torpedoes and physical training. All the sort of naval things, the naval drill, whereas they were still being treated as schoolboys, really. So we only did two terms. We did September to December, and then the January to March. Then we went off to sea, about March, 1941.
- 16:30 Our age group graduated, then we took part in the graduation parade at the end of 1940. They went off to sea ahead of us. Then to rub salt into their annoyance, later on, because we had had this twenty one year old, and a couple of nineteens, the navy worked out that we were older. So they gave us an extra six months seniority,
- 17:01 and we all finished up senior to the ones who had done their four years training and that again, they never quite forgave us. Right through the navy.... .Guy Griffiths actually, I think he got promoted to captain just ahead of him. But he made admiral and I didn't. So at any rate, it was a very pleasant time. I was used to all the.... .I had a been a sergeant major in the school cadet corps, so I knew about drill,
- 17:30 although the naval drill was a bit different. I knew how to be boarder at school, for many years. There was no homesickness or anything like that, it was just excitement to actually be in the navy and doing proper navy things, and looking forward to getting away to sea, which we did. Pretty quickly.

Tell us about your initial training , then. What sort of things did you learn?

Well, gunnery

- 18:00 and lots of actual learning the theory of gunnery, then doing gun drill on the six inch and four inch guns they had there. Lifting a six-inch projectile is pretty heavy. One poor chap dropped one on his toe. He was in hospital for a little while. I did finish up in hospital at one stage. I got a sort of boil on my foot, if I remember it was, and they had to put me in hospital, because I
- 18:30 had fainted on parade but I had refused to actually fall over. I suddenly realised everything was going around and around and I turned right and I marched off the parade and collapsed on the corner of the drill hall, and was taken to hospital. But at least I hadn't fallen flat on my face, so I felt rather proud of that. We went through all the usual boat drill. Pulling whalers.... pulling being the word 'rowing' in the navy. Cutters and whalers.
- 19:00 Sailing, learning to sail. I had never learned anything like that. So all the very naval things plus, as I say, talks on history, talks on seamanship, which covers nearly everything you might find on the ship to do. All the ropes and rigging of an old ship, and the rigging and equipment of a new ship. How you handle a ship. How you handle boats. We learned not only the pulling and sailing, but also the motor
- 19:30 boats they had down there. Because as soon as you got to sea, as a midshipman, you find yourself, virtually on your first command, you were given command of one of the ship's boats. That was your boat and you had your crew and they had to keep smart and clean, and you had to drive it, and you had to drive it so that you didn't crash into things when you had admirals and captains on board. So it was all a whole new experience for a country boy, really, but somehow it seemed all right and proper. And we knew we were going off
- 20:00 to do something in a war. Not just in the peacetime navy. So it was an exciting time, there's no doubt about it. We did lots of physical training. Swimming, I had to pass the swimming test of course, get the bronze medallions. Everybody in our navy had to learn to swim. Fascinating later on that in the Royal navy they didn't have to learn to swim. A lot of my sailors could not swim. And I remember
- 20:30 asking them, and they said, "No, sir, we'd much rather not. If you're going to be sunk in the North Sea, it's better to die quickly than to swim for half an hour, then die." That was their outlook.

You said that you had been in the cadets, but how did you adjust to those particularly naval things, such as sailing?

The squad drill and that,

- 21:02 we turned much simpler. We don't lift our feet and stamp, like the soldiers do, but that was very easily learnt. I remember the gunner's mate was the equivalent to the army sergeant major, and he was an English gunner's mate, who was out from England on loan, I think, to the Australian Navy. Very
- 21:30 experienced, a very good fellow called Barney Young. And the very first time we were doing our drill, the other fellows didn't seem to know what they were doing. Then he had us all out to give orders, too. And I gave orders the way I learnt. And I remember feeling so pleased when he said, "Now, that's more like it young gentlemen. That's the way you should be giving your orders." And I thought, 'I know all about this.' Then I did something wrong, and he cut me down to size again. Those are the little
- 22:00 things you remember. The pride of getting something right for the first time or second time. Well, not

very much difference to what I had been used to, as I say, as the sergeant major of C Company in the Geelong Grammar Cadets. I had had a bit of experience with that sort of thing.

Did you get on well with the other fellows?

Yes, very well. Although we were the age group of the senior year, they

22:30 put us for most other things, including the accommodation, in the block down with the next senior year, who then became the next senior year in January, and we were sort of with them there. So that all fitted in. So both those groups I got to know pretty well, and I've known them, on and off, ever since. They say, "You were one of those specials, weren't you?"

23:02 If you saw, "Who was in your year?" They can go through the whole lot, alphabetically, as they learned to do back then. I couldn't remember any of them. I couldn't even remember my own term mates, but the discipline of the navy had got to them very early in their time. But no, they were all decent people. I got along with them all. There was only one, I think, I ever really disliked, and I won't mention his name.

Did you feel a lack?

23:31 **Did you miss those four years of extra training?**

No, we were proud of the fact that we had missed it. We thought that we were more citizens of the world than they were. We felt that they had been sort of hidden away in a seminary for those four years, whereas we had been out in the wider world, and I felt that right through. Years later, I was brought back from the Korean War, to go to the college

24:00 as a term officer, then as a first lieutenant, to bring in a new entry of fifteen year olds, because then knew I had been a seventeen year old entry, and they thought I would be more able to deal with a slightly older entry. Then later on, when I was captain of the Naval College at Jervis Bay [NSW], by then we were bringing in seventeen year olds, and I was the first captain of the college who had not been a thirteen

24:30 year old. And again, I think they put me there because I had been one of them and would know how to deal with them, instead of treating them as thirteen year olds. Which the next thirteen year old would do.

So tell us about first posting, then.

First posting was to the Australia, which was normally the flagship. At that particular time it wasn't the flag. The flag is the

25:00 ship that carries the admiral, commanding the fleet. I think the admiral was then in the Canberra, who was the sister ship to the Australia. They were both eight inch heavy cruisers, over ten thousand tons. Built in 1928 in England, and been in our navy for the twelve years since. The Australia, then had an RN captain by the name of Stuart on board, but he was replaced two months later

25:30 by Australians, then we had Australians right through. I joined her in Sydney; she was in dry dock at Cockatoo Dock. In fact, I had a few days leave at home when I joined, and they found that one of her propeller shafts had worn more than they expected, so they found that she was going to be in dock for an extra week, so they said, "Right, go back on leave." And I said,

26:00 "But I've just left home and they've given me a farewell in the Balmoral Mechanics Institute Hall. I don't want to go back home on leave. I'm here to fight the war." So I went off with my of my term-mates Ken Bryant, who lived in Bathurst, so I had a week's leave there with him, where I met a couple of attractive Bathurst girls and had a very pleasant week's leave, and then back on board and we sailed two or three days later, when we got out of dock. So it was an

26:31 anti-climax, almost, at first joining. Then we joined again. It had given us time to settle in, see where the gun room was, where all the midshipman lived. Find out how to sling a hammock, which we'd been taught, but had not actually done. We lived in the hammock for the next year or so. We sailed. The very first job that we did was to escort about four ships across to New Zealand.

27:00 And amongst them was a ship called the Thermistocles, painted grey and it was looking like all the other ships in wartime, but I immediately realised that it was the ship that I had come out from England in, in 1925. Which was rather a nice sort of reminder of my early days. The ship, I think, survived the war. I never saw her again.

So it was another passenger ship that had been converted to a troop ship?

Yep.

27:34 We finished that trip, and then we picked up the big ships. The Queen Mary, and The Queen Elizabeth, which we had hardly heard of. She had only just been completed as war came. I'm not sure that she had ever been painted black and white. She had been painted grey as commissioned, because the war was over. Queen Elizabeth loaded first in Sydney with, I don't know, ten thousand troops.

- 28:01 They fitted an awful lot of people in. She then had to sail out of Sydney Harbour and go down and wait in Jervis Bay, because there wasn't room in Sydney Harbour for both the Queens together, they were so big. The second one then came in from somewhere and loaded. And Aquitania, I think, was quite a lot smaller. She had been around in the First War. Big four funnelled woodbine appearance.
- 28:30 Packet of Woodbines, they used to call her. Woodbine cigarettes, with the four funnels. And we sailed, I think, with the Queen Mary and Aquitania, and picked up the other one off Jervis Bay. I don't know how much we were told in those days, but it was obvious where we were going to take them. They were going to the Middle East and at some stage the captain would have said, "We are now on our way to the Middle East." I think we went through Bass Strait. Certainly I can remember going across the Bight. The Great Australian Bight at that time, I think, was the roughest I had ever seen it,
- 29:04 in all the years since. When we got to Fremantle, the big ships were all anchored out in Gage Roads, which is the area outside of Fremantle. Between Fremantle and the island there. We went in alongside, but I, in one of the motor boats, had the job of going out and running around the three ships. I remember one of them saying,
- 29:31 "What ship are you from?" And I said, "We're in the Australia." And they said, "Is that that submarine that was escorting us across the Bight?" I said, "We're not a submarine." They said, "You looked like it, you were under water half the time." So it had been quite a rough trip. We were transferring people across from one Queen to the other. A very heavy swell. Not much fun, I hadn't really learned how to handle boats, but I learned quickly.
- 30:00 At one stage we were picking up three or four nurses, from the Queen Mary to take to the Queen Elizabeth. And moving up and down, you've got to be pretty quick as you come down the Jacob's Ladder on the side of the ship, to know when to jump into the boat and one of the nurses, unfortunately, missed it and went crash, and broke her leg. So she went back with a broken leg. I don't know what happened to her. But we didn't take her across to the other ship.
- 30:30 So it was quite an interesting.... I had been driving boats in Sydney Harbour the first few days, which were nice and quite. But driving those boats in Gage Roads was quite an interesting introduction to my life as a midshipman. Remembering that in the First War, those were the midshipmen who took in all the troops at Anzac and that, I was thinking, "Well, yes, I'm really into this now."

So why were they moving

31:00 people from one ship to another?

I don't know, some re-organisation. They probably all loaded in a hurry or something. They had the opportunity then to do it, and it seemed the obvious thing to do. I was out there running messages in and out, and they said, "Would you mind taking..." It wasn't big numbers, but I do remember that one of the numbers finished up with a broken leg. So we were there two or three days, then we sailed and headed for Trincomalee,

- 31:30 which your comrade will know well, in Ceylon. And there they all came in. They fitted them in somehow. I've got a chart of where we anchored. Because every week as midshipman, you had to write in your journal a war diary or what had happened. Plus you had to write an essay on a subject given to you by the officer in charge of midshipmen,

- 32:01 who was known as the snotties' nurse. Midshipmen were known as snotties, in those days because they used to have three buttons on their cuff, to stop them wiping their snot on their sleeves. And also to do a diagram of something. I tended to do little sketches, because I enjoy painting now, and even then a little bit. But that particular day he said, "I think it would be a good idea if you did a sketch

- 32:30 of the harbour showing where we put all the ships." So that's still in my midshipman's journal, which I've got here. Usually the journals are a fine, well-bound, leather-bound book. But in wartime they suddenly said, "Oops, we can't allow that, because there will be a lot of secret information in it." So we had to do as a loose leaf, and we'd hand in the ten pages of foolscap every week, and it would kept in the confidential books

- 33:00 area. At the end of our time, it was taken away from us and we thought that was that, we would never see it again. And I finally got it all given back to me about four or five years after the war. So the system worked.

Now did you get sea-sick at all?

No, the nearest I think I ever got in my time was that day going across the Bight. The mess deck we were in, there was always a scent of fuel oil somehow, which doesn't help the

- 33:32 feeling of wellness. One or two others had been seasick as well. That doesn't help either, the smell of that. I was the nearest I think to ever being sick, but I wasn't. I've been lucky right through all my naval career. The stories that Nelson was seasick the day he died, poor chap, I was a bit of fear at first, because I had never been out in anything except a little boat before. But I was always lucky right through.

34:11 So tell me, other than running the boats, what were your duties as a midshipman?

Well, we were learning to keep watch. On the bridge, we were the midshipmen of the watch and there was an officer of the watch. In wartime, a principal control officer.

- 34:31 He would be a lieutenant commander in charge of the armament, and have it ready at any time, in case you'd find yourself in action. The officer of the watch was maintaining the safety of the ship and controlling the ship, and the zigzag, and everything that needs to be done on the bridge. And the midshipman watch, under him, was sort of a dogsbody. He was watching what he was doing. Sometimes the officer of the watch would say, "Okay, you take over the zigzag, mid [midshipman]."
- 35:02 So you would have to watch your clock and turn at the same time as all the other ships, because if you turned at the wrong time it could be awkward. The night watch in particular, halfway through the officer of the watch would say, "Right, go around and do rounds." And you would go down and you would walk right through the ship. The mess decks where everyone was sleeping in their hammocks, and everywhere else. Just making sure that the whole ship seemed tight and secure and safe and that nothing was going on that shouldn't be.
- 35:30 I think I once found a group of sailors playing a card game in a corner, and said, "Stop that, you can't do that. Get into your hammocks." But nothing really much to do. That was at sea. In the day you would be doing instruction. The officer in charge would get you all together, if you weren't on watch, and talk to you about something you needed to be told about. You would be sent down to the engine room and do a course in the engine room for
- 36:00 three or four weeks, solidly, in between your watch-keeping. In harbour, similarly you always had an officer of the watch on deck. And you would have a midshipman under him, and a midshipman running boats. So you would have two duties in harbour, which you'd share, depending on the routine that they had worked out for. And a lot of instructions, still, all the time, on the things that you needed to know. The action station one had and the cruising station were different.
- 36:34 As a midshipman, after I had been on the bridge a little while, I became the operator of the plot. The Plot is now what you would now call the Operations Room. It was just behind the bridge, and it was where we would plot the ship's course, that's why it was called a plotting room. And you would also be responsible for all the knowledge about merchant shipping. And if they,
- 37:00 on the bridge, sighted a ship and they said, "There's a two-masted, two-funnelled ship on the horizon. We've asked it who it is and it said it's the Strait Malaka. Should the Strait Malaka be here?" And you'd have to immediately know what ships were in the area from the signals that had been coming in. And if you said, "No, there is no Strait Malaka in this area. I think it could be an enemy," then you'd go to action stations and you'd go in a bit closer. Like the Sydney went in too close, and
- 37:30 got sunk by the Kormoran the next year. So there were varying degrees of interest like that. My action station happened to be down in the operations room, which we called the TS. The Transmitting Station. It was inside the armour belt, that the heavy cruisers had,
- 38:00 below the waterline. Small compartment, not as big as this room even, with a big fire control table, around which about twelve of us stood, with phones. I was talking to the people up in the main director, and they were setting the enemy ship or the enemy aircraft, and I was setting it on the table. And from that the information would go away electronically to the guns, which were trained off the amount
- 38:30 you allowed for enemy movement and those sort of things. So I was part of the main eight-inch gun control system, and that was action station I had nearly all my time as a midshipman, and particularly when we got into action and things were happening. So for the first few months after we dropped the ships off Aden, they went on up to Suez.
- 39:00 We stayed in Aden for a few days, then we operated up and down the West Coast of Africa for the next six months really. Mainly ships coming from England to supplement the forces in the Middle East and in the desert, they could come through the Med. If they did, they were sunk. There were a lot of convoys coming through from Gibraltar were pretty dicey. So ships coming
- 39:31 to bring troops around would come around the bottom, around the Cape of Good Hope, Capetown, up the East Coast, up as far as Suez and unload there, then the troops would cross by land to where they were needed. So we were doing quite a lot of escorting, to and fro, between Aden and Durban, and Durban and Capetown. Going out into the Indian Ocean every now and then. German raiders, both the big pocket battleships and the
- 40:00 disguised merchants like the Kormoran were known to be operating all around the world in those days. There was a particular pocket battleship somewhere in our area. We looked for them several times, but we never actually came across them. One of the more interesting exercises we did was

We're just at the end of the tape.

00:39 **Can you tell us what you did specifically in the Indian Ocean and which ports you visited?**

Mainly Durban, Mombasa.... East London we went to at one stage for what they called a self-refit, where I fell madly in love with a local girl. Capetown,

01:00 or Simonstown, rather. One interesting operation we had, there was a Vichy French convoy.... I'm not sure where it had come from. Presumably out in the Far East, Vietnam or somewhere like that. Indo-China. And it was crossing the Indian Ocean and we went out and intercepted it. Operation Kedgery they called it,

01:30 for some reason. And we took them into East London. Of course, they weren't really enemy, the Vichy French. We had been on the same side as them, but they were still on the German side. We couldn't really lock them up. Certainly South Africa, at that stage, were a bit ambivalent themselves. They almost came in on the German side, at the beginning of the war, if you'd read that bit of history.

02:00 But Smuts [General Smuts, South African Leader] sort of persuaded them to come in on our side. So they weren't locked up, they were billeted at a hotel in East London. And one day all of our sailors were going ashore, for a run ashore, and I happened to be going ashore about the same time as the sailors. And outside this hotel, all these Vichy French were sitting around, presumably drinking wine and smoking cheroots, and slinging off at the Aussies, and the Aussies were slinging off at them. And it turned into a fight. And the only time

02:30 I was ever really wounded in the war, was when I got a French knife across my tummy. Fortunately I was in my uniform, and our thick serge uniforms prevented it from being anything more than a scratch. But that was an interesting little episode amongst the other things that we were doing. Then we were suddenly ordered to Colombo again. We didn't know, the captain presumably knew, but we weren't told what was happening,

03:00 and we went in there, and we loaded a lot of long wooden boxes. The sort of boxes that you can imagine a torpedo would sit in. And they were labelled 'Senior Naval Stores Offices, Singapore'. And we said, "Ahh, we know where we're going. We're going to Singapore for some reason." This was before the Japs came in and Singapore was still ours. We sailed, and we didn't head for Singapore, we headed due south, and we went through the Tropics, past the equator,

03:30 kept going south, further and further south, getting colder and colder and finally the captain got on the broadcast and said, "Where we're going is a place called Kurzwellen." Kurzwellen Island, or Kurzwellen Land. It's in the middle of the Indian Ocean, almost down in the Antarctic. "And those boxes we have on deck haven't got torpedoes in them. And the SNO [Senior Naval Offices stores] labelled Singapore was just to fool you all, because

04:00 that's not where we're going. And those are magnetic mines. We've heard that Kurzwellen is being used by German raiders as a base..."

That was Australian territory, wasn't it?

It was French territory, then, still is. Not to be confused with Herd Island, which is a bit further to the east. That's Australian. No, it was French. It has got three quite big harbours....

04:32 At any rate, we got there. There were no German raiders there at the time, but sure enough they had been using it. There was one ship that they had captured and taken in and sunk. It was still showing its upper works above the water. That proved that they had been using it. Then the operation came into being that the magnetic mines we had. They were going to be laid in case the German raiders came back. And I was in charge of what they called the ship's pinnace,

05:00 which was a big open boat, quite long. About fifty feet long. And ideally suited to be fitted with wooden racks on the upper deck, or across the open boat, on which we could put these magnetic mines. So I found myself in charge of the.... My first command, really, laying these mines all around the different two or three harbours. And we had a lieutenant on board, who was actually playing around with a sexton,

05:30 taking fixtures off the point of land, saying "Right, let one go." And I would feel very important and say, "Lay a mine," and they'd throw a mine over the side. So we went on laying mines all around. I don't know whether the Germans ever went back there. As far as I know they didn't get sunk, anyhow. I tell that story because about four years after the war someone came along to me and said, "Smyth, is that right you've been telling people rather proudly that your first command was when you were laying mines in Kurzwellen?"

06:00 And I'd say, "Yes sir, that's right." "Ahh," they said, "we want you tell us exactly where you laid them?" I swallowed a bit and said, "I don't really know." And they said, "Well, you've been saying you were in charge. You must know." And I said, "No, no, no. There was a lieutenant on board and he would have a record somewhere." And they said, "Yes, we know who you mean. That was Lieutenant Commander Denny, as he later was, but he died last year. You're the only the one who can tell us." And I tell this story, sometimes,

06:30 when I'm talking to Probus Clubs and others, because I hear now that some of these cruise ships are taking cruises down to Kurzwellen. And I say, "If you're offered a cruise there, don't go. Because those

mines are still there." I'd hope, in fact, by now that they have rotted away, or rusted away. But that was a very interesting thing for a young midshipman to be doing. I did a lot of sketches around Kurzwellen, and wrote it all up in my midshipman's journal. That particular one,

07:00 they said, was so secret that they immediately destroyed it. So I have no record of my actions at the time.

So basically Kurzwellen was a French base? Naval depot?

No, nothing like that. It was completely uninhabited. Just owned by the French but nothing there. The most that you ever got there were a few sealers, and possibly whalers, who would go there in the proper season. Nobody would go there. It was ice, almost down to the

07:30 water-line. Enormous sea elephants all around the beach. A fascinating place to see and draw pictures of, but completely uninhabited. Still, I think, uninhabited as far as I know. It's so far down.... It's a pretty uninhabitable sort of climate down there. We were there in the early summer. In winter, I should think, it would be as bad as the Antarctic. They might have a settlement there now, if there was any good reason for it.

08:00 Not long after that, we were doing another hunt for an alleged German raider, we weren't finding it, and suddenly Pearl Harbour happened, the Japs came into the war. We were hurriedly called home. We got back to Fremantle as fast as we could. We refuelled there and came around to Sydney at our top speed of thirty two knots. Which was quite impressive. I remember going through Bass Strait, which happened to be flat-calm at the time. And the little coasting

08:30 ships that we were passing, they were doing about eight knots. And to see us going past at thirty two knots must have been quite a sight for them to see. We got to Sydney.... Actually, we did spend Christmas either at Sydney or at home. And almost immediately afterwards, Boxing Day, we sailed for New Guinea, with the old Aquitania, again, a ship that had been on that big three ship convoy I mentioned earlier, to the Middle East.

09:00 She and a few cargo ships, and we were taking troops up to reinforce the very few soldiers who were in New Guinea, because we really hadn't been expecting the Japs to come in like that. We got into Port Moresby harbour. Again, not a bad harbour, with a tiny little jetty. A wharf, really. No chance of Aquitania getting alongside it. So once again, I and my pinnace, and all the other ships' boats, and even one or two small Corvettes, I think,

09:30 were ferrying the troops ashore from the Aquitania. There were a lot of baby faced boys, I thought. I was all of eighteen, by then, so I was feeling very old and important and experienced, having had a year at sea. And one of them said, "Excuse me, sir?" I think it was about the first time that anyone had called me 'Sir'. I said, "Yes son, what can I do for you?" He said, "Excuse me, where are we?" I said, "You're in Port Moresby harbour." "Where's that?" he said.

10:00 I said, "It's in New Guinea." "New Guinea? That's not part of Australia. We're only the Militia forces. We're only signed up to fight in Australia. What are they doing to us? We can't be allowed to come outside Australia." I like telling that story, because those same kids, who were so raw and frightened then, were the same ones who, a couple of months later, down at Milne Bay, were the first army unit to stop the Japs. The Japs had come down through the Malay

10:30 Peninsula, right across into New Guinea. Almost untroubled. They had captured Singapore, before people even realised it was happening. They were winning everywhere, and those kids, so frightened at being sent out of Australia, were the first to stop them at Milne Bay, and then on the Kokoda Track, later. And it wasn't very long after that, that we were operating in the Coral Sea. We were then, of course, the first to stop the Japs at sea, in the Battle

11:00 of the Coral Sea, which was the first time that they were beaten. Only just. Tactically they won the Battle of the Coral Sea, but strategically we did. That stopped their movement south. The Battle of the Coral Sea.... Fortunately, the intelligence had been listening in. By that time, we could break the Japanese codes, and they'd listened in and they'd heard that there was something afoot. Sailing from Rabaul, in New

11:30 Britain, which they'd captured....

This would have been... '42?

This is late '41, we're into '42 now, May '42. The Battle of the Coral Sea was the 5th, 6th, 7th of May, 1942. We'd been operating in the Coral Sea with the American aircraft carriers, and they had been attacking Rabaul.... When the landings took place,

12:02 in that area, and further down, we had been sending strikes across, from the carriers. But we hadn't actually been in any action, except just helping to protect and sail with the carriers. But for the Coral Sea, we were suddenly.... We had been back in Sydney for a few days. We were all told to get up there, because of this intelligence report. Congregate in the Coral Sea, I think, was all we were told. We met up with

12:30 the two carriers again, [USS] Lexington and [USS] York Town. Lexington was the biggest aircraft

carrier in the world, then. Enormous, by then standards, and even by modern ones. And we realised that they had sailed from Rabaul. They were sending a convoy down to go through the islands, which lay off the Eastern End of New Guinea, that's known as the Louisiade Archipelago. And there's only one passage through it, and that's the Jomard Passage. And

- 13:00 they were obviously heading for that. The carriers kept well away, looking after themselves I suppose, and they sent us to guard the lower entrance of Jomard Passage. Us being the Australian and the Hobart, both Australian ships, the Chicago, an American cruiser, and about half a dozen American destroyers, who were guarding us. We weren't very keen on this, because by that stage of the war it was fairly obvious that you didn't
- 13:30 go into action in the navy if you could, without air cover. Because it was the air that was sinking ships all over the Mediterranean and the rest of the world. And here, suddenly, although we had two carriers with lots of nice aeroplanes, we had been sent away from them without any air cover. And the attacks that place on us, mainly on the 7th of May, the second or third day of the operation, we found out after the war were by the same sort of size of numbers,
- 14:00 and the same squadron, and the same actual units, as had sunk the HMS Prince Of Wales and HMS Repulse off the Malayan Peninsula a few months earlier. So we were very lucky to survive, actually. I think our captains were experienced by then. Although I was down in my battle station, down in the guts of the ship, I'm told that our captains, who were pretty bright about things, as the torpedo bombers came in, for instance, they would
- 14:31 watch them and see when the torpedoes were dropped and then they would turn and comb the torpedoes. I still swear to this day, although I think I might be inventing it now, that I could hear the torpedoes going past, in my spot down below. And with the high level bombers that came over then, the captain would watch them, he'd see them actually drop their bombs, he would calculate where he thought they were coming, and he would go, "Hard of starboard, full ahead port. Half a turn starboard." And he would
- 15:00 turn the ship and the bombs would drop in our wake. There was one photograph taken from the Hobart of us, where you can't see us at all. We were completely surrounded by the tall bomb bursts in the water. Somewhere in the middle was the Australia. They were quite sure we had been sunk. But they just made everything on the upper deck very wet. There were one or two people wounded by gunfire from the torpedo bombers as they went pass, but completely unscathed.
- 15:30 And the whole force, of three cruisers and six destroyers, escaped with only two or three casualties. So we were very lucky. And that was the Battle of the Coral Sea. Meanwhile, of course, the first battle ever was going on between ships that never saw one another. It was all aircraft. The Yanks sank one small Japanese carrier, damaged another. The Japs sank the Lexington, the biggest aircraft
- 16:00 aircraft carrier in the world and a destroyer and a tanker. So tactically, as I say, they won the battle. But it was enough to stop them. They knew were waiting for them, they turned the convoy back and they never tried to come through again. We were never sure whether they were coming for Port Moresby in New Guinea, or for Australia. We now know it was only Port Moresby, at that stage, but if that had all been successful, or even if they had got over the Kokoda Track and got Port Moresby, they probably
- 16:30 would have then headed for Australia. So it was a fairly important battle, the Battle of the Coral Sea, which we still celebrate here each year, in the first part of May, as the turning point in the war, really.

Did you say something about them attacking badly? The Japanese torpedo planes, their formation and the actual attack pattern....

No. Well they did come in in a bunch, which made it

- 17:00 easier for us. If they had come in from either side and ahead, you can't come the three different lots of torpedoes. No, I don't say they were badly handled, they were merely coming in.... It's always a bit of surprise, I suppose, when you suddenly find the enemy. And if you're all together, then you go in then, as you are. The high level bombers were very accurate, as I say. Not long after that main big
- 17:30 high level bomber attack, another few bombers came in. Very high, very inaccurate. They dropped all over the place, nowhere near the ships, and they went back to their base in Townsville. They were American bombers. And they said, "We've sunk the Japanese fleet, and here are the photographs to prove it." And they showed the photographs to the intelligence officers who said, "My God, you've been attacking the Australian-American force." "Oh," they said, "sorry about that."
- 18:00 The admiral, in his report, said, "It was very fortunate for us that they were far more inaccurate than the Japanese had been." So that was rather an interesting little sidelight.

What took place for you after the Coral Sea Battle?

Well, the Coral Sea went on for another couple of days. We kept moving around. We weren't attacked again, after that. As I say, I had been down below, listening to it all, and

- 18:30 helping control the guns, we had shot down two or three. One story I tell there, is that in this little transmitting station, into which we had to come down through an armoured hatch, down a little a short

ladder and then we were crouched in there all the time. And I had noticed during the attack that hanging on the ladder was a wooden mallet. And it looked so out of place amongst everything that was so metallic and electronic.

- 19:01 And I finally, during a lull in the proceedings, I asked the officer in charge, I said, "Excuse me, sir? What is that mallet for?" He said, "I'm glad you asked. You better all listen to this, so everybody stopped and listened. He said, "When we're sunk, we'll be locked in here, because they can only let us in and out from the compartment above, which of course will be flooded, and all the people will be dead up there. But we'll have enough air in this compartment to last two or three hours, and during that time some of you may get
- 19:31 a little bit mentally disturbed. You might even go around the bend. And if you do, that's for me to knock you out with so you won't be a nuisance to your fellows." I used to look at that mallet with renewed respect, thereafter. Anyway, we finally left the area. We knew the Japs had gone back, the aircraft carriers... The one remaining retreated, and we went back. I think we went into the Barrier Reef first, then down to Brisbane
- 20:00 and finally to Sydney. About that time in Sydney, Sydney was attacked by the midget submarines and then the following week, I was sound asleep in my bunk on the Australia, alongside Garden Island, and in the morning they said, "Oh, didn't you wake up during the attack?" And I said, "What attack?" And they said, "Sydney was being shelled during the night by submarines." And I'd slept right through. At any rate, there weren't very many shells and they didn't do much damage. I then left the ship.
- 20:30 We had our final seamanship exams, as midshipmen, which was part of our training program. Then our job was to go over to England and do courses over there, with the Royal Navy. Advanced courses, for the rank of lieutenant, I think they called them, even though we were still only acting sub-lieutenants, in gunnery, torpedoes, signals, the things that we had done a certain amount of both before we went to sea, and at sea. So we took passage
- 21:00 in a merchant ship over to England, and we did these courses all around Portsmouth. Mainly in Portsmouth. It was after the main Blitz. We were talking earlier about that. The Blitz was really in '41. This was late '42, by now, or mid '42. There were a lot of sneak raids going on in Portsmouth. We were billeted in hotels, mainly. One of our number happened to be in the hotel one day
- 21:30 when it was bombed, and he was killed. But we were lucky. We avoided that. One of the schools had been badly bombed, one of the naval schools I mean. So they moved it. I think it was to Brighton further along the coast. And they took over a girls school there, called Roden, a posh girls' school. The girls had been evacuated up to the north of England for safety, and we took over this school, both for our accommodation and for the instruction. I think it was the signals school it became.
- 22:07 We enjoyed that. They were very comfortable quarters. The girls were all in two-bedroom rooms. And on the top of each bed on the wall there was a little bell push, with a notice under it saying 'If you require a mistress during the night, ring the bell'. Well, you can imagine a bunch of sub-lieutenants who had come in from a couple of years at sea, thinking this is a wonderful idea.
- 22:30 "If we ring a bell, we get a mistress." But it never worked. We finished those courses. I reported to.... It must have been about Christmas '42, by then, I reported to Australia House and said I was ready to go back to whatever posting they want me for in Australia. They said, "There's no ship going for a month or so, you better go off on leave again." And rather like I had earlier in Australia, I said, "Well, I've just said goodbye to all relations and
- 23:00 friends in England. Can I go and join something a bit smaller and a bit more exciting?" And so they sent me off to Lowestoft, in Norfolk, where they had a Coastal Forces base. Motor gun boats, motor torpedo boats. Seventy foot long, quite small, very fast. They go about fifty knots, which is about a hundred kilometres an hour. They really got up in the water and flew through the air above the water.
- 23:30 I was in motor gunboats, the same sized craft, but we had instead of torpedoes, we had an Oerlikon gun, twenty millimetre, a couple of five inch turrets, one on either side of the bridge. And at one stage we had another funny weapon called a Blacker Bombard on the fo'c'sle. And our job was to either protect the British convoys going up and down the East Coast of England, Norfolk and Suffolk, or to go across and attack the German convoys
- 24:00 going up and down the Dutch coast. And so we had some quite interesting operations there. We were rather like the air force, really. We lived ashore in a hotel which we had taken over. We would board our craft, like airmen would board their aeroplanes. We'd get on board about three or four in the afternoon, and we'd sail so that by nightfall we were where we should be all night, and then we would come back the next morning and we would hand the craft over to the RNs [Royal Navy], who were doing a wonderful job.
- 24:31 There were armourers and shipwrights and mechanics, and if there was any damage they would fix all that. And we would go off in a truck taking us back to the hotel, where would have a nice breakfast and go to sleep until we had to get up and go into the next operation. One story I tell is that we were coming back one morning from the Dutch Coast and we had almost got in sight of our base. The captain, I think, had gone below....

- 25:00 I was only a sort of spare officer on board, there were two officers, plus me, but I was on watch. It was a misty morning, still only half light, and I saw to my horror, about three hundred yards away to the north, on a parallel course, what looked like a German E-Boat [enemy boat]. I thought, "Oops, he's coming across to catch us as we go into our home port of Lowestoft." So I quietly called the captain and we called everybody and we closed up action stations and we trained our guns on him. We weren't quite sure and we waited,
- 25:30 and the dawn came up a bit more, and the mist lifted and to our relief we saw that it wasn't an E-Boat, it was one of our own motor torpedo boats from Lowestoft. And our signal from our captain went across to him and it said, "You are very lucky, motor torpedo boat. We have been training our guns on you for the last half hour." And he came back and said, "You are an even luckier, motor gunboat. I fired two torpedoes at you." Anyway,
- 26:00 it was an interesting change from my big ship time. And even more valuable, because when I did get back to Australia.... I took passage in a merchant ship, when I did get back I found out I was posted again to the Australia. And I had been wanting to get into something smaller, like a destroyer. I had that coastal forces time in between. Incidentally, on the trip home, I was showing you both the George Cross, in our dining room
- 26:30 that Hugh Syme [Hugh Randall Syme, George Cross, George medal and bar] had. He was one of the fellow passengers in the ship that brought me home. That is where I first met him. He was given the George Cross by a signal from the admiralty while we were sailing home around Cape Horn, from England to Australia. All by ourselves because we were a cargo passenger ship, full of ammunition. They didn't like sending a ship like that in convoy because if we had blown up, we would have sunk the other ships as well. Which didn't make us very
- 27:00 very cheerful. But we had a nice quiet trip. And as I say, around the bottom of the Horn the captain came down one night and said, "Champagne all around. Lieutenant Syme has just been given the George Cross." Which made him the most highly decorated person in the Australian Navy at that time. So back home I got, rejoined the Australia, went up north. While I had been away, the Guadalcanal landings by the American forces, and the Japanese, they were both on the island then.
- 27:30 They were both, by then, trying to replenish their forces by bringing in destroyers or other ships at night, with extra troops on board. And we were operating up the slot, in the area between there and Rabaul, going through the Solomons [Islands]. The original landing, our sister ship the Canberra had been sunk, along with three American heavy cruisers. It was the biggest disaster of the war for
- 28:00 our navies, really. The Japs came down and caught them quite unprepared the night after the landings. Sank the three heavy cruisers in about twenty minutes flat. They didn't go on to the landing place, where they would have had a clear run to sink all the landing ships. The Australia was around at the landing place itself, and avoided being sunk, or even brought into the action. At any rate, we were operating then again with our old friend the Hobart. By that I was
- 28:30 an officer of the watch, as a sub-lieutenant on the bridge, alone. It was after dark one night, and I was looking out through my binoculars at the Hobart, when there was a tremendous explosion in the Hobart. Through the binoculars it seemed as though it was happening at our immediate stern. She'd been torpedoed. And all the drill that I had had.... By that I was a fairly experienced young naval officer....
- 29:01 A ship in the company torpedoed, what do you do? You turn away, you increase to twenty knots, you close up action stations, you close all watertight doors and scuttles. You call the captain and you call the admiral and you leave most of the ships in company, protecting the ships being torpedoed, you take one destroyer with you and you get out of it, otherwise you are going to be torpedoed, too, if you are not careful. So I did all that. Everybody was on the bridge and we were steaming away.
- 29:30 The Hobart actually did survive. She was badly hurt and killed a few people we knew well, on board. But she did get back to port. I suppose about ten minutes later, I was rehearsing again in my mind, have I done all the right things? I've called the captain, action stations, everything. I had turned away, I had gone on to twenty knots.... Wait a minute, Smyth, you silly clod. You were doing twenty five knots, you haven't gone on in speed, you've reduced speed. So I went quietly across and called down the voice pipe
- 30:00 to put the right revolutions on, back to twenty five knots. And the captain heard me and said, "What are you doing there, sub-lieutenant?" I said, "I'm just checking, sir, that I've got the right revolutions on the engines." I don't think he believed me, but at any rate he left it at that. But he did arrange about a month later to get rid of me. I was then arranged to go over and join a British cruiser on exchange service. I think it was probably my mistake with the speed that got me thrown
- 30:30 off the Aussie, but got me a very interesting time in a British cruiser. Due to join her in Colombo, sailed from Melbourne after a little bit of leave. She was one of the wartime small carriers, what they called an escort carrier. HMS Patroller. A merchant ship that had been turned into a carrier. Not operating, but full of aircraft, ferrying them to Southern
- 31:00 India, Cochin, in the south-west corner of India. Then they were going to be flown across to the Burma campaign. So we then disembarked at Cochin, I had to take a lot of sailors across Southern India, in a train. Which was quite an interesting trip in itself, stopping every night because our engine driver

seemed to have a girlfriend in every little town through which we passed. And he'd stop for the night and say

- 31:30 "We'll leave again at eight in the morning." We finally somehow got across. How would we have got across to Ceylon, then? By ship, I think. There wasn't a bridge of any sort. Was there a bridge across from India to Ceylon?

There was a train bridge across, at one stage?

Yes, I think we did train across. And we got down to Colombo where I joined my ship. And to my horror, it wasn't a big modern British cruiser that I'd been promised. She had just been torpedoed in the

- 32:00 Mediterranean, and she was undergoing repairs in Malta. And there was a little old World War 1 cruiser called the HMS Danae. I think it's a Greek goddess' name. Single six-inch guns, not proper turrets or anything. Only about six thousand tons. A very happy ship, I liked it. But at first sight I thought, "My God! Where am I going?" After my big heavy eight inch gun cruiser. And I found myself the only Australian on board.

- 32:30 I was replacing the first lieutenant, who was much older than me. I had only just put my second stripe up, as a lieutenant. And the captain said, "Right, you are the first lieutenant, you will be doing this and that." And I said, "Excuse me, sir. I've only got seniority of six weeks as a lieutenant." He said, "Oh? Why have they sent you to me?" Which wasn't a very good start, but at any rate, I fitted in and I did most of the first lieutenant's jobs, although the actual title went to somebody else. I found

- 33:00 myself the gunnery control officer, on top of the mast, in a special little control tower there. And off we went around the Indian Ocean again, a little bit. Up the Persian Gulf that time, quite interesting. We went right up to where Marva, the fighting in the Gulf. You'd read all about the places. We went up the Tigres Euphrates River, the mouth where they joined and it's called the Chattel Arab. And we went right up to Abadan, and into Basra, which you have read about

- 33:30 recently, where the British Forces are fighting the Second Iraq War. Had no particular action, but quite a lot of interesting times. Then we were suddenly ordered home to England. Incidentally, a memory I have on the way across to the Persian Gulf from Colombo, we came across one of those sights that one so often met during the war, of a lifeboat bobbing in the water. And this was off a

- 34:00 ship that had been torpedoed about a week before, and in fact, about half the people in the boat had since died. It's all right for you dark skin people in the Tropics, but you get a pale white Geordie stoker coming up from down below, in the Tropics, and sitting with just his underpants on and he gets cooked to death, literally. And they lost a lot like that. I took one particular wizened-looking grey-haired fellow down to

- 34:30 my cabin and gave him a cup of coffee and he went to sleep. When he came awake an hour later I was there waiting to chat to him. He said, "Where am I?" I said, "You are in the British cruiser Danae." "Oh my God," he said and passed out again. I thought, "Oh dear, what have I done here?" So I got hold of one of our doctors and he had dealt with the others by then, and he came along and we waited, and when he came awake again we had a bit of food him, and another cup of coffee, and he was looking a bit better and he said, "Where did you say I was?"

- 35:00 And I said, "You're in the British cruiser Danae." And he said, "What year is it?" And I said, "It's 1943." "Thank God," he said. "I thought I had gone through some sort of a time warp. Do you know that the last time I was torpedoed in 1917, I was picked up by the British cruiser Danae." So there he was, two wars apart and the same ship had picked him up again. Anyway, that was just in passing. We went back through the Mediterranean,

- 35:30 stopped off at Tobruk and Naples, interesting, things were still going on there, but didn't stop for long. Got through, went up and went almost straight away up to Scapa Flow, [Orkney Islands] north of Scotland, because we were going to be part of the bombarding force for the invasion, which we all knew was coming soon, somewhere. We had an interesting visit there by the King himself, who was very much a sailor. He had been through naval training himself, in his youth. This was King George VI,

- 36:00 this was. Very well respected fellow, but with an embarrassing stammer, which I think he finally managed to beat a bit. At any rate, he inspected the fleet. We weren't big enough to warrant him visiting us, but I took a contingent of our sailors across, with my captain, to one of the bigger cruisers. And I had them all fallen in and the captain obviously met the King, when he came on the quarter deck, and when they came along the

- 36:30 captain said, "And this is my crew from the Danae, your majesty, and this is Lieutenant Smyth, Royal Australian Navy." And the King said, "Oh, an.... n...n...another c...c...c.... colonial." And I drew myself up to my full height, and he was quite a small chap, the King, and I said, "Sir, you should know better than that. We're no longer one of your colonies." And the captain looked horrified and moved the King on and shook his fist at me, and got me later and said,

- 37:00 "You do not speak to your monarch like that." And I said, "I'm terribly sir, but he did get it wrong." And I forgot it. We went on working up, we went down to Greenock, near Glasgow on the West Coast of Scotland. We did a bit more working up there. All the time I, as the gunnery control officer, was probably the most important person in a way, because it was bombardment. Apart from anti-aircraft,

which you've always got to be ready for, which we were going to do, off Normandy. And

- 37:30 it was then, too, that I learned it was going to be Normandy. We were getting lots and lots of secret orders, books of plans and orders on board. And somebody had to keep correcting those, as the corrections came in. The captain said, "Right Smyth, you're an Australian. You don't need to go ashore in Glasgow. Your leave is stopped, because from now on you've got to sit and correct all the things. And you will be the first to know after me to know where we are going and
- 38:00 I don't want that getting out. We've got to keep it a secret." So my poor girlfriend in Glasgow never did see me again. I never heard from her. I was going to go and see her that night. But at any rate, I corrected it all and I knew exactly what we were doing, then finally, after a few more exercises we sailed. And I kept a diary of that, from the day we sailed, roughly, to after the landings. Which I recorded in a book of mine. And we sailed down the west coast,
- 38:30 down through the Bristol Channel. An enormous number of ships already at sea. We were in a force of about five cruisers and destroyers. Mine sweepers ahead of us, battleships astern of us. Merchant ships, all moving at different speeds. So we were moving through, one group moving through another, all the way down the coast. How we didn't collide a few times, I don't know. But we did by then have a bit or radar. The first part of the war we'd done without radar. It all had to be
- 39:00 eye-balling. So we got down safely. We rounded Land's End and we were heading along the south coast of England, heading eventually for Normandy, when to our horror we were told to stop, twenty four hour delay, turn back. So we all turned back, all going back at different speeds. We went back through all the ships we passed before, we rounded Land's End, we right up to almost the coast of Wales. And the order was
- 39:30 you did that for twelve hours, then you turned again, so twenty fours later you were where you had been. And it was all the weather that was causing this delay. And by that time the weather was even worse. And we thought. 'Oh God, we're all ready for this, and it looks like they're going to have to cancel it. If we can't do it now, it's at least another month before they get the right tide and the right moon. And therefore it might even be cancelled. We'll have to just cross our fingers.' That was the time, of course, when [General] Eisenhower in his
- 40:00 headquarters had the decision to make. He delayed it twenty four hours, he was about to delay it another twenty four hours, and I think only one of his experts said, "No sir, there is only one window of opportunity. Dawn on the 6th. I think it will ease off for a few hours. I think you can do it." And so he had this tremendous decision to make and he said, "Go." So we heaved a sigh of relief and we kept going.

Tape 5

- 00:44 So there we are. We've sailed along the south coast of England. Around about Portsmouth we turn south and head for Normandy. From that moment on, we were at action stations. I was up in the spotting top, where I
- 01:00 controlled the guns from. And we were at the far eastern end of the whole operation. Sword Beach, which was under the guns when we got there, the Omaha Peninsula, and also of course the guns ashore. To the east we were looking all the time to see if there were any German E-Boats or anything coming along. But to the west.... All that night, we were passing literally thousands of ships. We could see them spread right across into the distance.
- 01:30 We were going fairly fast, so we were passing the slower ones, the landing craft, the landing ship infantry, rocket ships, LC [Landing Craft] vehicle landing.... the things. Including great big things like the PLUTO, the pipeline under the ocean, almost like enormous cotton reels being towed along, and as they went they were laying on the bottom of the sea
- 02:00 a big petrol pipe, so they could petrol straight across, and presumably diesel and things they wanted. So you saw this multiplicity of very peculiar looking ships, plus all the big.... We had two battleships, four cruisers I think, and our own escorting. The minesweepers went ahead of us and they were sweeping in toward. So my memory of that night, from my lofty perch, the best view anybody had of the whole channel,
- 02:30 probably was me, because I could see to the west, the whole congregation of ships in the moonlight. I think six thousand ships was a figure that somebody quoted, plus small craft. So you know it could have been ten thousand. Then we edged down through our channel, behind our minesweepers. Then we parted at the top of a sort of pear-shaped arrangement, then met again at the bottom
- 03:01 with the other cruisers, and got there at five o'clock, roughly. I think it was 5.25, I can be precise. There we sat, trying to keep our position. We didn't anchor or anything, but we tried to keep our position as well as we could. And at 5.25 we started our bombardment. That's when I started getting really busy. We had pre-arranged targets on the

- 03:30 shore. Weastrem and into towards Dovell and further in, Caen, out of our range. But the battleships were ranging on that. And in between, the guns of Lahar Peninsula were firing at us. And my memory of that was.... We never got hit, I was lucky again. I was lucky right through the war. But my memory is one particular shell coming over and missing us and hitting a landing craft tank,
- 04:00 which was quite a big vessel about one hundred yards from us, and it just disappeared, in a swirl of oil and water and as all the water subsided, nothing. And another one coming alongside us that had been hit. I remember looking down and seeing the captain, with blood all over his face, still driving his ship alongside. So one was really feeling that one was in the war, then. Probably more than I had in the Coral Sea Battle, because
- 04:30 there I had been hidden down below. And we spent the whole day bombarding. The landing itself finally came at seven, after we had been bombarding. First of all the destroyers went in and did what they called beach drenching, and I was watching all this again. They went in shore of us and just blew the beaches, as much as they could, to hell. And then in with the landing crafts rockets, which had, I think.... I seem to remember the figure of a hundred and forty four rockets.
- 05:00 They'd go in even closer than the destroyers, press a button, then the whole of the hundred and forty four rockets would go off one after another in about ten seconds. And you'd see them all in the air together, going in, then all landing and whoompf. Hopefully all hitting something useful because sure enough at seven, whatever it was, we saw the soldiers beginning to land from their landing craft, and stream up the beaches. You could see the odd one.... I had moments in between
- 05:30 firing when you could watch, and you could see the odd ones falling and thinking 'I'm glad I'm a sailor and not a soldier, in these circumstances.' We had Spitfires spotting for us, for our inland firings, our bombardments inland. And I learnt later, actually, my sister had just married an air force officer and he had been put in charge of seven squadrons of Spitfires to provide
- 06:00 cover and spotting for the fleet at Normandy. I didn't know this at the time. And he knew that I was the gunnery control officer of the Danae, and so he told off a particular friend of his to be the ex-Fleet Air Arm pilot, I think it was. And he said, "You will be working with my brother-in-law Dacre Smyth, in the Danae." And sure enough, he said, "That Smyth?" I said, "Yes" and he said,
- 06:30 "Right, I'm your man." He spotted for us for a little while, then suddenly he went off the air. I thought 'Oops, it's happened to him.' And we never did get in contact again. But in fact, he was shot down. He did plane [fly] back over the beaches, land in the water, near one of the other ships and the ship picked him up. And the ship that picked him up happened to be the one he had left only two weeks before, and he had been operating their reconnaissance aircraft. So that
- 07:00 was a happy ending, as I later learnt. At any rate, we went on firing direct at whatever we could see, and they eventually gave us another Spitfire. So it was quite an interesting day. By the end of it, we were still unscathed. We were ordered back to Portsmouth at high speed, presumably, we thought, because we had almost run out of ammunition, and they would re-ammunition us. But as we got to Portsmouth they said, "No, all your
- 07:30 ammunition..." Or the main armament, the six inch. "Fill your magazines with the stores from the lighters that are now coming alongside you. And you are going back there. You've finished your job as a bombarding ship. You were one of the ones that we expected would be sunk and you haven't been, so now you've got a more valuable job. You are going to be the mother ship for the Sword area, for all the little craft over there. They all want someone to come over and look after them." The landing craft, the motor torpedo boats. And that's what we did for the next
- 08:01 five or six weeks, I think. You need a mother if you are a little craft over there. You need stores, you need a rest occasionally, you need to be able to tie your boat alongside. And I realised, as we got back to off Sword Beach, as the gunnery control officer of a six inch gun ship, which didn't any longer have any six inch gun ammunition, I really no longer have got myself an action station. And the captain realised
- 08:30 at the same time and he said, "Smyth, you will still do all your watch-keeping duties and everything, as normal, but as you haven't got an action station, I suggest you take a couple of your guns' crews. We'll get you a duck [DUWK], one of those amphibious trucks to take you ashore. You can report to Brigadier So-and-so on Sword Beach, who is the beach master, and you can see what you can do to help the army." And I thought, "This is great." I'd always wanted to play soldiers a bit. So I took one of my Royal Marines guns crews. I had become the
- 09:00 captain of Royal Marines at that stage, because our captain of Royal Marines, who had been sunk a couple of times before, he had gone around the bend and we'd shipped him off in a straight-jacket. And the captain said, "Smyth, take over the Royal Marines." So I had to learn to salute this way instead of that way, and I became a Royal Marine officer. I took my guns crews ashore, reported to the brigadier, cleared up the beaches all morning, bodies and wreckage and things, which was a grisly job....

And this was Sword Beach?

- 09:30 This was Sword Beach.

How big was Sword Beach, the actual area you had to cover?

I suppose it was about two or three miles long. The whole area.... There was Sword Beach, there was Gold Beach, there was Juno Beach. They were the three British and Canadian beaches. Then there were three American beaches. Omaha, Utah.... There were six beaches

10:00 completely. Probably more than I said before, probably at least five miles. So the whole thing was probably a thirty mile, or even fifty miles, I'd have to look at a map to remind myself. But we were the eastern most, just near the Orne River and the Orne Canal, which both came into the bay there.

You've probably seen the film Saving Private Ryan. Was the sword beach similar to Omaha Beach? From what you see in the movie, I'm just curious to know...

10:32 Oh, I think so, yes. But Omaha, of course, was the worst, because they found themselves fronting up to a German division they hadn't expected to be there. A pretty elite division, I think. And there were other troubles on the beach, I can't remember.... They couldn't get across the beach obstacles....

So what was different in the set up at Sword Beach? The German defences.... You were actually inspecting, cleaning up bodies and so forth.

11:04 The houses that were right down on the beach, they had almost been all blown to bits. And in amongst them were the concrete gun emplacements. Some of them still pretty good, because they had four or five feet on concrete on them. That was the trouble right along. In many places we thought we could bomb them to smithereens and we couldn't. They were just so thick.

11:30 But our people got ashore, through that initial part fairly well. My brigadier then said, "Look, if you would like to go inland a little bit, there is a particular group of soldiers in a paddock over there, who are being held up by sniper fire from the village. They are in a trench and they want to advance across the field to get into the village. It would be useful if they could have a trench on the other side of the field to which they could hop, as a first stage

12:00 in going into the village. We'd like you to take your sailors up there and dig a trench for them." And I said, "But what about the snipers you mentioned in the village?" He said, "Oh, I don't think there are really that many. I don't think you'd need worry. It would be a great help if you could." So off I went to my Royal Marines and my sailors and we dug a trench for the army, and we weren't sniped at, fortunately, and the army advanced into it and then into the village, and they found the village was virtually deserted by both Germans and French.

12:30 And I then led my boys into the village. I thought I'd have a look around. And I remembered that before I left the ship the captain said, "By the way, if you get anywhere near the village, or a shop, see if you can get a camembert cheese." I said, "A what?" He said, "A camembert cheese. It's a short of French cheese that is made in Normandy." So I said, "All right." When we got into the village we found a deserted shop and we went into it, and we souvenired

13:00 one or two things, including two camembert cheeses that I slipped into my pocket. And when we returned that night, in our duck to the ship, the captain was standing on the quarter deck, and almost before I got alongside the gangway, he said, "Have you got one?" And I said, "Yes, sir." So by the time I got to the top of the gangway, he had called a motor torpedo boat alongside, that had been lying off, and he threw one of these cheeses down to the chap and said, "You know what to do?"

13:30 And the fellow said, "Yes, sir." And off he went at fifty knots, heading back to England. I must, understandably, looked a little bemused, so he said, "Come down to my cabin, I think I owe you an explanation." So I got down there. He said, "Sit down, Smyth. Have a gin." And I said, "Oh, thanks very much sir, I would like a gin." So I had a gin. Then he said, "Smyth, you remember when you insulted the King by accusing him of not knowing

14:00 that you were no longer a colonial?" So I rose to my feet, I put the gin down and I stood to attention and said, "Yes sir, I do remember." And he said, "Well, I'll forgive you for that, but I want to tell you now that the King is a particular friend of mine. We did our training together at Osmond Naval College, back in the early part of the century. And I called on him again at Buckingham Palace, before we sailed and we chatted about old times. And he said, 'Captain Holmes, if there

14:30 is one thing I would like you to do, if you can there is nothing I won't do for you, if you can get me a camembert cheese when you land in Normandy, because it's my favourite cheese and for five years I haven't been able to get it.' So that cheese," says my captain to me, "is on its way back to Portsmouth. There will be a Buckingham Palace car waiting at Portsmouth to take the cheese up to the palace and the King will have his cheese for breakfast." And the King kept his promise. Three weeks later

15:00 my captain was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his work at Normandy. And I didn't even get to taste the other cheese.

So it's curious, you didn't have any infantry training. Royal Marines are essentially on board infantry, aren't they?

Oh yes, they are.

So why would lead Royal Marines?

Well, somebody had to.

So they didn't have a commander?

No, he'd gone around the bend.

15:30 The captain of the Royal Marines had gone mad, well temporarily mad. Bob happy. He'd been sunk twice, poor chap, and he'd always been terribly nervous. I know the sailors were frightened to call him to go on watch, because he would come up fighting from his bunk. The sailors would get flattened. As I say, the day of the landings was too much for him. We landed him in Portsmouth when we went back that night, and the captain picked on me and said, "You can be the captain of the Marines."

16:00 **What did you find the differences were, not having that kind of infantry experience?**

Well, I didn't really do any fighting with them, did I? I just had fun with them ashore. We went on landing, doing various jobs. I mentioned that the Orne River and the Orne Canal.... which were half a mile apart and parallel going into the sea, and our forces were on our side of the river and the German forces were

16:30 still on the far side of the canal, so there was a sort of No Man's Land in between. And I was chatting to a colonel in the British Army and he said, "Would you like to stay ashore tonight and do dinner and a show?" I said, "Do what?" He said, "Dinner and a show." So I said, "All right," and I sent the boys back and said, "I will be staying ashore tonight." I went along. Dinner consisted of going into their dugouts and eating bully beef. I think he had a bottle of French wine he commandeered somewhere.

17:00 He said, "Now we will go and see the show." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "You come along and you'll see." So he took me up into their trenches, and the show was the kaleidoscope of colour from all the tracers. From our people shooting at the Germans and them shooting back at us. It was like Sydney Harbour on New Year's Eve. It was very pretty to watch, so I had dinner and a show in France, which not many people, at that stage, would have been having.

17:30 **You were on an elevated position?**

We were just looking over the top of the trench at it.

Over how far a distance could you see this?

Half a mile away, they were shooting at us and we were shooting at them. It was a very interesting evening.

They actually do a show a segment in Saving Private Ryan, they walk past a hill area and you could see bombs landing everywhere, like a huge battle going on.

18:01 **Countless artillery shells over the entire horizon. So it must have been similar?**

The same sort of thing.

When you landed on Sword Beach to do a clean-up, can you tell us exactly what sort of things you saw and did?

It was mainly wreckage that had been either flung up by the.... The weather had got pretty bad again, overnight. So some of the small craft were there. I remember souveniring

18:31 the compass from the bridge of a stranded landing craft tank. It had actually been hit by shellfire and was abandoned. I couldn't do anything about that. But the smaller wreckage we literally lifted it up and moved it. If we found a body we lifted it up and dragged it away, then one of the army people took over and took the dog tags off and dealt with it. So it was trying to tidy up the beach, because the landing craft were still coming in all the time, and they didn't

19:00 want to land on the.... We weren't dealing with the beach defences. They were out in the water. It was high tide when we started this thing. At low tide our job would have probably been to set off any bombs that hadn't been set off, on the ends of the logs they had there as beach defences. So it was a varying sort of.... You did what you could do to help tidy up the scene, really.

At Sword Beach, did the Allies, or the landing that you witnessed,

19:31 **were there heavy losses for the Allies?**

No, I think the losses were later on, when they were trying to take Caen. The inland city which became the hinge for the whole operation. And they expected to get it within the first two or three days, and I think it took six weeks. While we were still not bombarding for those six weeks, the battleships outboard of us were still bombarding Caen. It should have been absolutely obliterated

20:00 but time and again when our people would try and move in, out would come the Germans from the cellars. You can make a city look as if it is completely destroyed, and yet there are still people underneath who will come out and defend it. And that's been proved time and again in many wars, I think. Caen was the one straight in from us, beyond Westrem,

20:30 which was the little village that we landed on. One of memories from that time, the Germans.... We only saw a few aircraft the first day. We saw some E-Boats, they came out through a smokescreen that they

had laid. They were met with so many shots and shells from all of us that they turned back. So things were not terribly.... It was mainly the artillery that was attacking us

- 21:00 those first few days. Then they brought in the manned torpedoes. There was a torpedo with a man sitting in it that had been specially.... with a plastic lid, and underneath his torpedo he hung another torpedo, and he would drive this thing in quietly through the water, with just his head showing, then he would fire his lower torpedo.... Either that
- 21:30 or a magnetic mine, we don't know which, got the Dragon, which was the sister ship of ours. She was run by the Polish navy and she was only a few hundred yards from us, and she went up. And the captain very cleverly manoeuvred her in as she was sinking, and put her alongside the gooseberries. You've heard of the Mulberry? The Mulberry was the harbour, the Gooseberries were actually the ships that they had sunk, old freighters mainly,
- 22:00 to form the breakwater. And the Mulberry was the harbour inside. And he took his cruiser in and put it as an extension to the Gooseberry Harbour, and there it sank. And later, we went back after about six weeks to Portsmouth and we were told to pay off. We had done our job, we hadn't been sunk, we weren't needed, we were too old fashioned and suddenly they realised that the crew of the Dragon was still around, because they hadn't had many casualties, without
- 22:30 a cruiser, so they decided to give us to the Polish navy. And I happened to be the last officer on board when we handed over. So I handed over the cruiser to the Polish Navy, which was quite nice. After the war they gave me their Gold Cross of Honour for giving them a cruiser, which I still wear with my medals.

If I can ask you one question about the German K Force.

- 23:00 **They operated those little sub. They were known locally as 'niggers'. I read a book on this. It was an interesting book about the K Force.**

Would they be the human torpedoes that I mentioned?

Yes. And they used to call these torpedoes 'niggers' for some reason or another. I have no reason why they called them that. Were you pre-warned about German infiltration attempts and things like that?

Oh, we knew that various things were going to happen.

- 23:30 **What sort of things did you know?**

Well, one interesting thing. Somebody came on board just before we sailed from Greenock, and fitted something up the mast, in amongst our new radar and things, and ran an electric lead down to the bridge and fitted an ordinary bakelite electric light switch. A brown electric light switch. And they said, "That's what you do, if you have to." And we said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "We can't tell you, but we'll tell the captain." So as we were sailing for Normandy,

- 24:00 he said, "This is alleged to be a jamming arrangement for the guided bombs that we understand the Germans have. The aircraft will be in sight, out of our range and they will drop this bomb and they will guide it towards us. And if we turn on that switch it will somehow jam it." And sure enough a few days after the landing, there were a couple of
- 24:30 the big bombers in the distance and they dropped this thing and we could see it coming towards us. And we said, "Oh Christ, I remember now." We switched on the switch and it went into the sea. So they were the sorts of things that our intelligence had learnt about in time to have something ready to deal with it.

When you say bomber, do you mean rocket?

I suppose it was a propelled bomb, yes. To us, then, it was just a flying bomb, but it must have had an engine in it.

- 25:00 Probably a miniature version of the V1s that we were suddenly experiencing then, back ashore. I know when I finally went on leave back to London, after we had finished in Normandy, this was when all the buzz bombs, or the Doodlebugs, the V1, they were coming over. They were jet propelled un-manned aircraft. Rather
- 25:30 like the kamikazes in a way, except they didn't have a person in them. And they would cut off, over London, you'd hear the thing coming over, quite a noisy thing, like the helicopters you hear now, and it would suddenly stop. And you would know that it was gliding down towards you. And you would wait, lying down in the gutter if you were out in the street, and then boom, up it would go, a couple of blocks away. And you'd say,
- 26:00 "That's all right, that one missed me." And they were frightening. They were replaced, around the same time, by the V2s as well. And they were the first ones that were the first real intercontinental ballistic missiles. They went up into the air, into the stratosphere, and came down faster than the speed of sound, so you didn't hear them coming until they suddenly went whoompf. And once you heard the whoompf you knew you were safe, and you didn't have that worry beforehand. So I preferred them to the V1s.

26:30 **What about German air power? Did you see....**

During the invasion, very, very little. One or two Messerschmitt 110s came over on D Day, and zoomed along the beaches, shooting up the troops and they were shot down pretty quick, I gather, in the distance. It was very well proved that we had superior air-power by then. I mean, the other things that I can remember as we crossed,

27:00 when I was looking at all the ships, you were hearing a thousand bombers go overhead, and you could even see some of the lower ones, as they were obliterating the whole landing area. The gliders, I don't actually remember seeing the gliders, but they were being towed over and then they were then dropped and landed where the commandos were doing their particular special jobs. But the amount of aeroplanes in the sky....

27:30 We would get a signal 'Expect a hundred plus bombers 0800 tomorrow, coming in from the north'. And the very first day they said that, a hundred plus, was rubbish. I think somebody miscalculated. It was over a thousand. And a thousand aeroplanes all going over and dropping their bombs on Caen and that area, you would think, "Well, there can't be any of them left." But there still was.

What about when you went inland, did you see a lot of dead German soldiers?

28:01 I didn't really remember seeing too many. They seemed to get rid of them fairly quickly. We weren't really in the front line, I wasn't playing soldiers. I don't think the army would have let me. They wouldn't have trusted the navy to do that. Once they'd moved in five miles, or five miles behind them, or two miles behind them, everything would have been cleaned up. Our own people, you pick up your dead, some of them are yours and some are theirs. And you take the wounded to hospital, whether they are theirs or ours.

28:33 I like talking about my army time, but it wasn't as if I was really playing soldiers. I went to my show and got the camembert cheese, but I wasn't really risking my life and limb.

You probably would have met French civilians, around that area....

Two or three of the poor girls who had had their heads shaved. I didn't know. I thought they were men dressed as women.

29:01 Because a girl without any hair is a bit different to a bald man, and they were the ones that had been collaborating.... They weren't collaborating, they were going to bed with the Germans, I suppose. Why not, if you were keen on that. Once they were liberated by us, their friends or their neighbours decided that was the way to treat them. They shaved them all to the very skull. So everyone you met, you knew whether they had been good or bad

29:30 with the opposition.

I would understand that the French civilians, the ones who were liberated, were they on the streets?

They were beginning to come out, yes. That first village that I went into, it was virtually deserted, but I think we went back two days later for something, and they were back. I didn't speak any French properly. An interesting aside, fifty years on from the landing, which would be June,

30:00 1994, it's ten years ago now.... You might remember that the French government, the president of France has given the Legion of Honour to all our First World War diggers who were still alive. There were only twenty or thirty left. Then he went further and he said, "I want to give the French Order of Merit..." which is an equivalent Order. They've got two Orders in France. One is the Legion of Honour and the Order of Merit, which [French General later President Charles] De Gaulle had brought in actually,

30:30 after the war. And the president said, "I want to give three of those, Officer of the Order of Merit, to Australians who were at Normandy. One for the army, one for the navy and one for the air force." And we had very few there. So somehow I was the one who came out as the naval chap to get one. The army I think had about a dozen people there, as observers. The air force, I'm not sure. The air force claimed they were in Normandy in the thousands,

31:00 but of course they were flying over dropping bombs. I don't count that. It's not the same as being there. At any rate, we each got one and the government approved it and the Queen approved it that I should accept it. The ambassador came down to Canberra especially, gave me a dinner here, kissed me on both cheeks and made me an Officer of the Order of Merit in France, and that's the last one in my collection of medals out there, which I'm allowed to wear. That was fifty years on.

31:30 **I heard you say the name Major Gullett [later Sir Henry Gullett, Minister for External Affairs]?**

Major? Yes.

Was he the one who served in Papua New Guinea as well?

Oh, yes. He wrote a very good book.... But he was a very famous infantry.... I knew him well in Canberra, but he's dead now. I think he had a nasty car accident that put him right out of action for few

years. He was a member of Parliament. He was our

- 32:00 high commissioner to Malta, I think. He had quite a distinguished career, after the war, but he was a very brave soldier during it.

And I understand that he was fairly left wing in his politics. Is that true?

Well, if he was, as a Liberal minister it must have been interesting, because he was in the Liberal government. Left wing?

That's what I heard from some of his soldiers. I was just curious, because he is quite an icon in the Australian Army.

Well, that's him.

- 32:37 Joe Gullett. Joe Gullett. What his proper name was, I don't know, because everyone called him Joe.

Okay, so after you went to the beaches and so forth and did these little special operations, what took place after that?

Well, finally we went back to Portsmouth as I say, and I handed the ship over to the

- 33:00 Polish navy, and I went back to Australia House and said, "Right, where am I going? I think I'm going to an Australian destroyer in the Indian Ocean again." They said, "Yes, that's quite true. There is a destroyer depot ship sailing for the Pacific via Colombo, in about a month's time. You better go on leave again." So once again I said, "I've had my leave. I had a few days. I said goodbye to everybody. Can I see what the air force does?"

- 33:30 So they sent me up to an air force station in Norfolk, not far from where I had been with the little coastal command people at Lowestock. And there, there were two Beaufighter squadrons. One was the Australian 455 Squadron, who were rocket firing Beaufighters, and the other one was a New Zealand torpedo dropping Beaufighter squadron. They were coastal command. Basically their main job was

- 34:00 to attack the German convoys. The same as I had been doing in motor gunboats, a couple of years earlier. So I flew with them for a few weeks, attacking German flack ships protecting the German convoys. Which was quite frightening, I'd rather much be in the navy, where you can fire up at an aeroplane, rather than being in an aeroplane being fired at by the ships. It was an interesting experience. Part of the broadening of my experiences as a young officer.

- 34:31 When I finished that I came back and boarded this ship the Tyne, which we went through the Med. We worked our way as it was a naval ship, I was officer of the watch. I finally got to Colombo where I got off and had to train up to Trincomalee where I joined the Norman. The Norman was one of five M Class destroyers, very modern destroyers, which were given to us during the war. Originally to replace the First World War scrap-iron

- 35:00 flotilla, which were the V&W [class] destroyers. But in fact, they were doing such a good job, the V&Ws, the scrap-irons, that they kept them going. Those that survived, to the end of the war and we were somehow able to man the ends as well. One of the them had been lost in the Med, the Nesta. She had been sunk on the Tobruk run taking stores and soldiers into Tobruk. She had been sunk. But there were still four left.

- 35:30 The Napier, Nysan, the Norman, my ship and the Nepal. So I joined her in Trincomalee. Mainly we were going to be fighting the Burma campaign, but in fact, we shot down, this was on Christmas, 1944, we went down to Durban, I think, to give us a break. They had been fairly busy until I joined, so we went down and we spent Christmas in Durban. Christmas and New Year,

- 36:00 so we must have been there a week. I know New Year's night, we were due to sail on New Year's morning, and all the officers were at a night-club called the Stardust night-club. We always referred to it as the Sawdust night-club, but it was quite a nice night-club. But our captain was Lieutenant Commander Plunkett Cole, and the signal came through that night, which is always the day that you have promotions, that he had been promoted to commander.

- 36:30 So we immediately, instead of going back to the ship as we had expected to do, went on celebrating. So by the time we got back to the ship, we were probably all a little bit happy, shall we say, celebrating our captain's promotion. And we sailed an hour later. We somehow got out of the harbour, and we found ourselves escorting an aircraft carrier back toward Trincomalee, and everybody left the bridge. I found myself all alone there, not being quite sure what I was meant to be doing with this aircraft carrier, but

- 37:00 they all gradually sobered up, so we all got safely to Trincomalee. From then on we went across and did the landings all down the Arrakan Coast of Burma. Akyab, Ramree, Shadoobah, various landings. Fairly quiet. The Japs seemed to usually get out ahead of us. We'd go in quite close and bombard like mad and then we'd land and find there was no-one there. We had been blowing trees to bits. So it wasn't terribly exciting, but

- 37:30 you never know. It was always interesting. We had one small aircraft carrier with us. We did all those landings down the coast, until they were heading for, well, the main capital I suppose. Chittagong. We

had finished our job, really. Bill [Sir William] Slim and his forces were coming around and down and taking over. Re-taking Burma. We then shot

- 38:00 back, fuelled in Perth, came around the bottom, up to Sydney, where we then joined the British Pacific, which had been forming up, by that time, for a couple of months. Four aircraft carriers, four battleships, about twenty cruisers and about forty destroyers, to go up and do the same thing as the Yanks had been doing. The Yanks had probably twenty aircraft carriers and twenty.... Much bigger than
- 38:30 the British. The Yanks didn't really want the British there, but the British insisted on playing their part in the Pacific war. Which the Americans could have won without them, I must admit. But they were polite enough to say, "Okay, you can help us land at Okinawa, and help us land at Sakashima and you will be doing the main Japanese landing." And our main job was to escort these carriers. A lot
- 39:00 of running around, acting as a messenger ship between ships, taking mail to all the other ships in the force, transferring the odd person from here to there, for some reason. Quite an interesting seamanship time. Kamikazes started coming in and attacking us. We were never attacked again, we saw various other ships did. One morning we were quite close in to Japan. It was foggy and we had been sailing away
- 39:30 during the night, and we turned at dawn, almost a hundred and eighty degrees and we headed back towards Japan for that day's strike. As six o'clock, or whatever time it was occurred, we automatically altered course, took up a new position, the kamikaze destroyers took position one astern of each carrier, four carriers.... They were there to add firepower to protect the carrier, and we all started
- 40:00 zigzagging. We had done that several times before, but this day it was thick fog. Doing all that in thick fog, it can get a bit dicey. We were all right, we were out on the screen. The HMS Quilliam, which was the kamikaze destroyer detailed off to go astern of the HMS Indomitable, suddenly came up on the air and said, "I have collided with the Indomitable. They had been careening in at high speed meaning to do that but in fact they did that. And we were detailed off
- 40:30 to look after them. We crept forward in the fog and found the poor old Quilliam with its bow down. There was nobody hurt. There were always action stations, fortunately, so they weren't down in the mess deck, which had been obliterated almost. The only casualty was the captain, who had broken a couple of ribs when he was flung against the front of the bridge. We had to take her in tow. We towed her back out of the action, which was a bit difficult because her bow was bent around at angle,
- 41:00 so we were trying to tow her stern first. She kept trying to.... This was acting as an enormous rudder. We'd tow her and she'd swing around to starboard and we'd part the tow. So at any rate we finally got her moving at about two knots and we spent about a day doing that before a big ocean-going tug came and took her away from us, and then we rejoined the force. That was just one interesting little episode in amongst it.

I'll pause you there....

Tape 6

- 00:37 **When we left off, you were in the Pacific Fleet. Can you tell us a bit about the landing at Okinawa?**

We didn't really see anything about that landing. When you are covering a carrier force like that, you keep well out of it. We had the same frustration later in the Korean War where a landing was going on, and

- 01:00 because you were covering a carrier, you didn't really see the landings. We just knew the Okinawa thing was going on, there were kamikaze attacks around our fleet and the American fleet, and we hardly knew what was going on. It would have been the same for us, probably, at the main landings on Japan, if they were declared. The destroyers, they used them at Normandy

- 01:30 as beach dredges, as I mentioned.... The Yanks might have.... I don't know the details, really, of the Okinawa landings.

So what exactly was your role then in covering....

You had your four carriers, and a circular stream around them of anything up to twenty four destroyers. You would obviously help protect the carriers against air and submarines. We didn't seem to strike any submarines in that

- 02:00 particular battle. Although that is what your screening destroyers are mainly there to do, to help protect your carriers. Your carriers are your offensive weapon, and you become a defensive weapon, really, to look after them.

So you were fighting off aircraft attack?

Not as much as one could pretend, no, there weren't that many. And the ones that were coming in were

kamikaze. They came through.... We didn't get attacked.

02:30 I don't think we fired our anti-aircraft guns at all in that time. We were having a quite time, really, but you never knew what was going to happen next.

Tell us about the kamikazes?

They were just ordinary aeroplanes. The very first one, my old ship the Australia, I've heard them describe it many times, because I am a patron of the Australia Association now. They rather sneer at me. I wasn't on board

03:00 the Australia during the kamikaze times. At Leyte, she was really the first ship on our side to be hit, including the Americans, by the kamikaze, and I think that was a mistake. The aircraft came down and it ran past the Shropshire, our sister ship that had replaced the Canberra, it sailed past the Shroppy, turned away and suddenly came back

03:30 and almost by accident came up the side of the Australia and hit her bridge. It didn't seem as they were deliberately trying to hit. Perhaps they realised he was being shot down, perhaps he said, "Right, for the Emperor!" But that was the one that did the most damage, really. It killed the captain and the navigator and most of the bridge crew. Collins was the commodore commanding the squadron and he was badly wounded. That was only the first one, at Leyte.

04:00 Later at Bougainville, three months later, they were hit by five kamikazes, and they were deliberate. They were coming in, aiming at you, straight from the moment. And they were loaded with special bombs, so they would go off. But in fact they didn't do as much damage in those five attacks.... Some of them hit the side of the ship, for instance, they couldn't keep up enough because they were being blown out the sky as they came in. So all that I've heard about. I haven't really seen it, except in

04:30 the distance. One landing on one of the American ships near us, at one stage. It was just the fear that if you saw an aeroplane, by then, you knew that it were probably not going to drop a bomb on you, it was going to come in and hit you.

So when you say you saw one off in the distance, that was at Okinawa?

Yes, it was, I think. Or Sakashima, it was around about that time.

05:00 But I can't really give you eyewitness accounts, plummeting into the decks of aircraft carriers and things, seen on movies, never quite actually seen.... The British stood up to it better, when they were hit.... I don't think I did see that one.... They had an armoured deck, whereas the Americans just had a deck. And of course anything like a kamikaze would go straight through the deck into the hangar below, full of petrol laden aeroplanes, and the whole thing

05:30 would go up. Whereas the British carriers, because they had an armoured deck, it would bounce off a bit.

Was there a discussion about the procedure if a kamikaze should hit and take out the captain and the leaders of the ship?

Well, that applied to anything. If it was a bomb or whatever. You always had your second in command at the other end of the ship, usually the bigger ships, and even the destroyers. After

06:00 conning position, and the action station for the second in command was usually down there. Certainly on a bigger ship, the commander would be done there and the captain would be on the bridge. That's what happened in the Australia, unquestionably, bridge out, take over down aft. But you lose a lot of control straight away, because so much is run in that central forward bridge area. The directors are above it.... The director was up in flames,

06:30 the chap in it was killed, one of my term mates. So from then on any gunnery would be local control only. They wouldn't be run by the director. But any ship has damage control practice and hopes that it can be put out of action very quickly by the right bomb in the right place, or the right kamikaze.

All right, so what was the next thing to happen for you after Okinawa?

07:01 Well, we continued doing the same things. I think we might have done a quick run back to Manus, then up again and rejoined the fleet. We were then attacking Japan. When I say 'we' the fleet was, we weren't. I think one of our destroyers did somehow get close, HMS Quiberon, one of our semi-sister ships in Q Class, did get in close enough to Japan to fire a few rounds.

07:30 I don't think they were meant to, but they always claimed that they were the only ones that fired at Japan itself. But mainly we were again covering the aircraft carriers as they did their attacks. And one particular evening, things were fairly quiet, we had been not within sight of Japan, but close in. Probably twenty or thirty miles, something like that, while they had been doing their attacks. And the doctor came down. I was sitting in my cabin, things were quiet, it was just on sunset. He said, "Dacre? Come up

08:01 and look at the sunset." I thought that it was a bit peculiar that one of my fellow officers should invite me to look at the sunset. It was really romantic and all that, but not quite my cup of tea. So at any rate,

I said, "All right, I'll come up." And it was an amazing sight. Because a sunset, if you think about it, depends on clouds. If it's a cloudless sky, all you get is an orange sky and the sun disappears. But if you've got clouds, you get all

08:30 these interesting pink lights, and orange and yellow lights, reflecting off the clouds. And yet this was a night when there were no clouds in the sky and yet you were getting a magnificent, almost an Aurora Borealis, or Aurora Australis effect in the sky, as the daylight died. And we looked at it for some time and we couldn't work out why it was like that. And I went below and we thought about it. And I wrote a poem the next morning, and

09:00 the poem.... Can I quote the poem to you? "The blood ran sun sank in a scarlet sky, amid folds of multi-coloured tapestry/No cloud was there to see the daylight die, nor see the heaven's crimson majesty/No cloud I say, but yet the sun did light on towering columns/All unreal, yet huge, which waved and shuddered in grotesque delight/Far out beyond our silent sliding

09:30 ships, the realm of Nippon lay beyond our sight/To westward/Where the rows of crimson tips reflected back/The sun's satanic might/A mighty carrier's hull, all black and vast, obscured the scene with sharp-edged silhouette/And in that fleeting moment as she passed, the sun in stately silence sank and set/With startling speed the heaven's colours died,

10:00 A sombre blue envelopes sea and sky and darkness rushed from every side to hide/Or tried to hide, for memories do not die/We did not understand that sunset there/Tomorrow's dawn brought us the knowledge first, the mystic sight we saw had come from where the atom bomb on Hiroshima burst." So that was the end of the war, really. A few days later the war ended and that was the end of my World War II.

10:42 **Apart from your poetic answer, tell me how you heard about the atom bomb?**

There were signals the next day, I would imagine. Well, there were news reports, which we would have got. We were listening in on

11:00 radio news reports. We knew the next day that it had happened, and we suddenly twigged, that's what we saw from a distance.

So what was your reaction?

Thank God we're not having to go into Japan. That should have ended the war. It didn't. They had to drop another one a few days later on Nagasaki, but we felt some thing is surely going to come of this, if it is as big as they say. And as big as what we'd seen from hundreds of miles away.

11:33 At any rate, finally the signal came through, and we spent the next little while sorting ourselves out. We didn't quite believe it, and we suspected there would be kamikazes still throwing themselves at us. But it never happened, as far as we were concerned. And we gradually.... We went back to Manus, which was our forward base and finally sailed back to Sydney. Our new

12:00 captain had taken over and he said, "We will make this ship look like a peace-time ship by the time we get to Sydney." And we removed all the paint from all the brass work and we polished it up and we stopped somewhere off Sydney, further up the coast, and painted the ship's side. We sailed into Sydney looking like a palace of gems. And then they said, "All you N Class, we are going to give you away, and swap for

12:30 RN Q Class. You've got two Qs already. The Quibberon and the Quickmet. Your four Ns are going to be swapped with four Qs." And we were swapped a few weeks later with the Queenborough, which was an absolute mess. It had blown up a boiler and it was covered with rust. And I, as second in command, had to almost stop a mutiny, because my sailors went on board, and came up from down below, bringing all their lockers, saying "It's full of

13:00 fleas and mice and rust and dirt. After our lovely ship we've got to go into this one?" But we did it and we gradually got her back to normal. And the Ns only sailed back only because their peacetime future, somebody had decided they had a much shorter range than the

This had been proved to us during the war, because we always had to fuel a bit sooner than the other ships. So we wanted a better range and the Qs

13:30 **apparently had it. So we kept the Qs, thereafter, and the Ns disappeared back to the RN, and finally disappeared. Which is a pity because they were a very fine set of ships, and we were very proud of them.**

So did you then get leave to go home?

I think not long after it I got a bit of leave, then I found myself commissioning a new frigate, the HMAS Murchison

14:00 This would be about November, I suppose, '45.

Before you go on to that, tell me about your homecoming. Did you go and see your mother?

Yes, I had leave on and off. There were the times I have mentioned as we go along. They've always said, "Pray for leave, for the good of the service, as much and as often as can be. One of the laws of the navy. And he would do well to observe them going down, in his ship to the sea."

14:31 We got a lot of leave, really. We were never away for more than.... I suppose a year at the most. Six months perhaps. Whereas the poor old soldiers again, they'd sometimes be away for two years or something. And certainly the fact that peace had broken out. It was a great relief. We had all sorts of discussions. My brother had got back by then, he was in the Diplomatic Service.

15:00 I think we did have Christmas, '45, at home. My sister hadn't yet got back from England, with her new Royal Air Force husband. But you know, it was the time when we would have discussed things. And I would have said, "No, I think I will stay in the navy. There is bound to be another war soon and we need to have a navy to protect our country and I quite enjoy it. I've survived one war." And my brother was in the Diplomatic Service. And that was probably when my mother first

15:30 decided that we would sell the farm and she would retire down to Portland, which she did in due course.

It must have been a fairly emotional time for you, though. With your father having died while you were away. This must have been the first time that you were reunited.

Yes, well, I don't think we were all reunited for another year, probably. It was '47 I think, before my sister came out. Yes, it was an

16:00 emotional time. I don't remember being.... My father had died. That was an emotional time, but I was too busy fighting a war. That was back in '41, so here we are in '45, four years later. And I had missed both his funeral and my mother's funeral. When she died in 1960, I was over in Scotland, running a naval air station. So I wasn't there for my own parents' funerals, which I suppose

16:30 was handy in a way, it saved that emotion that you talk of.

It sounds like Peace didn't have a huge impact on you....

Well, we were still just as busy. When we commissioned the Murchison, we went north immediately. We were going around all the islands. We were picking up Japanese prisoners of war and putting them in a cage on deck and taking them back for the war trials at Manus.

17:00 We were picking up war graves.... Well, they weren't graves, they were the remains of our people. We would put four or five in a coffin and putting them on the quarterdeck, stinking to high heaven. And generally going around doing the first sort of surveillance of what had been part of the war, and we were sorting it out. Short of not actually being shot, you were still just as busy doing all sorts

17:30 of things like that.

Tell us a little bit about the Japanese POWs and how they were treated and what the process was?

We had a vegetable locker on the upper deck, which was a cage, really. So we emptied the vegetables out and we made that their cage. We put in a dozen of them at a time. They poor kids,

18:00 were sort of small, diminutive, wizened, half-starved.... We didn't know if they were real criminals or just people that had been left behind. There was a certain amount of sympathy, I think. The odd sailor going past would swear at them or stick with a stick or something. But in general I think we felt pretty sorry for them. Not knowing.... Some of them might have finished up

18:30 being shot as war criminals, others were probably just sent home as prisoners who had survived the war. There was an immediate feeling, after the war, that the war was over. Up in Japan, where I was quite a lot over the next few years, you had a sort of sympathy. You didn't like them very much, naturally, because they had been the enemy. And they were quite different. I remember in one ship we were alongside

19:00 in Kure, and one of our Bofors [machine] guns was due to be off-loaded and taken up for some sort of repairs, to the dockyards we were using, the Japanese dockyards. And they hoisted this up and swung it out with a crane, then it slipped out of its wire slings and fell onto the wharf and onto one of the Japanese labourers. It broke his leg, very messily, there was blood spurting and bones showing. And his mates stood around and roared with laughter.

19:30 "Look at old Bill! Have you ever seen anything so funny." We thought, "Really, these are the people that we had been fighting." And yet, a couple of days later I was doing some re-rigging on the upper deck of the lower boom, and I was saying to the chief purser's mate, "I think it would be better if we put the boat rope outboard of the Jacob's Ladder and the two lizards inboard." And he was saying, "Yes sir, but perhaps one

20:00 lizard out and one in.... "Terribly seamanship sort of stuff. And a little voice behind me said, "If I were you I would put both the lizards outboard, and the boat rope inboard of the Jacob's Ladder." And here was this little Japanese. He said, "I'm sorry, sir, I shouldn't be interfering." Perfect English. I said, "I think you're probably right. What do you know about it." He said, "I was the first lieutenant of the destroyer so-and so up until the other day, and now I'm part of your working party. And

20:30 he spoke perfect English. He had been trained in England before the war. So you know you had a mixture. These were all the people that we had been fighting and you had to come to terms with the fact that they were no, not friends, but no longer your enemy. They were a subjugated race sort of thing.

So how were they treated, for instance. You mentioned that they were in the vegetable locker. Did that give them cover from the sun?

Oh, it had a lid on it. It was only

21:03 cyclone netting down the side. It was probably quite comfortable. It was easy for us to shut the locker and put a padlock on it. It was ready made, really. I don't think anyone had thought of that in advance, but if you had to have prisoners on board. And I'm sure we could have let them out in the open. I don't they were cowered so much that they wouldn't have wanted to escape, jump over the side. But that was where we happened to put them.

And did they get fed?

21:30 Oh yes, we gave them the same food as the sailors. As much as it was. One trip we did around, a place called Tinati [?], and there was a person called the Sultan of Tinati, an Indonesian. A magnificent little fellow. And we went into his wharf and we called on him and he said, "I would like to do a trip around my islands, which I haven't seen during the war." And we said, "That's what we're here to do, to go around and see

22:00 what's going on, picking up dead bodies and prisoners and so forth." So we did this cruise with him, and he became quite a firm friend. He spoke good English and we got along well with him. And when we got back we said, "Right, thanks very much. We're off." And he said, "No, no. I want to give a party in my palace." So we said, "Right." There was a fancy palace up the hill, within walking distance of the ship. So we left a small duty watch on board and most of the officers and a lot of the sailors went up,

22:32 and we had a wonderful party there. All his harem was there and all his hangers-on and beautiful girls here and there. The local wine was a thing called choptikis, which our navigator nicknamed 'Top Secret' because it sounded like that. The navigator had a couple of bottles of gin which he poured into this big of wine, so it was quite a good drink that we were drinking.

23:00 At one stage our captain was approached by a tall, beautiful Dutch lady, married to a tall handsome Indonesian major. And she said, "Captain, we have been discussing things, my husband and I, and we do not want to bring a half-caste child into the post-war world. Would you oblige me by giving me a white child?" And the captain said, "Oh.

23:30 First lieutenant?" And he sent for me, and I came over and he said, "Mrs So-and-so wants to speak with you." So we went into the corner and she put the same delightful proposition to me. And I thought, "Well..." "Gunnery officer?" So I sent for the gunnery officer.... I never found out how far down the line it went. But come two in the morning we finally decided that we had better sail and we went down on the wharf, and my job as first lieutenant was to

24:00 make sure that when the captain was ready to go that all the lines were let go." And I said, "Let go of the head rope, let go of the stern rope, let go of the for'ard back spring." And I forgot to say, "Let go of the aft forward spring." Which meant the wire that was leading frontwards from the back was still there. And we slipped, and we thought we had slipped, and off we went at half speed, and this wire gradually dripped in the water and finally came up taut, after we had gone a whole ship's length

24:30 and by that time we were probably doing about ten knots. And to our horror, too late I realised that I had forgotten to take it off, while at ashore, and we pulled the bollard right out of the wharf, and the sultan and all his harem were on the corner of the wharf waving goodbye to us, and the last thing we saw was the wharf disappearing into the water as we sailed into the night. And we thought, "Well, we'll just keep going." I never did find out if there were any casualties.

25:01 But we were having fun by then, you see, the war was over. It was a lovely evening and we were all probably a bit worse for wear, which we should never have been, of course, if we were sailing. Things were a bit different in those days.

Now I'd like to just go back a bit and ask you a little bit about the Battle of the Coral Sea. You

25:30 **mentioned that the Allies knew a fair bit about what the Japanese were planning. What sort of information were you getting? What was actually passed on to you?**

I of course didn't know anything. I was the lowest form of marine life, as a midshipman, but the navy were being told by the Central Intelligence Team, here in Melbourne, that there was a gather of Japanese forces

26:00 which were heading south from Rabaul. I don't think they had seen them, I think they had only intercepted wireless messages that had been decoded, because Freddy Nave, the chap who died a few years, had broken the Japanese codes. The same as in England when they broke the German code, the Enigma code. It made a tremendous difference, on each side, if you knew what the other side was doing. Like the U-Boat [Unterseeboot - German submarine] war, they

26:30 lost the final U-Boat war because we knew the U-Boat codes and they didn't know that we knew and we could hear them gathering together, but that's another story. The same thing, even as early as the Coral Sea, we were being told, our forces, or our leaders, had been told there was an imminent move south by the Japanese. And our orders were simple. Get out of Sydney as fast you can, congregate in the Coral Sea, for further orders.

27:02 We were in dry dock, but we quickly got out. Canberra was in having a few bigger repairs, she couldn't get out, so she missed the Battle of the Coral Sea. But we and (UNCLEAR) both got up there and rejoined the Lexington and Yorkdale, and we were in the right place at the right time. Had we not had that breaking of the code we wouldn't have been there. The Yanks would have probably

27:30 still been back halfway towards Pearl Harbour to replenish, and they would have got through the passage and they would have got to Port Moresby and who knows?

Could you take us through exactly what your ship was doing, step by step? And what was involved, in the Coral Sea.

The first day we were all together with the carriers. Again we knew

28:00 that the movement had started, we knew that we had about a day's grace. We all refuelled from the American tanker. We learned.... The British hadn't at that stage really learned how to refuel at sea. The Yanks had it down to a fine art, and we quickly learned it. The very first time we tried, we tried the British method, where we would steam alongside, keeping about

28:30 twenty yards out from the tanker, and we would actually put a hawser across and we would allow ourselves to be towed along by the tanker, although we would be towing alongside. Then the hoses would go across. We rapidly realised that the towing line was quite unnecessary and only confused things. If it came taut it would drag you in. So all we were doing was keeping station, very carefully. The job of the officer of the watch would always be "Up two turns,

29:00 down two turns. Steer one degree out, up two turns." And gradually getting it settled and finally we would only have to move every little while. But we all fuelled from the USS Neosho, which was the name of the big American tanker. It took all day to do the whole force. And then she was sent out of harm's way, in theory, with one destroyer to take her safely back

29:30 back down to the Spirit of Santo or somewhere. The Sims was the destroyer. When, two days later, the main battle started, the Japs came over. They missed the main fleet, the Lexington and Yorktown. Kept going, then suddenly came across the poor old Neosho, which was allegedly out of harm's way down there. They thought they had come across the carrier force, misreported her in fact as a carrier,

30:00 with a cruiser. In fact, she was a big tanker and destroyer and they sank them both. They were the first losses of the Coral Sea. The Neosho did float for about twelve hours, I think, then finally went down. The Sims was blown out of the water. So that was bad luck if ever there was. The poor old tanker, who was going out of harm's way and went right into it. Having done that, it was after we had all fuelled up to capacity, that we were sent off

30:30 to go west and cover the bottom, the exit from Jomard Passage, in the Louisiade Archipelago, and that's when we separated from the carriers. I think it might have been the next morning, then, before we finally had the attacks on the 7th of May, I think it was. It was always a difficult battle to commemorate. Because you don't know whether to commemorate the 5th, 6th, 7th or 8th of May. The 5th was actually my 19th birthday.

31:00 So I was fighting the Battle of the Coral Sea on my 19th birthday. It was a fairly quiet day for us, that day. That was the day we were refuelling. But we never rejoined the carriers that time. They went back and I never saw them. We never rejoined the carriers that time. We went back and I never saw them again. We left the ship down in Sydney and went over to England.

Apart from the main Japanese force, that first bunch

31:30 **of planes that came over, and then there were some American planes that came and fired, or dropped bombs.... Did you encounter any other planes?**

Well, one of the first things, when we were all sort of jittery and waiting, in came a single plane and we very nearly fired at it, and it came along and we recognised it as an American torpedo bomber. A Devastator [Douglas TBD Devastator was the standard USN torpedo aircraft in the years before WW2], I think they called it. And it said

32:00 "Where are the carriers?" And we said, more or less, "We don't know." I think that's what we said, or "They're somewhere to the east." And off he went. And in fact, as he went off, two minutes later in came the Japanese torpedo bombers, in at about the same level, down almost on the water, and there was a theory going around at the time that

32:30 he wasn't a genuine American plane, he was a Japanese who had come in to.... One theory was that you had the recognition signals, and if you flashed a Q at the aeroplane and he flashed back a J, they were the signals for the day and you knew he was friendly. And these were put up on large blackboards on

the back of the bridge, so all the ship's

33:00 gunners could see them. So if they saw a plane coming in flashing J or M, or whatever was the signal for the day, you knew it was one of ours. And the supposition was that perhaps it had been a Japanese that had come in and actually seen.... "Ahh, yes. The answer is J, quadrant A." And he had gone off. Because as they came in they were flashing something at us. I think they were probably

33:30 just pretending to give a friendly signal, which probably did delay our firing for a little while. So these were all the stories that were going around the ship. How much was true and how much was not. But I think it was a genuine American Devastator, I don't think it ever found its carrier and I think it ditched, so we were never able to find out the true story. But there were aeroplanes like that. There was a long-range flying boat, flying right around us, one day.

34:00 Obviously reporting us back to headquarters or the fleet, and that was Japanese Mavis, I think they called them. They all had their nicknames. The Zero was the Zeek, the Mavis was the.... The Betty [Mitsubishi G4M Betty - Japanese naval heavy bomber and long-range torpedo-aircraft] was the torpedo bomber that came in and tried to torpedo us. So there were planes around. But mainly, once we had left the main force we didn't see what we had seen many times, in the future.

34:31 They sent ninety eight aeroplanes off from the two ships. Ninety eight aeroplanes from two aircraft carriers. They fitted them in to those American carriers. The British carriers only carried about twenty or thirty, but they were sending fifty from the carrier, and still keeping their own cap overhead. The defensive fighters of their own. They were big.

35:00 **When the first group attacked, how did you defend yourselves? How much were you firing?**

Well, the eight inch, which you normally think of as a surface ship gun, we were firing.... You fire towards the plane, but you wait until the plane is at two thousand yards, then you fire your shell with

35:30 a fuse set to go off at fifteen hundred yards. So it bursts in the air, just in front of the plane, and the plane flies into it. We got a couple like that. I wasn't seeing it, of course. I was down below. But I was making sure that all the settings were correct and that the plane was coming direct towards you. There was no side setting. If it was crossing, you would say one hundred and forty knots, depending on how the angle and the inclination and all that.

36:00 But that was how you used that. The eight-inch could also, not normal for such a big gun, it could go right up to about seventy-five degrees. So we did also then fire at the high level bombers. But you had to stop when it got to a certain position. Once they were overhead, you couldn't get right up. But the four-inch guns and the pom-poms and the Bofors, they could all go right up and they could follow the plane right over. So we were

36:30 using everything that we had to the best that it could be used. And the eight-inch were actually quite effective. I didn't see the result, but I was assured that we had shot down two torpedo bombers.... I don't know whether we really did claim the high level, but that was the sort of claims going on.

Well, there was a few torpedoes fired, and as you were downstairs you would have

37:00 **been right in the firing line. Did that occur to you?**

Oh, yes it did. As I say, I swear to this day that I heard it going right past the ship. I don't think I could have, really, but it makes a good story. They were very close, obviously. We combed the tracks, that's what they called it. If the tracks are coming in like that, you've got to turn completely to them, and make sure that they will go down both sides of the ship. If you stay side on, you will get hit.

So did you have a lot of confidence in your captain?

37:31 We hated his guts, but we would have gone anywhere with him. He was chap called 'Fearless Frank' Farncomb [Rear Admiral Harold Bruce Farncomb]. I always thought he was terribly rude. I remember when I first went on board.... No, he took over a few months after I joined. Every morning in harbour he would be out tramping up and down the quarterdeck in his rubber sea boots. And I used to look at him and say,

38:00 "How could they let someone as old as that come to sea in wartime. He must be sixty or seventy." He was forty [Date of Birth, 28 Feb 1899]. But to us, seventeen-year-olds, he looked so old. And he was a rude, brusque person, but he had been at sea the whole war. He finished the whole war, never having really stepped ashore, in various ships and commands. He was a fighting captain. As I say, the whole ship's company disliked him, because

38:31 he was rude and he would push you out of the way. If you were coming down the ladder and he was coming up, you were thrown off the ladder. But we would have gone anywhere with him, because he knew his job. And he certainly did that, that particular day he saved the ship, by just throwing it around in the right direction, at the right time. Apparently. He didn't say anything that he was actually doing. Any time I was on the bridge with him,

39:00 at other times, I knew he knew his job very well. But he was one of the first two to get to the top. Collins was the other. Collins we looked on as a Women's Weekly admiral. He loved his.... rather like our

present Prime Minister, he loved getting his photos in the papers. And he had done a very good in the Mediterranean, in the Sydney, sinking the Bartolomeo Colleoni. But he wasn't a fighting admiral in our general

39:30 naval view that Farncomb was. But Collins finished up running the navy after the war, and eventually became an alcoholic, left the navy. He became a barrister. He had proved his ability like that, just before the Coral Sea, we'd had an interesting murder on board. Would you like to hear about that?

I would, but we have to change tapes.

Tape 7

00:35 **Okay, about the homicide on board the ship?**

Yes, it's rather not a war-like story, but it happened in war and suddenly.... A few weeks before the Battle of the Coral Sea, we were steaming around in the Coral Sea, blacked out as usual, and I was in the plot just behind the bridge of the Australia, and we heard screams coming from the upper deck.

01:00 Sailors don't normally scream and they were rather bloodthirsty screams, then everything seemed to happen at once. A couple of people came up and said, "So-and-so, somebody's been attacking him and we've taken him down to the sick bay." It was all in the dark, and we couldn't really work out what it was. But what had happened was, two people had attacked another one and knifed him, I think thirty seven times, and he was being pushed through the guard rails and he was

01:30 hanging on the guard rails. And enough other people came along when the screams went on to stop them pushing him out, and to get him in and get him down to the sick bay. And for about two days, we were still steaming around in the dark and every time one went up on watch, I thought, "I wonder who the murderer is?" Because the chap finally died and we all wondered what it was all about. And what it had been was actually a homosexual triangle, which was something that us

02:00 innocent midshipman didn't know anything about in those days. And one of the three decided he didn't like that any more and he said he wanted to stop and they said, "You can't do that," and he said, "If you won't let me get out of it, I'll report you." And they said, "Come on up deck and we'll talk about it." And when they got him on deck one held him and the other stabbed him, with the idea of pushing him over the side. It became a very interesting case, and this is what I like to tell people about,

02:30 particularly my lawyer friends. So we heard the screams.... One person on the bridge, who was on the signalman, who had been on the watch for two hours and had very good night vision, looked over as soon as the screams began and saw three figures. He saw two of them obviously attacking the third, and then the screams went on and gradually a little group of three people came from for'ard and then two people from aft.

03:00 He couldn't recognise anybody. That's all his evidence was. At the court martial that took place, and I listened in to it all, our captain, Captain Farncomb, prosecuted. And he said, "Right, we know that much, but we don't know who they were." Then he called the two people who had come from for'ard. Their evidence was that they had heard the screams, they had come down and there they found Stoker Elias and Leading Stoker Gordon with Stoker So-and-so,

03:30 and they said, "Somebody has been attacking our friend, let's get him out and get him down to sick bay." And they recognised the two figures. Then somebody came from aft who also recognised the two people. The combination of the person from the bridge who had seen the figures, but not recognised them, but knew that they were doing the murder, and the others who came from for'ard and recognised the other two, was enough to convict them of murder. It was a very interesting court martial, the first I had ever attended.

04:00 I listened in to it all. A chap called Trevor Ratki had come down from Darwin, he was a young lieutenant in the naval Reserve and he finished up a judge here in Victoria, a criminal lawyer, and he was brought down to defend them. And he lost against the captain, who in his spare time had been a student of law, and won the case. It was very interesting. That was just an interlude before

04:30 the Coral Sea. But I can remember walking along the upper deck, going on watch at midnight and thinking, "I wonder who the murderer is?" We didn't know for two days. And although the chap lived for two days.... He did become conscious, the doctor did say, "Who did it?" And he said, "How am I, doc?" And the doctor said, "You'll be all right. Who did it?" And he had said Gordon and Elias did it, and this wasn't accepted at

05:01 evidence because the doctor had told him he would be all right. If he had said, "You are dying," it would have been accepted as a dying deposition. But at least it came out. The captain grabbed them and he put them in the lock-up and from there all the process proceeded.

So these people were convicted?

They were convicted and sentenced to be hung and we practised all the next day hanging them from the

yardarm,

05:30 and then the Navy Office heard about it and said, "You can't do that. It's the 20th century." So they were taken back to Sydney and finally commuted to life. They got out sometime after the war.

I've heard of these stories before, on merchant ships especially, but also on navy ships, did you come across this any time before or after, in your career?

Are we talking of murder or homosexuality?

06:00 **Well, murder. I can get onto homosexuality....**

No, no. And I didn't really understand all about this homosexual business, either. There has been a certain amount in the navy since then, that I've been mixed up in as the senior officer. I've had to decide on situations. Now I think it's not exactly compulsory, but it's permitted.

For them to murder someone, it must have been a very strong stigma.

06:30 It must have been a very strong stigma, and I think it was. And the fact that the other chap was threatening to report them, to them that meant that they had to get rid of him. Whereas today, that would never have happened.

What would have happened if someone found out a sailor was homosexual, or an officer for that matter?

I don't think they would have been really court-martialled, I think they just would have been quickly thrown out of the service. And I have known officers.... There was one who was a captain of

07:00 a corvette here, just after the war, about the same time as I was captain, and he was found carrying on with his steward in his cabin one day. He was sort of sent for and he left the navy. His resignation was accepted the next day. I suppose it's not still quite right, but it's more accepted these days than it was. And if you were a bit that way inclined that way, long months at sea, you can imagine. Everyone is sexual to a

07:30 certain extent. That's why sailors like to get to port and get ashore. A wife in every port. At any rate, that was the story.

After the war....

After the war. First of all Murchison, up north that I mentioned earlier, the frigate, including about a year almost in Japan, in Japanese waters,

08:00 being part of the Occupational Force and going around to the different ports. Interesting time, getting to see the Japanese in their home country, then back to Australia. We did a certain amount of training, out of Sydney. Then I was appointed to my first command, which was a Corvette called the HMAS Latrobe, down here at Flinders Naval Depot. It was a training ship. I would load up with new recruits, or ordinary seamen, or even junior

08:31 officers and go out for a week's cruising around Bass Strait, coming around to Melbourne, going around Port Philip, back the western port. I had a year doing that, very interesting. One's first command is always very exciting. I had sort of temporary commands during the war, of the little boats I mentioned. And also for a moment or two, the motor gun boats. But this was my first proper command. A corvette. Very enjoyable.

09:02 After a year of that, very much peacetime navy, I went as an ADC to the Governor-General, who was then a chap called Mackell [William Mackell, originally a boilermaker at Eveleigh, who became Premier of New South Wales in 1941 and Governor-General of Australia in 1947], who had been a Labor politician. It was an unpopular posting, or appointment, but once he got there he did a very good job, I think. He had been there a year when I got there, and the services had given him, I think, rather

09:30 bad officers. Partly because they thought he shouldn't be the Governor-General, "We'll send him so-and-so." And they'd all left by the time I got there. They'd either resigned from the job or been sacked by him. So I hinted in a rather sort of feeling, and it took us both, I think, a couple of months to understand one another and for him to accept him. There was also an air force ADC

10:00 and an army ADC. And one day he sent for the air force ADC, and he came out white-faced of the Governor-General's office and he said, "I've been sacked. And he wants to see you," to the army aide. So the army aide goes in, he comes out and says "I've been sacked, too. And he wants to see you, too, Dacre." So Dacre goes in all trembling, and Mackell says "Dacre, I've just got rid of so and so, and so and so. I don't think they've been doing their job, I don't think they've been loyal to me.

10:30 I want you to do the job alone from now on. Is that all right?" So I had an interesting six months in my time there. I was the only aide. We took him all around Australia. Fascinating trips by old fashioned aeroplanes, the DC4s we had then, up to Darwin and right down to the centre, by road. And generally a very interesting time being an aide to the Governor-General. And then I virtually

11:00 asked the navy.... Mackell wanted me to stay on for two years, and I said, "I think I want to get back."

And the navy said the same, "We want him back in the navy." And they appointed me to a nice, fairly modern destroyer called the HMAS Battan, and I went up in her as the second in command. Did one tour of Japan, came back, changed the captain and I was still the first lieutenant. We went on up.

- 11:30 We were in Hong Kong, where I had seen my brother there. He had been in China as a diplomat. We sailed from Hong Kong, and that very day the Korean War broke out. So we were in the Korean War two or three days after it began. We went straight in and we were escorting troops across from Japan to Pusan, in the southern end of Korea. And that began the Korean War for us.
- 12:00 And the first six months of the Korean War for the navy, particularly, and the army.... That's when the North Koreans pushed the South Koreans, right down, almost into Pusan. We were operating on the west coast, which at first was friendly country, and then was suddenly enemy country as they pushed their way down. We had some interesting engagements with shore batteries, which the North Koreans were setting up. And they were sending junks down ahead....
- 12:30 They didn't have much navy. They were sending were sending junks down and we were going inshore trying to stop the junks and find ourselves being taken on by shore batteries. So it was quite an interesting time. Then we did the landing in Inch'on, which was a brilliant move by [General] MacArthur, to land well behind the enemy lines. He was still in danger of being pushed out of the bottom of South Korean, at Pusan, he bravely
- 13:00 took this decision to go into Inch'on and that really changed the course of the war. By that time, more and more soldiers were getting into the country, they had very few to being with. They had hoped to win it in the first place, just by the air. I think that the air was unable to do much. And they gradually pushed back over the border, went on pushing, if you remember the story, right up towards the Chinese border. And that's really where he made his mistake, because that, finally, prompted the Chinese
- 13:30 to come in. So they came in over the border at the Yalu River, and they pushed everybody back again to the original line. Then it became a sort of a stalemate for another two years, before the Korean War finally finished. I just had those very interesting first six months, when we were doing landings, bombardments. I re-reading my letters home, only yesterday. And I note with interest, we never met very many
- 14:00 air attacks in the navy. I think I only saw one plane in the distance once, attacking another destroyer. We never saw a submarine. But I re-read there, that in August, '50, that we spent an hour attacking a submarine, which got away. I said in my letter, "Of course, we know the North Koreans haven't got any submarines. And I'm sure that the Russians wouldn't have a submarine here. Or if so they would tell us
- 14:30 it was here." In other words, I was being sarcastic. And it was obviously, I think, a Russian submarine that got in the way. We might have even got it, I don't know, but they wouldn't have dared admit it, because they would have been in the war. So that was my Korean War.

You were involved in the Inch'on landings support?

Again, that was a fairly dull one as I mentioned earlier, because we weren't in bombarding. We were escorting the carrier, that

- 15:00 was sending planes in to cover the landing. Our most exciting thing, I think, was later, when the Chinese had come in and they were pushing down through North Korea, and a lot of our troops were caught at a place called Chinampo, which is the port up the Chinampo River [estuary] from the sea, quite a long way, but it is still the port for the North Korean capital. Pyongyang.
- 15:30 Yes, Chinampo was the place. And we were suddenly dragged in from patrol and told, "Get up the river to cover the evacuation of all the army by sea." And we got up there and there were two or three merchant ships that had got there, and they were being filled with the army. And we could see the gunfire as the Chinese advanced towards us, over the hills and hear the noise. And finally, just on sunset,
- 16:00 the last of the ships slipped and went down river, and we were told, right, smash the port to bits before we leave. We had what I can only describe it as great fun, really. Point blank range, with all our four-inch guns, our pom-poms, even our machine guns, firing at the port to destroy it, before the Chinese got into it. And it had been a fairly risky trip up river. Two ships had failed to get up.
- 16:30 Our sister ship HMAS Warramunga, and one of the Canadian destroyers had got tied up with the mooring of a mine. The mine fortunately, didn't go off, but it got tied up. So only four of us got up, and that was described by O'Neill [Robert J. O'Neill, Australia in the Korean War 1950-53, [vol. 1. Strategy and diplomacy, vol. 2. Combat operations], who wrote the official history of the Korean War, as the most dangerous naval incident of the war. So that
- 17:00 was quite something to have been in.

Apart from that, did you ever actually go on land, go ashore?

No, no I didn't. The number two lieutenant landed once or twice on islands, with a landing party. I went off once or twice in boats to help destroy mines. I'd tie explosives to the mine, then back off and set them off.

17:30 Because at low tide the mines were showing, the water mines. At low tide they showed, so we thought the best way to get rid of them was to blow them up. So I was sent away to do that once or twice by my captain. But normally I stayed on board and sent somebody else to do things.

What did you find life was like at sea in Korea?

When we got there, of course, it was high summer. Very warm, tropical. We were a ship built for the Tropics, in Australia. And we were very comfortable.

18:03 We weren't air-conditioned in those days, but we had lots of fans and scuttles, which you could open in breeze time and it was very pleasant. And then as winter set in, it was bitterly cold. None of us had ever experience weather like that. We were pushing the ship through flow-ice, in the sea. The sea-water won't normally freeze at all, it's just the ice that flows down the rivers.

18:31 I had to have all my sailors chipping the ice of the super-structure, to stop it making us top heavy and making us turn over. If you touched any metal on the upper deck, your skin would stay behind on the metal, the temperature was so low. When we were waiting for the Chinampo evacuation that day, things got a bit tense. We could hear the Chinese coming, we were still not being able to do anything.

19:00 We were sitting there with an anchor ready to slip, and the sailors were getting a bit edgy. And my captain and suddenly said to me "Number one, paint ship." I said, "Sir? We're at action stations." He said, "Make sure they keep to where they are, around their own guns, in the super-structure, but to get their minds off worrying, give them something to do." So I said, "All hands, go down and get paint pots from the paint shop. Up on deck. Paint your own guns and the super structure."

19:30 So this all was done, and it had a lovely coat of paint, and we were looking a bit rusty by then. We had been operating for some months, and this was fine. We did our bombardment and we got off down river safely. And about three weeks later we were off Inch'on, the port to the south of the Seoul, the capital. And expecting to do the same thing, and it was a bit tricky. It was actually Christmas Day by then, and Christmas Day we were expecting

20:00 something to happen. I was on the bridge all day. But down below they were having their plum pudding and everything. And suddenly, to my horror.... It was a lovely sunny day, all my ship seemed to be falling to bits. The paint was falling off the gun turrets and off the super structure. I couldn't work out what was happening. Finally I realised. When we had painted ship the temperature had been about minus twenty.

20:30 There was a thin layer of ice. Dry ice, because of the temperature, on all of the gun and the super structure. And we painted over that. Finally, three weeks later, the temperature had risen to zero and all the paint was dropping off in flakes, in strips of paint. So that was an interesting example of what the weather was like in Korea, during the winter. And the army ashore, of course, was having it tougher than us. A ship can be colder than a dug-out,

21:00 but at least we were in a ship. You didn't have any heating or anything. You had no cold weather clothing, at first. We had to borrow that, or pinch it. So it was an interesting time, Korea.

The North Koreans, what sort of techniques would they use to try and attack ships? Did you face any of those?

Just purely these shore batteries that they had set up very quickly and they would move them very quickly, once we started firing at them, they would sort of disappear.

21:30 And on one occasion at the Yalu River on the west coast, they obviously disappeared went down the back of the hill, then suddenly they were firing at us from another headland. At about that time a cruiser came in to help us, and they blew their battery to bits. But they were obviously not fixed. Well, they couldn't have been. They had only been occupying South Korea for a week or so, so they couldn't have set up concrete ones. But they were very efficient. They straddled us straight away.

22:00 The captain had backed in. We were going in looking at a couple of junks that we wanted to board. And we backed in, so he must have had a premonition that he might have to get out in a hurry. And as soon as they started firing at us, we started firing back. And he said, "Full ahead." Something went wrong down in the engine room, and there was a puff of smoke, and we stopped dead in the water. And we were being straddled with shells landing short and over.

22:30 But again, they didn't hit us. I had a charmed life right through my navy. And the engine room quickly sorted out what it was, and within a couple of minutes, as the cruiser came in to take over from us, we were doing about twenty knots heading out, leaving them to it. Because they were quite big guns they had ashore, obviously.

At the time, did you see the Korean War as a futile exercise?

Oh no. We thought it was the beginning of World War 111, almost.

23:00 My letters I wrote to my mother at the time, I was being quite sort of philosophical about it all.... I thought Russia would come in. I didn't think of China so much, but I knew the Russians were behind the North Koreans, obviously. And I thought they would come in and I thought it had the makings of World

War 111. And that shows up in the letters that I wrote home at the time. In fact it was China who came in.

23:31 And if MacArthur had been allowed to go over the Yalu River in China, which he wanted to do, we would have supported him. Because at one stage we were being shelled from the Chinese side of the Yalu River, but we weren't allowed to shoot back, because that was Chinese territory, we were only allowed to shoot at North Korea. So we were all for it, but I think if we had gone over it would have turned into a much bigger war, it could well have been. But now it's the

24:00 forgotten war, as you suggest by your question. But at the time it had all the makings of what could have turned into a war with Russia. After all, Russia had been on our side during World War 11. And all the Cold War had been fear of Russia, and that could have been what triggered it.

When did you start to take note of Communism?

Certainly not during the war, not during World War 11, because they were on our side

24:30 and we were losing good ships on the Arctic convoys, trying to get help to the Russians. I don't think we ever really trusted the Russians, from what we heard about them, they didn't seem to be a terribly nice people to fight alongside, yet along against. But Communism, because they were on our side against Fascism.... Fascism and Nazism were the two things, then. So it gradually became apparent, I suppose....

25:01 Certainly by 1950, and that's five years after World War 11 had ended, that the Communist threat was the main thing. And North Korea proved it, by suddenly invading South Korea. Then as we sailed south I remember, I think I said something in one of my letters, we were going down past Vietnam and that's probably where the next one will be. Again,

25:31 the powers that be after the war, split these countries in two. North Korea and South Korea, with an arbitrary line through the middle. North Vietnam, South Vietnam. Germany, one Germany, two Germany. No way to really do your diplomatic sorting out after the war. It could have led to World War 111 eventually. Touch wood, it hasn't. But one certainly became more and more aware of Communism as being the then threat.

26:00 And I never believed what's happened in the last ten years.... Except for North Korea, they are the only ones really left. China, although still in theory very Communist, they are becoming very democratic now. And good friends, we're meant to be friends with them. North Korea is still rather a wild boar.

Did you know much about Communism before the Second World War?

My brother again,

26:30 being the bright one of the family, had studied the political science at school, very much. He had even written to Mussolini and Hitler, and each had sent him a book. What Is Fascism And Why? And My Struggle by Adolph Hitler. He was very interested in the Spanish Civil war, which I didn't really understand at the time.

27:00 He was much more aware of what was going in the world, and that sort of thing, and he made a very good diplomat after the war, except that he was killed not long after.... Just after I had been up in Korea, he was drowned trying to save a mate in Formosa on his way back here. So I was one of the typically ignorant people who said, "Well, Communism is bad," and left it at that. Whereas he really studied it pre-war.

27:30 I didn't know whether it was better or worse than Nazism at that stage. You just knew that there were baddies around, on the other side of the world. And they were revelling in the fact that Australia was well away from it all. Then we were embroiled to a certain extent. But we've still been lucky right through, haven't we?

So you were in BCOF before the Korean war?

Oh yes. We did two trips.

28:00 One in the Murchison and one in the Battan, there.

Tell us about your BCOF tour. What sort of activities....

Well again, we had quite a pleasant peacetime sort of tour. A ship in port is always known as showing the flag, and we were based on Kure, where all the Australians were. So when we were there.... I had friends in the army, I'd go off with them,

28:30 and perhaps they'd come to sea for a short trip with us. One always liked having army people on board. I will digress for a moment and say on the way up to the Korean war, a chap called John Althorp was a friend of mine. He had been ADC to the Governor of South Australia, when I was ADC to the Governor-General. And he said he wanted to work his way back to England. And I said I will give you a trip up to Japan.

29:00 My captain agreed so we took him with us and we used him as our landing officer, up in the north west

islands. That's where they're always picking up boat people now. And he would dress up as a soldier and go ashore. Finally when the war broke out, we landed in Okinawa and we said, "You're on your own from here, chum." And he somehow got a trip back to the States and he arrived back in England where he became equerry to the King. And he was the chap who when he got married invited us to the wedding, we didn't go.

29:30 But his daughter was one Diana, who married the Prince of Wales. That was John Althorp, and I can remember seeing him at the wedding. He had a stroke by then, poor chap. But I remember him as a dashing young guard's officer, out here as ADC to the governors. So we used to carry people around like that. Then we would go up to Tokyo, up to Yokohama, Yokosuka, round to Sasebo, and show the flag, but when we were

30:00 there, we didn't really talk to the Japanese very much. We would go to their geisha houses, just to see what went on, and drink local sake and stuff. But most of our entertainment in port would be with the other ships. An American team of officers would come across and they were all happy to come to us and drink our gin and that sort of thing. So the navy has a very different life to the army.

30:31 They were all right ashore with the Japs. They had to deal with them everyday. We were really just our own little cocoon, in our ship, doing our job.

Did you visit any of the devastation scenes....

We were in Kure, which is only about thirty miles to Hiroshima. In the Murchison, as soon as we got there, the captain said, "I think I want to take my ship up to

31:00 Hiroshima." And no other ship had dared do it, because the channel was a bit winding and difficult and we thought it was probably mined. But we said, "All right, let's take the risk." So we slipped from Kure and went up to Hiroshima. The captain and I made sure that everyone of our sailors went ashore and wandered around and had a look at what Hiroshima was really like. And it was frightening, the devastation. I had seen London.

31:31 I had seen Tokyo. It was so much more, and so much bigger. And every sailor wandered around. We didn't know then there was any danger from the after effects, which we probably endangered our sailors lives. But I think that they all survived. I, for instance, picked up a bottle that had melted in the blast and fallen over and then solidified and it was a nice little souvenir.

32:00 I had it sitting in my cabin for a month or so, and then somebody stole it. I hope they're suffering from radiation poisoning. I'm not. Perhaps if I had kept it I would be by now. But yes, we were the first and only ship that I know dared go up. We did get through the minefields and we landed there. They all got that education at the back of their mind now.

Did you think it was necessary to drop the atomic bomb?

I think as we had it

32:30 that it was a good thing that we did. Because the millions we would have lost on both sides, if we had to invade Japan. Japan was a very.... They would fight to the last man. And they were still willing to fight after that. It was the Emperor, I gather, who really said, "Look, this is the end. If they can do that with two bombs, what more are they going to do with us?" They didn't have any more bombs ready, but he wouldn't have known. But

33:01 the Japs.... They had shown it in all the other landings, that they would fight to the last man. And in our kamikaze outlook. So I thought it was a good thing. I'm delighted we've never used one since. But for people to blame America now for dropping the atomic bomb, I think they forget what the alternative would have been. And we were just getting ready for it you know. We were just beginning to get the sort of preliminary orders

33:30 of where we might land and so forth. The sort of carnage that would have resulted.... Bad luck on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but they did bring the war to a close.

Throughout the war, did you see yourself fighting for Empire?

Well, we certainly started that way. We were still very much the British Empire. My father, my upbringing

34:00 of my father having been in the British Army and Empire, and King and Country. The pride with which he had been given his Victoria Cross by Queen Victoria at Osborne [House] in Isle of Wight, and how he had then got his knighthood from the King, King George the V. Empire. And so I, and I think all the rest of the Australians at that stage were fighting for the Empire. The way [Australian Prime Minister] Menzies at the beginning of World War 11 sort of said, "Britain is at war, so of course we are at war, too."

34:30 And we didn't really question it then. Perhaps we should have, but I think we would have been brought in later anyhow. It seemed right and proper. We immediately put all our navy.... Well, before the Japs came in, all our navy were over in the Mediterranean, or where we were in the Indian Ocean, fighting for Britain really, and leaving Australia alone. But then when the Japs came in, our [Australian] Prime Minister Curtin said, "Hoi! I want that division back and I want

- 35:00 the ships back and we had to defend ourselves. But it was the Empire really. Such as it had been built up.... My father had been an Empire builder in India and the north-west frontier in 1890, that was his first action. It's a hundred and fourteen years ago. Then Africa and everywhere. It was the Empire then. The greatest Empire that the world had known, really.
- 35:30 Now it's poor little England again, and Australia trying to be independent and a bit different.
- Did you see yourself as an Englishman during the war?**
- No, I was firmly Australian. I got accused of being English, because apparently I still speak English like. But that was because I was brought up by English parents. But no, I came out. I can't remember England then. I went there later during the war. I came out at the age of one and I was an Aussie,
- 36:00 and proud of it. You can always find out if a person is really English or Australian by finding out who they barrack for in the test match. It was always Australia, even when England was beating us.
- Just a few questions regarding World War 11. Did you see any signs of division on sectarian lines**
- 36:31 **in your service with the RAN or the Royal navy?**
- Sectarian? You're talking religion? No, we had very few ethnics. We had one or two Torres Strait Islanders, occasionally. They were very good sailors. But I think we had them after the war, I don't think we had them during the war. Religion? Most people
- 37:00 were allegedly Protestant or Church of England. Whenever we had our church parades on a Sunday in harbour, they used to say, "Fall out the Roman Catholics." And a lot of people would fall out, some of them whom I suspected were not Roman Catholics, but they just wanted to get away from saying prayers. There were only about two Jews that I knew of on board, who were nice people. I can't remember any... besides the funniness of saying, "Oh, you're a bloody Catholic. You got out of it again." But nothing more than that.
- 37:31 I'm interested that you asked that. Colin [interviewer] asked something similar, earlier. He was asking whether my parents were religious or anything. Religion has somehow never worried me. But now.... I've always said that I think the final battle that will ruin this world will be religion, rather than race. Race you can get along with, but sometimes.... Look at Northern Ireland; they're the same race,
- 38:00 but they just can't sort themselves out between Catholics and Protestant. Look at all the Muslim world... But these people who are fighting the wars that are going on now, they are all absolutely fanatical.
- 38:31 And that is my fear and it's been proved. I've been saying this for years and in the last couple of years it has been proved more than ever. But no, I never struck anything in our service. When I had my last command, which was a big fleet tanker called the HMAS Supply, which I vaguely had in the Vietnam War. We sailed for a trip up north, and a very nice Catholic padre in the navy, called Tiger Lyons,
- 39:00 who is still around, he came with me. We don't normally have a padre on board, but he said he would like to do a trip up north. And the very first Sunday I said, "Let's have a sort of combined service, up on the flag deck." And he said, "What will we do?" And I said, "I will say a few words to the boys and then I'll say the Lord's Prayer and then you will say something and we will
- 39:31 pray and pray about." And he said, "Fine." And I got up and I said, "Well, we are going to be away for about six months. We've got a padre, my old friend Tiger here. About every three weeks, if it's convenient, I will probably call you together on a Sunday here, so we can all say something to the Good Lord and say, 'I hope that the folks back are safe, and that we're safe,' but I don't want to make it compulsory. So anyone who doesn't want to do that
- 40:00 in future, they can fall out now." And not one moved. And we had our combined prayer.... We had our little service every few weeks or so. And he was a great fellow to have on board, because he was a help down on the mess decks, when fellows had particular problems. And that personified the navy as I've known it
- 40:30 right through my life.

We'll have to pause again.

Tape 8

- 00:37 **Okay, tell us about the Walrus [sea plane]?**

The Walrus was a rather peculiar looking aeroplane that most cruisers had in the early part of the war, as a sort of reconnaissance or spotting plane. It was an amphibian, it could land on water or land. It had two wings and a pushing engine.

- 01:01 And when the first Americans saw it when they came into the war, one of them is reported as having said, "Gawd, Orville Wright himself." Because it looked so ancient. At any rate, we use to catapult ours off, to do various reconnaissance jobs and then when landing, because we were just a cruiser, it had to land in the water, alongside the ship. The ship would often turn across the wind and make what they called a slick in the water so they could land safely.
- 01:30 Then it would taxi up and be hoisted on board with one of the cranes. Normally the port side. Whenever we were operating it, we would man one of the whalers, one of the rowing boats, as a crash boat in case something happened. Sure enough one day, three or four weeks I think it was before the Coral Sea Battle, we were operating in the Coral Sea and our aircraft came in, after doing a reconnaissance flight, of no
- 02:00 great consequence, the flight. I don't remember what it was. And it landed and there had been a bit more swell than normal, and it had bounced off the swell, even though we had made a slick by turning to port, and it crashed into the stern of the ship, folded up in flames with the engines crashing down on the cockpit, and very quickly went down. I was the midshipman in charge of the whaler, the crash boat. So we quickly lowered ourselves, trying to remember all the things that one should do.
- 02:30 When you were lowered in you had a boat rope which was still towing you along, once you've been slipped and dropped in, and finally you let go of the tow rope. And up until then your tiller has been tied over with a piece of spungen [?] to keep the boat turning away from the ship, and the one thing I couldn't do was break the spungen, so I said to somebody, "Cut it!" And they made a swipe with their knife and cut the end of my thumb off. The second swipe they cut the spungen all right
- 03:01 and we got away and we went back to where the Walrus had gone down. An American ship had launched their gasoline gig astern of us, and they got their first, and they picked up the observer and the air gunner, and transferred them to me. The pilot had gone down with the plane, unfortunately. Anyway we went back on board, we were hoisted
- 03:30 on board. They both had a couple of broken limbs so they weren't too well off. And there we were without an aeroplane. We were in Noumea, about a week later, and they had arranged, obviously at headquarters, for a new Walrus to be flown out from Sydney. And it came flapping over the horizon, looking rather like a duck, or something. In those days, we didn't have a Fleet Air Arm. Our pilots were all air force. And the observer
- 04:00 was actually a chap on loan from the Royal Navy, who did have a Fleet Air Arm. So there we were in harbour, and being hoisted on board was the new Walrus. I was leaning on the gunnel, looking over the side. The chap at the guard rail beside me, I said to him, "I can't see an observer, there's just a pilot. I wonder who the new observer will be." And at that stage someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Smyth, Captain wants to see you." So I doubled up to
- 04:30 quarter deck and he said, "We've just been told we won't have a new observer for about three weeks. You are the new observer until then." "Aye aye, sir," I said and went away, with my tail between my legs and wondered what on earth I had to do. The observer in a naval aircraft is always the captain of the aircraft. In the air force the pilot is the captain. But because navigation was so important,
- 05:00 when you were squirted off a ship and the ship moves around while you were away, you need somebody really on the ball. So I did a few trips. We were catapulted off and I would have to work out where we were, and we would go off looking for any Japanese ships or aircraft around, then we would go back. And one day we came back to where the ship was meant to be and no ship. Because there had been a air-raid alarm while we were away. And of course with wireless silence the ship couldn't tell us. I thought 'Oh my God, we've had it.'
- 05:30 The Americans had recently lost two of their similar sort of aircraft. They were more of a flying sea plane, rather than a flying boat. But they had lost them for the same reason, because they had moved away. I looked around the horizon and thank God I saw a little patch in the distance, and it turned out to be the Aussie. The job of the poor old observer as we landed alongside was always to climb up onto the upper wing, with the engine still rotating about two feet away behind you.
- 06:02 This pusher engine. And my job was to grab the hook when it came down from the crane, hook it onto this sling which was built into the upper wing, then get off to one side quickly while they hoisted us out of the water. I'm glad I only had to do that about three times before the proper observer arrived and I was able to hand over to him. But I've always been able to tell the Fleet Air Arm people in the navy, "We didn't start our Fleet Air Arm until 1947-48."
- 06:30 That I was in the Fleet Air Arm, in a rather half-hearted way, long before them. And when I tell them I was an observer on a Walrus, they say, "Gee, did you really fly those things?" Later on, after the war, I went to England and found myself on exchange duty in 1959-60, running an air station in Scotland, much to my surprise. As the executive
- 07:00 officer I decided it was time I learnt to fly properly, and I learnt to fly from our Commander Air, flying supersonic jets, Sea Vixens they were at the time. I never actually soloed, because we had a nasty prang, killing one of our chief test pilots, and my wife said, "I've been watching you take off every day. You don't really have to, do you?" And I said, "All right, I don't have to." So I didn't solo. But again when

I came home my Fleet Air Arm pilots were saying "Oh,

07:30 we've really modernised over here now. We've got Sea Hornets and Sea Venoms and things." And I said, "I've been joining the Bangers Club." "You've been through the sound barrier?" they said. "Yes," I said. "Many times in the Sea Vixen." "Oh, really?" they said. So I am still an honorary member of the Fleet Air Arm Association in Australia.

08:01 **You also commanded a corvette for a while?**

The corvette was my first command, I mentioned that earlier, in 1947, before I went off as ADC to the Governor-General. But after the Korean war.... I was brought back after six months, from Hong Kong, to take over the running of the entry of 15 year old cadets at the Naval College.

08:31 I spent about two years there. Interesting job, being a schoolmaster, really. And teaching them all the young new cadets needed to know. That took me through to...I got married during that time to my wife, who I'd met. Her father had been navy,

09:00 way back before she was born. But so she had that acceptance of the fact that the navy was a pretty peculiar life to marry into. But she always followed me everywhere I went, from then on. The first place we went after that, I went off to sea again, and she moved into a little flat in Melbourne. I went back to the Australia for the third time. By then, she was pretty old. 1953....

09:30 She had been launched in '28, so that's twenty five years. I spent about six months in her, by then I was a lieutenant commander and from there I was appointed to command a frigate. The HMAS Hawkesbury. And that was a very good job. I loved doing that. I spent a lot of time up around New Guinea as the only ship up in New Guinea waters, which was still Australian territory then, showing the flag, in all sorts of places. I think I went to 67 different ports or harbours.

10:00 Some of them completely uncharted. Some of them hadn't seen a white man since the war. Some hadn't even seen a white man. So I had great time learning a bit of pidgin English and showing the flag, and every time I left a port or harbour I would open fire with all my guns to frighten the natives and impress them with how important we were. And I had a lot of fun. Every now and then the fleet would come up and have an exercise and I would have to join in, but mostly it was a very nice independent time

10:31 in the Hawkesbury. Of interest, only three years ago, somebody at navy office had remembered that I had been the last captain of the Hawkesbury, because she paid off, as I left her. And that was fifty years before. They had remembered that I had been the last captain fifty years earlier. And they asked my wife to launch the new Hawkesbury, which is one of the new mine hunters built in Newcastle, two or three years ago. And she was both the launching lady

11:00 and the commissioning lady of the ship, and the ship's been in Port Phillip a couple of times since. And one day the captain took us out and said to my wife, "Madam, it's your ship. There's the captain's chair, it's yours for the day." So she sat there, grinning and saying, "Hard to starboard," and, "Open fire," but not actually doing so. So that was rather fun that we had been carried on in perpetuity... At any rate, the Hawkesbury was great fun. I left her in

11:30 '54, went in to do a shore job.... The first real shore job apart from the college. I was the operations officer of the Fleet Headquarters in Sydney, for a couple of years. Then I came down in '56 to Melbourne, where the navy office still was in those days. I was a director at the navy office. A rather obscure title, I was Director of Training and Staff Requirements. I never quite found out what I was meant to do, but I did lots of things. Including being

12:00 the naval liaison officer for the Olympic Games, and the naval liaison officer for Prince Phillip's visit to open the games. The Queen didn't come. He opened it, so I was on board with him on the Britannia quite a bit. So that was quite fun. And the navy, for those games, provided all the ushers in the various venues. The fleet was in so we borrowed a lot of sailors from them, a lot from Flinders Naval Depot, and being the

12:30 naval liaison for the games, it was up to me to make sure they were doing their job well. So well in advance I went through the program and picked the eyes out of it and said, "I want two tickets for that, and two tickets for this and two tickets for the opening and two tickets for the mile.... ." And I had the absolute pick. My wife couldn't come to all of them because she had a new baby, but I had the absolute pick of the games, and as the liaison officer had probably the best time of anybody in Melbourne at the time.

13:00 I finished that, went over to do a course in America, taking my family with me. Norfolk, Virginia [USA]. A staff course, mainly American, but they had a few overseas people like us. Quite fun. Because my family were with me, and they were only with me because I was going on afterwards for exchange in the UK. Because they were with me we were able to rent a house and live the American way of life. Had I been alone I would have been

13:30 living in bachelor officer quarters [BOQ] and I wouldn't have got that nice feel for the American way of life. Which we thoroughly enjoyed. The people in our street were nearly all service-minded, or knew the area well, and they were all very nice to us. Our opinion of the Yanks, who we had always liked, went up quite a lot. And I was proud to be able to boast that I was a member of the first family of Virginia.

Because we claim in the family that Captain John Smith who founded Virginia,

- 14:00 and had an affair with Pocahontas, the Red Indian princess, he was my great-great-great-great grandfather, so we were accepted by the Americans even more. From there we went on to England, where to my surprise they said, "We want you to go to...." "I didn't know what my job would be, I thought it would probably be a shore job, and they said, "Yes, you're going to be the second in command and the executive officer of an air station in Scotland,
- 14:30 at a place called Abbotsinch . I couldn't even find Abbotsinch on the maps. Finally we found it. It was just outside Glasgow, on the west coast of Scotland. Got there in mid-winter, didn't really see where we were for about a month, because it was thick fog. About the first time it looked like being suitable weather to operate aircraft, we hadn't for the first week or so, someone rang up about seven in the morning or so
- 15:00 and in a very broad Scottish brogue said, "Och, what do we do? Wegunsnowaway?" And I said, "We've got what?" And I finally realised that he was saying "We've got snow on the runway." Well I had never seen snow, really, and I knew nothing about runaways or aeroplanes, so I said, "Well, sweep it off." So away they went and they obviously said, "The new commander, he says to sweep it off. He must mean those new street sweeping machines we've just
- 15:30 been given for use in the summer for getting the grit off the runaways. Don't think they'll work with snow, but he says so, we better do it." Fortunately for me the snow was still very dry and granular and lying very thin, and they brought out the street sweepers and it worked. So by the time I got to my office at nine o'clock in the morning, having only been there about a week, they were all saying "That new commander, he knows what he's doing." To this day I really don't know what I should have said.
- 16:00 One thing I shouldn't have said was to sweep it off. I think they should have scraped it with scrapers or something. Anyway, that was the introduction to Naval Air Station. And it was a testing station, really. It was getting the new aeroplanes from the factories, test flying them and turning them into war planes by fitting them with all the nasty things like guns and bomb racks and things. The very latest fighter bomber Sea Vixen was coming in just as I got there, and that's
- 16:30 what I did quite a lot of flying, with my friendly Commander Air, who was quite willing to teach me to fly in one of the smaller aeroplanes. I had a very pleasant time there with the Scots. The Scots were very accommodating and hospitable to us. They didn't really like the English. The English tended to stay on the airfield and say, "We're the English, running an English air field in Scotland." Whereas we got outside and met all sorts of nice Scots and had a lovely time. It was an interesting
- 17:00 comparison off the feeling between the Scots and the Saxon action down below. We finished that job, it would have taken me...Yes, up until then.... They done a terrible thing to the navy a few years earlier where they had decided that all senior officers, because there was so few jobs at sea, would be divided into sea-going and non-sea going lists. And when they promoted me to commander, which had happened quite early,
- 17:30 and I had had my two commands, they said, "You are on what we've nicknamed 'The Dry List' as opposed to the 'Wet List'." I said, "Do you mean I'll never go to sea again?" And they said, "I'm sorry." And one or two of my friends, including David Hamer, resigned on the spot when they did that to him. I said, "Well, no, I might as well stick it out. I still like the navy." And I accepted the fact that I never did get a destroyer command, during those years. But as I was coming back from Scotland, the Chief of
- 18:00 Navy wrote to me and said, "We've decided to do away with the two lists and to re-immerser you, Dacre, I'm giving you command of the Supply." And the Supply was the big fleet tanker, that I later took up off Vietnam. It was the biggest ship in the navy. Bigger than the aircraft carriers Melbourne or Sydney, and it was a nice challenge. It only had a single screw, and it varied in its draught and windage
- 18:31 because if you were full of fuel you were carrying sixteen thousand tons of fuel, and if you were empty, you were flying along like a kite, above the water. So the ship handling was a nice challenge, which I enjoyed. I enjoy driving ships and trying to get them safely alongside, and so forth. And they have in the navy a thing called the Gloucester Cup, which the Duke of Gloucester presented when he was Governor-General back in 1946. And that is given each year to the most efficient
- 19:00 ship in the navy, and it was always being given to the latest destroyer or the aircraft carrier or one of the fighting frigates, and finally, the second year I was commanding the Supply, they gave me the Gloucester Cup. They never thought it would be given to a tanker. A fleet oiler. So I was able to boast that I was not only the captain of the biggest ship in the navy, but also the best ship in the navy. And that was my last command and
- 19:30 it was a lovely way to finish. I had actually left the ship, gone on leave in Canberra where my family was living, and a week after I left, my former second in command, the commander, dropped in and said, "What's it like having been captain of the best ship in the navy?" I said, "What are you talking about?" "He said it is the best ship. But they've really made it official now, sir." So we opened a bottle of champagne and celebrated. After that I was in shore jobs more
- 20:00 and more, both in Canberra, and down here. I had three years as the NOIC [Naval Officer in Charge] of Victoria, went back to Canberra for two years, as sort of head of the personnel world in the navy, or nearly the head, hoping to be made an admiral, but I think I insulted one or two admirals, so they never

made me better than commodore. I came back here for another three years as the commodore and finally retired twenty five years ago now and stayed put.

- 20:30 We'd lived in twenty five different houses during our time in the navy, in twenty five years. Which is not bad going. Here we've stayed for twenty eight years now. My wife keeps saying, "Aren't we due for a posting soon?" I said, "No, we're no longer in the navy, we can stay here now." But that finishes my life story, more or less.

So tell us a bit more about commanding the Supply in Vietnam?

Well, I claim rather naughtily to have been in the Vietnam War. But

- 21:00 we didn't get even within sight of Vietnam. We were operating, briefly, once or twice out of the Philippines. We were fuelling the destroyer, the Brisbane I think was the one that was there, at the particular time we were there. She had come back out of the firing line, in the South China Sea, and we refuelled her. The Sydney was running troops up and down. She ceased to be an aircraft carrier then.
- 21:30 She was a troop ship and supply ship. And we would meet her either up there, or once or twice I met in New Guinea waters to fuel her on the way. That was my job, it was fairly dull, but great fun. When we were in big Fleet exercises, you would have perhaps in three weeks, you would have had two occasions of fuelling ships, and providing things to them. Minimum stores, not ammunition. The modern ones have ammunition, too,
- 22:00 we didn't. We were mainly fuel, water, stores, mail and every time we had to keep a steady course, and a ship would come alongside us, unless it was a bigger tanker that we would sometimes fill up from. An American or British tanker. A lot of very good seamanship. You had to be right on the ball for the other ship and you to be stationary while you sent the hoses across, which were in great hanging loops.
- 22:31 So if you did move out, you still didn't part the hose. Once or twice you did part hoses in heavy seas, and it made an awful mess of both the destroyer and us. Black fuel oil being sprayed everywhere. That was one of the risks you took. No, it was great fun. A big ship, for ship handling. The small ship's company, not quite two hundred men, frigate size, and that's what I liked because you knew everyone by
- 23:00 the end of your time in the ship. If you were in an aircraft carrier with a thousand men, you couldn't possibly get to know them all. You were a captain hidden away up on the bridge. But with a small ship, or a ship with a small ship's company, you got to know them all and I like to think they got to know me and I had great fun.

Did you go ashore in Vietnam at all?

No. We didn't actually go in. Sydney would go in, and we would stay out. She had to go through all the processes

- 23:30 of manning the upper deck with guns and sending divers down to make sure that nobody was attacking her. There never was, but they had a lot of security problems, in case the Viet Cong were sending down underwater demolition experts and things like that. We did never did that. My only medal from Vietnam is the Vietnam Logistics Support medal, because that was what we did. It also went to various army
- 24:00 people who didn't get into the front line.

So how long were you at sea for during that war?

Well, we weren't off Vietnam very much, at all. The main one I'm thinking of.... You remember the two Melbourne collisions. One of them.... I somehow slipped the two years I had in command of the Naval College, '64-65, at Jervis Bay. I got there at very short notice early in 1964.

- 24:31 And a week later the first Melbourne collision took place, on my doorstep. The Voyager was sunk, with the loss of 82 people. I was the Naval Officer in Charge of Jervis Bay, so I had a lot of things to do that night and thereafter. And then later on, in the Supply back to Vietnam, we were operating in a big exercise out from Manila Bay, in the Philippines, off the Vietnam Coast. And to
- 25:00 my horror, one night I was in charge of twelve ships in the Logistic Support Group, we had an American tanker, we had New Zealand ships, Australian ships, Thai ships, Pakistani ships, all getting in one another's way, and I very nearly had collisions going on all night. Avoiding them by telling ships to buck up and steer somewhere else. And then in the middle of it all, came through the signal that Melbourne had collected the American destroyer USS Frank E. Evans
- 25:31 twenty miles ahead of us. So that kept me busy up there for a bit, sorting that out. I was flown across to the be on the preliminary enquiry into that one. Again, the captains of Melbourne each time were good friends of mine, and I felt so sorry for them. Because there but for the grace of God could any of us have gone. I had close calls in my career, but I was always lucky, but they were just unlucky. Both of them left the navy afterwards, both
- 26:00 of them would have been admirals, had they not had bad luck. In each case, the other fellow's fault,

really. So it was only that sort of period and just before that I had been fuelling the Brisbane, that I went down. The whole fleet was meant to go to Hong Kong, but Melbourne limped down to Singapore. And I went in and represented the Fleet all by myself, with a Hong Kong visit, that was quite pleasant. So there are lots of bits of my career that I've

26:30 half forgotten as I went along. The Naval College was great fun, too. Captain of what was virtually a boy's boarding school, seven days a week. We used to get people in to lecture on other things, because they were academically studying all the week, then on weekend we would send them out sailing, send them up mountains, trying to get the navy adventurous feeling. And on Friday nights we would have the lecturers come in to talk about something quite different.

27:00 Farming or yachting. Somebody said, "Where's a local artist? Let's bring him in." I got him in, he gave a lecture, I was so impressed with the painting he did I brought it. And I borrowed some paints the next day, and I started painting and I've been painting ever since.

And another area that would need closer examination was your time with the motor gun boats.

27:33 It was a very short time. I was really only a passenger, but sort of obviously fitting in with the scheme of things and taking watch when things were quiet.

It's something we don't have much of in the Archive....

Again, it was Australian.... You see, over there, you wouldn't have.... There were quite a few Reserve Australian officers,

28:02 who had gone over under the Yachtsman Scheme. They got into motor gun boats, motor torpedo boats. All sorts of boats and ships in the Royal Navy, but as members of the Australian Naval Reserve, so there would be some around. There's a chap called Bock, who I know was in motor gun boats, motor torpedo boats, for two or three years. He would have much more interesting stories if he is still around. He was a year ago. I was purely....

28:31 having heard about them, really, I said, "Can I fit in a few weeks there, filling in time when I'm waiting for a passage." So I was really just a goofer, goofing, but really enjoying it. The same as I did later with the Beaufighters. I don't know, if you are in one form of the service.... Then again, I played soldiers at Normandy, I felt at the end of my time in the navy, I knew what went on in all the services to a certain extent. And my father's upbringing of me made

29:00 me more soldier-minded, too.

You mentioned that were Aide De Camp for a while to General Mackell?

Mr Mackell. Very much not a.... He was the Governor-General, he wasn't a general. He was very much a politician. He was appointed by Chifley, who was a very good Prime Minister at the time.

29:30 Menzies was then the leader of the opposition. And there were rumours around for a few weeks that the new Governor-General taking over...I think taking over from the Duke of Gloucester was going to be Mackell. And he was then Labor Premier for New South Wales. So it would have been a very definite political appointment, by a Labor Prime Minister of a Labor Premier. And Menzies as leader of the opposition was saying, "It would be the most disgraceful thing

30:00 if such an appointment was made." And then it was announced and it was him. And in all the papers the next day, there was a photograph of Menzies shaking Mackell's hand and bowing slightly and saying, "Congratulations, your excellency." But if he hadn't done that there would have almost been a mutiny, I believe. But he immediately switched and said, "No, he is now the Governor-General. We will pay him due homage." And I give Menzies full marks on that. And I saw quite a lot of both Chifley and

30:30 Menzies. They were both excellent people. Menzies finally took over from Chifley. And it was an interesting thing. I would like to think... If I can refer back to my murder on board the Australia. Whilst I was with the Governor-General, the Minister for the Navy came out one day, Reardon [Minister for the Navy, Mr WJ Reardon - 1945] was his name, and he gave bits of paper to the Governor-General to sign. And finally he got to one of them and he said, "What's this?"

31:00 And Reardon said, "Oh, it's a pardon for two naval people who were found guilty of murder during the war. That's some years ago now, sir. 1942, it's now six years ago. We think it's time to let them out." Mackell had been a self-taught lawman. He was QC, or KC as it was in those days. And he said, "I want to see the file." And Reardon said, "Oh sir, you don't need to see the file. I'm your adviser, I'm telling you to sign it."

31:30 Mackell said, "You're telling me to sign? Bring me the file." And off Reardon went. Mackell sent for me, and he said, "Do you know anything about a murder that took place on the Australia in 1942?" And I said, "Well, sir, let me tell you about it." So I told him the whole story and the file came out the next day and he studied it, and he said to Reardon, "I'm not going to sign it. I don't see why they should get out. It was cold-blooded murder. I've heard

32:00 from somebody else the real reason for it." Because the homosexual thing never came out in the trial, it couldn't, but I told Mackell about it. Mackell said, "No, I don't see why they should be let out. Let them stay in, for another few years." Anyhow, they all got out eventually. And that was the first time that

Mackell, or any Governor-General, had turned against his advisors. Because he's really just a copy book. He does what the Prime Minister or one of the ministers tell him. And that gave him the feeling that he

32:30 could do it. Three years later, double dissolution was granted, against Chifley's wishes, and Menzies got into government. And so that was the second occasion against the Prime Minister's wishes that the Governor-General had done something. And you could throw forward a few more years, to when Kerr sacked Whitlam, again, that was the third time. And the first time was with

33:00 my doing. So I like to think that I changed the course of Australian history a little bit.

33:35 **So tell me, just generally, what your work as aide de camp involved?**

Oh, very much a personal.... Not a servant, you're a gentleman's servant. You're looking after the boss, particularly when you take him anywhere. You make sure that everything is going smoothly. You do a lot of planning in advance for visits.

34:00 When we did a visit all the way around Australia, really, flying all the way up the Queensland Coast, across to Darwin, down by road almost to Alice [Springs], then from Alice flying to Adelaide. All the time, we had to have the program worked out in advance. There was an official secretary, Murray Tirrell, who did a lot of it, too. That particular trip he did come, but mainly I would go, or the army or the air force when they were still with us. Even if it was going to...I remember going to a trotting meeting

34:30 in Melbourne. Mackell, he loved being with the people. He didn't like pomp and ceremony. I always dressed in uniform, always, with a walking stick, trying to look important. But he'd be in a dark suit and Homburg hat and walking through the betting ring at the trots, people tend to sort of push your Governor-General around, not knowing who he is. So I was acting as a body guard half the time, making sure the drunks didn't push him over. We went to Darwin,

35:00 he was still in his dark suit and Homburg. I was in full white tropical uniform with medals and swords and everything. And the first official welcome, a little girl was sent forward with a bunch of flowers to present to the Governor-General. And I could see her coming, and she came up and she looked at him and she looked at me and she looked at him and she gave it to me. She couldn't believe that I wasn't the Governor-General, and this fellow in the dark suit and the Homburg couldn't be.

35:31 So all that was part of the life one led. Back in Canberra, all sorts of interesting episodes. I remember the Russian ambassador came to present his credentials one day. A photo opportunity and everything. I picked him up in the official Rolls Royce, and after the photographs were over and he had presented his credentials as the new ambassador, I and the

36:00 secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department, External Affairs it was called then, a chap called John Burton, we got in the Rolls Royce with him to take him back to his embassy, which we did. He was a chap called Defarnel, pleasant fellow. And as we got out of the car to say goodbye, he said, "Would it be within the grounds of diplomacy if you were to come in and have a drink?" And I looked at John Burton and he looked at me and I said, "Do you think so, sir?" And John Burton said,

36:30 "Oh, I think so." So we said, "Yes, sir." We went in and we sat down at the table and in came some lackeys, and they put one of those triple decanter silver holders, with three silver crystal decanters in it in front of the ambassador with a lot of little glasses. One was a plain colourless liquid, one was a purple liquid and one was a red liquid. And he filled our glasses, one of each.

37:00 And we each got these three glasses in front of us. And he said, "Well, Prozit!" or whatever they say in Russia [Za vashe zdorovye! toast]. And we watched him and he picked up the first colourless one, which was a neat vodka. Down it went, and before it hit the table he was picking up the red one, then down it went, then he was picking up the purple one.... So we had three of these things inside us in twenty seconds, and we thought, 'That was nice, we better go now.' And he said, "No, no, no, you must have three drinks." We said, "We just had three drinks." He said, "No, no, no, three rounds."

37:30 So he filled our glasses again two more times, by which time we were getting garrulous and talkative and it was very pleasant and he finally let us go. I said goodbye to John Burton, I think I dropped him off and I drove out to the government house, still feeling pretty right, it was fun, I enjoyed that. I walked into the front door, I walked into the ADC's room and I collapsed flat on my face and I can't remember anything for the next six hours. I was out like a light apparently.

Did you find out what the red and the purple were?

38:00 I suppose they were variations of some liqueur with a vodka base. I don't want to know.

So the dangers of drinking and driving weren't known in those days?

I wasn't driving. We had a chauffeur of course. No, we had a chauffeur and a big Rolls Royce, everywhere we went. And also an aeroplane. The pilot, of course, would take us. It was interesting. The trouble is I would find myself.... Admirals would come out, and

38:30 I'd say, "Your five minutes early, go for a walk. He's not ready for you yet." And I found myself telling admirals what to do. And as a young lieutenant, that's not a very sensible thing to do. So that's when I

asked the navy to relieve me after a year. The first person, I think, to leave with good grace, which was nice to be able to say. The others they say were all sacked, or walked out in a huff. But he shouldn't have gone. He shouldn't have got the job, but having

39:00 got there he became very good. He was apolitical, he was fully conscious of the dignity of the position. He tried very hard. I had to spend a lot of time at parades and things. I'd stand behind him and say, "Take your hat off, sir. They're saluting." "Oh, thank you." "Put it back on, they've finished." So one had to be a delicate leader of him into the ways he needed leading into. But the speeches, he was excellent. I would give him a few facts.

39:30 "We are going to land in Rockhampton in twenty minutes, sir. It has been a city of so many thousand. It's main industry is beef and sugar, and the lord mayor's name is so-and-so." "Right, thanks Dacre." He'd get out and make a speech that you'd think he'd been working on for five days. He was very good like that, being a politician and a law man, a QC [Queen's Counsel].

We better stop there.

Tape 9

00:33 **I'd like to ask you about your Vietnam War service. Firstly, did you agree with the Vietnam War at the time, and now?**

No and no. I didn't think it was our war, really. We got into it unnecessarily. It was an unpopular war, anyhow, down here I thought. But there was no question that any

01:00 part I played, I played. In the navy, you were apolitical and you do what you were told. I didn't feel strongly about it. In fact, I was rather keen to get in a bit closing, and if we could have fired a gun one morning, it would have been nice for all my ship's company. They would have finished off with a Vietnam [Active Service] Medal, instead of only a Logistic [Logistic Support] Medal. Apart from that, at the back of my mind, I wasn't terribly keen on it. I wouldn't have marched against it if

01:30 I was down here, but I just felt it was one that we really needn't have got in to. I wasn't really in it very much. I can remember, the crew were all.... Very few of them had been in my wars before with me, I was the old man. You can be an old man in the navy when you're still very young, because the kids are all

02:00 about 19 or 20. And as we left Manus to sail across towards the Philippines, where we were joining up with the Fleet for the exercises and the eventual collision, and in going towards Vietnam, they said, "Oh sir, can you get on the blower and tell us a warrie [war story] or two." And I would say, "Yes, why not? In this water, in 1944, I was here in a destroyer..." And I would tell them some exciting story about how

02:30 we nearly had a collision with an American carrier in the middle of the night or something. And they were all kids who were mad keen. They loved the navy, or I hoped they did. They seemed to be enjoying the time on board, and if you're in the navy you like the idea of something a bit more than a peacetime exercise. So they would have loved.... If I could have wangled it.... In fact, I think I found out later that if I had gone in about another fifty miles one day, I would have been with in the area that would have

03:00 entitled us to the Vietnam War medal, as opposed to the Logistic medal. If I had known that at the time, I would have disobeyed the admiral and sailed in anyhow. But I didn't know until.... So you don't really worry very much about the politics of war when you're in the war. You do what you're told, and that's it, really.

What sort of operations did you do, logistically?

03:30 **Were you just supplying the troops in....**

No, we were just supplying fuel to the ships. We never got into Vietnamese coast waters. That was the point. We would fuel a destroyer that had been on the gun line firing away, and it would come out and we would give it some more fuel and it would go back in. Or we would meet up with the Sydney, who had been coming up from Australia, if she was running short of fuel, we would give her some more fuel.... It was a very short time that we were there, really.

04:00 **Did you ever get shore leave?**

No, we never went in to Vietnam at all. Shore leave we got, was in the Manila Harbour where some of our sailors got into mischief at the various...

What happened there?

Well, I don't know. Some of them get into mischief in ports. I remember as I sailed, I delayed sailing for half an hour the next morning, because one of our sailors was still missing. And I finally said, "I can't wait any longer." And I slipped,

04:30 and we had a tug pulling us out from the wharf, and then rushing down the wharf was the sailor. He

dived into the water and swam out and I stopped the engine and we actually got him on board, and I dealt with him some time in the future for being late. But I never sailed without a sailor again. That was the only time. He said he had a lovely time ashore. It was worth the punishment I gave him.

05:00 **Throughout your career in the navy, tell us how discipline was instilled. Like punishment, for instance. Someone who broke the rules? Did it change in the years from World War 11 to Vietnam?**

Very little, I think. Discipline is not punishment as I think of it. Discipline is knowing how you've all got to pull together towards the end in sight. And if

05:30 the discipline breaks down, then punishment has to be administered. I didn't always agree with some of the rather strict rules that we'd inherited. And the strict outlook that we had inherited from the British navy. There was too much of them and us. I know when I got to the British cruiser that I mentioned earlier, that I joined for the Normandy landings, I was the divisional officer to the fo'c'sle division. All the sailors in the front end of the ship,

06:00 and we were in harbour, out somewhere, it might have been in Colombo, and I was leaning on the guard rail on the fo'c'sle, talking to one of my able seaman, and I was saying, "Where do you come from?" "Oh, that part of the world. Have you got a wife, any children?" I was getting to know him. Because the job of a divisional officer, as we called them in the navy, is to know the people under them, if they have any problems. From then on I would know. Yes, he's got a wife at home. I better remember that next time I see him and say,

06:30 "How's your wife?" If he has to say, "She has left me for another man I will be able to sympathise with him." And in the middle of this somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said, "The commander wants to see you, sir." So I went along to the quarterdeck and saluted the commander. He said, "Smyth, you were talking to a rating, leaning on the guard rail." I said, "Yes sir, he's one of my sailors. I'm getting to know him." "You don't hob-knob with the sailors like that in this ship." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. Any ship that I've ever

07:00 been in, my job is to get to know my sailors. And the more human I can be in the process.... " I can't remember exactly what I said, but that's what I felt. And he said, "Oh, no, you do not hob-knob with the sailors here." It was them and us, more or less. And that was the RN, and we had inherited a lot of that in our navy, because of all the training that we had one. And I think that was the hardest thing I had to overcome in my early days. Realising that Old Joe Blow who I was at

07:30 school with, and who was up in the fo'c'sle, I wasn't really meant to talk to him because he was a lower deck and I was an upper deck, sort of thing. It's got much better since. I've been delighted when I go out on any ships now to find that they virtually use Christian names to the captain, but they still treat him like the captain. And it's a very subtle change in those sixty years between the harsh discipline and the human discipline of the day.

So what about punishment, though.

08:02 **What sort of punishments?**

Punishment you used to give people if they were late coming on board. You would give them a week's extra duties, which would mean leave would be stopped. They would have punishment drill for an hour every afternoon in the dog watches, between four and five in the afternoon. If it got more serious, you could put them in cells. Very rarely did I see that. If it was really serious,

08:30 and they'd got into trouble ashore, and disgraced the uniform, they would be sent away for three months in a military establishment's prison, really. We didn't have naval prison. We had a cell. Every bigger ship, like the Australia, would have a couple of cells up for'ard and occasionally there would be a couple of people locked away in that for the week, being given oakum to pick. Which is just sorting out

09:00 rope. Teasing out the rope so you can put it between the gaps on the upper deck and then seal it with pitch. It's sort of a naval tradition to pick oakum. But now we don't have wooden decks, they don't pick oakum, I'm sure. There would be no point. So punishment was tougher, then, I suppose. But we were certainly long past the day of.... We never actually had walking the plank, but

09:30 in Nelson's day there was lots and lots of this whipping. Fifty lashes, or even put them in a boat and take them around the Fleet, and alongside every ship this poor chap would be given ten lashes, then they would row onto the next ship and he would be given another ten lashes, and he would be cut down at the end, almost dead. That had all gone. We were all....

So that never happened in the Australia navy, lashes? In World War 11?

10:00 No, never, because the navy was only formed in 1901 and we were fairly human by then.

Was that a practise in World War 1, would you happen to know?

No, I don't think so. I think it had gone. I think halfway through the 19th century, about 1850 or so, it had probably disappeared by then. But as I say, my captain who I mentioned earlier was all for hanging those two murderers and we started

- 10:30 doing the drill and it was laid down in a book, how you do it. Starboard yard arm, Leading Stoker Gordon, hoist, and the starboard watch would man the rope on the starboard side, with a band playing, would double away, and up would go Leading Stoker Gordon, until he got close to the upper yard arm, then a toggle would be pulled out of the rope and he would drop six feet. But six feet was not the exact length to drop because Leading Stoker Gordon was a big heavy stoker.
- 11:01 The table that existed then, I imagine it still exists somewhere, meant that if you were weighing fifteen stone you only dropped five foot one inch. The other chap Stoker Elias, he was only a pip squeak of about eight stone, he had to drop about seven feet. Because that final drop is what broke their neck. So we were all doing this saying, "We're not really going to do this, are we?" Fortunately the naval office heard about it....

Otherwise it would have been done?

Well, we were

- 11:30 practising it. I think he might have meant it, only to bring it home to us, "You don't murder people in my ship." As far as we were concerned, it looked like we were going to do it.

A life out at sea, over the years, you must have also encountered strange examples of nature? Such as sea creatures and weather and....

Weather certainly. The typhoons were

- 12:00 what one remembers. I mentioned earlier going across the Bight, which was one of my first trips, it was very rough. And you get very rough water down south of Australia, around Tasmania, even in Bass Strait. But the typhoon, or the tropical storm, like the hurricanes they have up north, like the one that flattened Darwin in 1975, up in the northern hemisphere they were called typhoons. And we were right in amongst them during those last few months of the war.
- 12:30 And they were quite frightening. They were enormous waves and enormous winds. We were in about three different ones. There was one when we were by ourselves, we were virtually stopped. The revolutions were about ten knots, but not making any way through the water, facing into the sea. And if we tried to move one way or the other, we might well have rolled over. And we received a signal from a
- 13:00 poor little American cargo ship and it said, "We are in the apparent centre of the typhoon. We are abandoning ship." And we couldn't do anything about it. Had we turned to go over to them, we would have probably rolled over. That was the last we ever heard of them. There were no survivors and the ship went down. We were caught in Tokyo Bay just after the war, by a typhoon. The bay was full of ships.
- 13:30 We had all gathered there for the victory celebrations, really, and we were all told to get to sea. I was up on the fo'c'sle, trying to weigh the anchor and it was out almost lying straight ahead of us, and the winch just wouldn't work. So we dragged backwards, through the ships for about half an hour. The captain was seeing the ships coming up astern, and going, "Full ahead port and half astern starboard,"
- 14:00 and somehow trying to miss them. And then finally he somehow was able to steam ahead enough for me to get the anchor up and we steamed out of Tokyo Bay, somehow avoiding collisions and things. But standing on the fo'c'sle, I was on an angle like that into the wind, into the wind, because if you tried to stand up, you just blew over. Two hundred kilometre an hour winds, sort of thing, which really flattened you completely. So those seas were
- 14:30 tremendous. On the way south from Tokyo Bay, we called into Okinawa for fuel. The typhoon was still some distance away, but the swell had already arrived. So while we were alongside this tanker in the harbour, we were crashing into it every time the ship rolled on the swell. We got enough fuel, but we came away with all our guard rail and a lot of our sea boats stowed in, just from trying to get some fuel in harbour. So yes,
- 15:00 storms like that. The Atlantic gales, of course, were well known. I didn't get much time in the Atlantic. We were up in Scapa Flow, and for the D-Day landings and things. And the channel where I was in motor gun boats, we got rough weather, but nothing like the big storms. You asked about animals, I never saw a sea serpent. Saw lots of whales and sea-snakes.... Sea-snakes, up in the Tropics
- 15:30 the sea-snakes, at any one time, you could probably see three or four of the big yellow thick sea-snakes. Which are very poisonous, I'm told. And the Coral snakes which have the different colours in bands down them. You get them more in the harbours. Manus harbour and Port Moresby, places like that. Nasty things like we were in the [Great] Barrier Reef at one stage during the war, having a bit of
- 16:00 rest and recreation, I suppose you would call it now. We were in for a few days, and we landed a lot of sailors on the beach of one of the islands there. And the boat, not the boat that I was in, but just close to us, they all hopped out into the water, when the water was shallow enough for them to walk ashore, and one of them hopped straight onto a Portuguese Man of War and he screamed and said, "My God, something's got me." They put him back in the boat, took him straight back to the ship and he was dead by the time they got him back on board.
- 16:30 These nasty Portuguese Man of War's are not much fun. When I was in my ship up in Darwin, the frigate Hawkesbury where we were looking after the Japanese pearl fleet. I was going out for a week or so, or

ten days, making sure that.... They were allowed to pearl but they weren't allowed to land on the Australian shores.

When was this?

This was 1953, '54. Japanese pearlers were very good

17:00 at the job, and they were doing it. I took the Prime Minister out one day to take a look and they presented him with things that he then passed onto me and I've passed onto my children. But one of our sailors, when we were in harbour in Darwin one day... On one of the main Darwin beaches, and they picked up a little octopus, which had little blue rings on its tentacles. They'd never heard of it, I'd never heard of it. They were playing with it, they tossed it from

17:30 one chap to the other. And one chap had it on his soldier, sort of saying "Take a photo.... Oh! It seems to have bitten me." And within second almost he was saying I don't feel too good. By the time he got up to his towel, he was sort of passing out. They had a Jeep there, they rushed him to hospital, he was dead on arrival. He was the first blue ring octopus fatality in Australia. We had never heard of them.

18:01 Fortunately the other chap, he either kept the octopus or he knew where it was, still lying on the beach. And from that, we've all been told, ever since, stay away from blue ring octopuses. One of my sailors was the first victim of it. So there are nasty things in the sea. Sharks we caught a lot. There's a photograph of a shark we caught in Mauritius one day. I don't know, a line over, a heavy line with a hunk of meat. They pulled him up on the crane

18:30 and he was about fifteen feet long, I suppose. You can see people standing beside him, and he is more than twice their height. There were sharks everywhere.

Do sharks normally follow convoys?

I don't think they bother to follow.

Because of junk being thrown overboard....

They might a bit, I suppose, yes. The things that followed of course were the porpoises and dolphins. They precede you, they lead you along

19:00 rather beautifully, leaping out of the water, in front of your bows. Sharks, I've never met anybody who's been attacked by one, or anything. But you're always very careful in tropical waters. You like having the opportunity, I used to like doing it, of stopping over fairly shallow water and saying "Right, we're stopping here for half an hour if anybody wants to put a line over the side." Then towards the end we'd say, "All right, in five minutes time it will be hands to bathe,

19:32 close up two or three riflemen" and everybody would hop over the side and swim, not go very far away. And you'd have riflemen in case sharks did appear. But I don't remember having to shoot at one. But we took those precautions. In Manus harbour we used to put two booms over the side and set up a water polo pitch....

20:02 in the water alongside us, and we'd challenge other ships to water polo. But you would always have a chap with a rifle standing by, just in case. But I've never known of a shark attack in that sense.

Through the war, or more specifically the Second World War, how do you think it impacted on your life?

20:31 Well, it obviously impacted, I suppose. If the navy hadn't invented that new entry into the navy, and if there hadn't been a war, I would have left school, I would have gone to some university, I don't know what I would have done. I would have possibly gone back to the farm, and taken on farming and been a sheep farmer for the rest of my life. And I might have

21:00 done something clever and been in the city. I think I would have liked to stay in the country. You can't visualise it.... Six years out of my life was suddenly World War II. A very formative six years. It obviously formed me for the rest of my life. It impacted on my life. Because I was never wounded or sunk.... I used to get burnt, absolutely dark, I was far darker than you up in the Tropics.

21:30 I would sit on the bridge all afternoon watch or morning watch, with just a pair of shorts on and I would get myself burnt, absolutely black. Because I had seen so many people who had cooked to death in lifeboats, I said, "That will never happen to me when I'm sunk." And of course, I was never sunk. So now what happens? I've got halitosis and skin cancers and things all from being a silly boy, then. But it didn't seem silly at the time. It seemed a sensible precaution, and it was fun to burn yourself.

22:12 Would you say that your memories of the war are the strongest memories you have?

No, my memories of the navy are. I think if you.... not only war service. A lot of the peacetime service.

22:30 The dreams that I have, and I often find myself dreaming that I am back in a ship, I'm either the captain in it or the second in command, told by the captain to do something, and it's never actually firing guns, it's more avoiding reefs. Remembering the one I nearly landed the ship on in Indigo Harbour [Solomons], in 1954 or something. More so than during the war, when I wasn't captain on my own ships,

- 23:00 in any of the wars, except Vietnam, and I wasn't really in that war so much. I think it was the time in command, when your responsibility is so supreme, far more probably than in any other service or situation. You've got a ship and the safety of the ship is in your hands, but you've also got two hundred men and their safety and their well being is in your hands. And it is the most complete responsibility I can imagine.
- 23:30 You can be the chairman of BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary], but you've always got dozens of people to straighten you out if you are going wrong. But if you are captain of a ship, you are the captain. You are alone. You've got nobody to refer to, really. You can be friendly with your first lieutenant and your officers, but you never say, "What would you do now?" You've got to decide it yourself. Will you go into this harbour, even when you've got no chance? I remember going through a channel in the Solomon's in 1954, in my frigate,
- 24:00 Booker Passage it's called. And we knew the Japanese destroyers had gone through their during the war. They also had command of that island. So I said, "Well, if they can go through, I'll go through." And I was quite a big ship, two or three thousand tons, and I drew twelve feet of water, and we got hold of a Japanese chart and I said, "Now I've got a chart, I should be able to get through." Halfway through I realised that the soundings under my bottom, which I thought would have been about six or eight feet
- 24:31 were two feet and one foot. I was skimming on top of the bottom, and suddenly in front of me I saw a horse, standing on the water. I thought, it looked like it. As I got closer I edged around to the left of him and he was standing on a platform of coral that had come right out from the shore, and he was standing in about three inches of water, and just beside it, it went straight down. And I went past and I was looking down at this horse, and he was looking up at me.
- 25:00 By this time my nerves weren't very good, and my soundings were still telling me I still only had a foot of water under me. I got through the far end, I didn't hit the bottom. I stopped the ship and I said, "Let's sort this out," with my navigator and we looked at the chart. I suddenly said, "What would Japanese soundings be in?" He said, "Probably metres." I said, "We've been assuming that when it says three, it means three fathoms."
- 25:31 A fathom is six feet, a metre is three feet. I thought I was in.... eighteen feet of water. In fact, I was in twelve feet of water. And that is the sort of thing that I still dream about. Not quite a nightmare, but that sort of thing. I'm suddenly driving through that place again and
- 26:00 I realise that I am putting my ship and my sailors at risk. So they're the things that you remember.... When you're in command, those are the things that you remember, I think. Jobs ashore again, you've always got somebody to turn to. But in command of a ship is a unique situation, I still think... Probably driving an aeroplane, but so much is automatic these days. You don't have to make those sorts of decisions as much, and you're always within cooe of the ground. I would be away.... I sailed from Darwin at one stage
- 26:30 and came across a Japanese ship, and it was asking permission to land someone who was sick. I didn't think he should. I made a signal to Navy Office in Melbourne, more or less, requesting instructions, which was silly of me because the signal didn't get through for about three hours, and by the time the signal came back saying, "It is up to you to decide" and I had had to decide anyhow. And I didn't let him land and I made him go away and I
- 27:00 kept going. So in other words, perhaps today you can pick up the phone and talk to the Prime Minister. Like when children are overboard or something, but certainly in my day communications were so doubtful that you had to make decisions yourself, completely, about anything that came up.

Did you tell your children about your war service?

Oh, I would occasionally tell them, I think. They used to get rather sick of it and finally they said,

- 27:30 "Dad, you should write it down." So we had a Christmas here about five years ago, they were all gathered here and I said, "By the way, I'm going to do it." "Do what?" they said. I said, "You've been telling me I should write my life story. I'm going to do it." "Oh Dad, what for?" And I said, "You've been telling me, I think it would be interesting to right it." They said, "You're not going to publish it?" And I said, "Well, I've been publishing my other books of my paintings. This will be full of paintings, that I will paint of my life as I remember it. "How many are you going to print?"
- 28:00 I said, "Well, a normal print run, about two thousand books." "Oh, Dad, only two hundred is all you will ever get rid of that book." Well, there's one he's got now to take with him. And I have sold quite a few. So then they had the book that they could read and I didn't have to bore them any more with stories. They have been great supporters. They gave me a lovely picture on my 80th birthday, which is up there. One of my children is a
- 28:30 graphic artist and she put together what she thought my 80 years of life consisted of. There is a picture of me, I am wearing a naval coat. I am in Boy Scout shorts, because I was a Boy Scout Leader and a Boy Scout. There are pictures all around.... There is a shrine where I have been a trustee for years. There is one of my ships. There is a picture of my wife. There is a pile of the books I've printed and put out. There is a sheep somewhere, because I was brought up on a sheep farm

29:00 and that was presented to me by my children on my 80th birthday, which was rather fun to get. So they laugh at their Dad, but I think they get along all right and respect him.

Did you dream about the war or do you still?

As I say, I dream a lot about navy. I'm sort of doing funny things. Half the time I am dodging rocks. It is not so much the war it is more my peacetime in command.

29:32 I am lucky, I wasn't one of the soldiers who went through absolute hell anywhere. Even when we were being bombed at Normandy, and I remember one night the bombs were getting closer and closer and I lay down on the deck and I thought, "This is bloody silly. If it's going to hit me, it's going to hit me just as much if I'm standing up." So I stood up and I hoped that nobody would see me. But you know that was the nearest, perhaps, those sort of occasions. But I never actually copped

30:00 a bit of shrapnel in the guts or something. So I haven't got that very personal feeling of.... real fear and pain, that so many soldiers and the airmen who were shot down out of the sky.... I've been lucky. So my memories are of 40 years in the navy, yes.... But they're not really nightmares, they're just happy dreams that take me back into the dream world that I used to be in.

30:30 **Did you have any nightmares?**

I don't think so really, no. Occasionally you do, but they have nothing to do with the navy. They are about falling off a high place or something. If you wake up from a dream and you don't want to go back to sleep, because the dream might go on and might lead to something nasty, that's the nearest I get to a nightmare, I think, so I stay awake.

What did you think about

31:00 **the countries you fought against, and their people? Germany? Japan? Italy?**

Japan we had less respect for than the Germans. But as I said earlier, meeting one or two of them afterwards, people who had been in their navy, I had just as much respect for them as sailors. And there is a brotherhood of the sea, which is much more than any brotherhood of the armed forces, like the army would have.

31:30 You were fighting the sea half the time, not your enemy. And any time you met up.... I met a lot after the war. I know that when I was in London I was our Naval Attaché, and the German Naval Attaché, and the Italian Naval Attaché, were amongst my best friends, amongst the attaches union, and we talked over the war and we once or twice realised that we had been pretty close to one another, and possibly almost shooting at one another. But they were

32:00 all... They were naval people, and naval people are peculiar in a way. Not only navy, but merchant navy, too. We've drawn away from the merchant navy in peace time. A lot of the young naval officers I meet now haven't really got to know people in the merchant navy, which is a pity because that brotherhood of the sea cemented us all together during the war. We were convoying them, they were being sunk, even more than we were, and the people you met you knew were facing the

32:30 same dangers, and there was a tremendous brotherhood. And whether they were German survivors that you picked up, which we never did, actually, but if you had, you would have treated them the same as your own survivors. Because they were facing the same dangers. Some of the films brought that out quite well, I think. There's that famous one, The Cruel Sea. Have you ever seen that? It came out ten years after the war and it was

33:00 Nicholas Monserrat [author] and there's the awful picture where he has attacked a submarine, the submarine has sunk a ship, then he has picked up the submarine echo again and he's coming in to attack it, and he realises that right over the submarine are all the survivors in the water from the ship, a merchant ship that has been sunk by the submarine. And he has to decide.... They think he is coming into save them, he knows he's

33:30 coming into depth charge the submarine and kill them. And this would have been a terrible decision for anyone to make, and it's made in the film. He does go in and he drops his depth charges and his sailors almost disown him on the spot. But those are the sort of decisions, because friend or foe, however you play it, they're all men of the sea, and how you cope with decisions like that.

Did you ever have any close shaves with submarines, personally?

34:01 No, no. We attacked this submarine, as I said earlier, off Korea, in the early days of the Korean War. I think we might have even got it. It was obviously not a North Korean submarine, they didn't have one. If it was genuinely a submarine and we thought it was, it was pretty obviously a Russian one that was down there. They shouldn't have been there. If they were there

34:30 they should have told us they were going to be there. But they were a potential enemy and I think we might have sunk a Russian submarine, but it was never claimed or acknowledged. No, none of the convoys that I did, that were sort of off the west coast of Africa, it wasn't like the convoys crossing the Atlantic, which was U-Boat alley. I crossed the Atlantic several times, but we were never attacked, the ships I was in. And I was never escorting the convoys

- 35:02 to and fro in the Atlantic. That's where you see those awful pictures of ships being blown up all around, and the escorts rushing around trying to find the submarines, who were there in the wolf pack, which was one of the phrases that they used for them. They would have shadowed the convoy, which was going pretty slowly, all day, then they would have moved in like a wolf pack at night. And it would have been terrible there. Some of the losses. Some of the convoys that lost....
- 35:30 You know, out of thirty ships there were twenty ships sunk, that sort of thing. And nearly every time so many people lost their lives. They would normally have one escort hold off to rush around and pick up the survivors. But if there were twenty ships being sunk in the length of a night, you probably didn't get to some of the sights where they had gone down. So the sea is a cruel place, and that is a wonderful title for the picture, The Cruel Sea.

Were there any instances where convoys were completely destroyed?

- 36:00 Almost I think, yes. Some of the Russian convoys. There's a particular one. I think it was called PQ11, or something, and it virtually lost everything in it. And another one, one of the Malta convoys, out of about fifteen ships, three got in. One of them was the tanker the Ohio, an American tanker. And it had been bombed and set on fire and it had sunk in the water. It was almost sinking, and a destroyer got along one side of it
- 36:30 and a frigate on the other and they lashed themselves to it, and they brought it into harbour in Malta, by sort of holding it up themselves. And that saved Malta because they had no more petrol for their aeroplanes, to fight off the attackers. And the stores, one of the other ships also got in, full of stores. And that saved Malta. But that was a convoy that was virtually.... Out of fifteen fast-bottomed ships, three got in.
- 37:01 Whether there was any that was a hundred per cent, I'm not quite sure. There could have been smaller ones. Certainly there was a smaller one, north of Australia, only three ships.... The Yarra was escorting it out from Java coming south, and five Japanese ships, three cruisers and two destroyers, found them. The Yarra turned towards and took them on. It was blown out of the water. And then the other three ships were sunk, too. The captain of the Yarra should have
- 37:30 got a Victoria Cross. We've never had a Victoria Cross in our navy. He was one who perhaps should have.... But because he was sunk, he didn't get anything. He was facing fearful odds as they say.

Okay, we're coming to the end of the interview now, so I'll ask you a few more quick questions....

- 38:04 **Did you ever encounter cowardice or desertion, throughout your service? In either Korea, Vietnam or World War 11?**

No, no. I encountered fear. I think the first time we took on an enemy battery at Korea with a ship's company, most of whom had not been in World War 11.... I remember the chief stoker was up on deck from his

- 38:30 engine room, having a look at the scenery and wondering what we were doing, and suddenly the shells were arriving on both sides of the ship, we were being straddled as they called it. And he said something in the way of a swear word, "My God! Christ Almighty!" And he dived down into his stoke hole, where he should have been anyhow. Now that was fear, not cowardice. He went back to his job. Quite a lot of the sailors that day, I think, got a
- 39:00 rather sudden introduction to what war-like feelings can be, because when one shell has gone over and one's gone short, you think, "Christ, the next one is going to hit me." I had the same fear myself, but cowardice, no, I never saw.

What about heroism?

I think everyone is a hero all the time, but I can't remember any specific bits that would.... My own captain in Korea was always on the bridge,

- 39:30 acting like Nelson, but we were all hoping that we were acting like Nelson, too. He wasn't having to face up to anything specifically personal, he was just hoping he'd get his ship through, and his crew through it.

Is there anything you would like to say that we haven't asked, or for the record, you're most welcome to at this stage.

- 40:02 Well, I think a naval life is a wonderful life, and it is a safer life in many ways. Although, in fact, in World War 11, we lost a higher percentage of naval people than either then army or the air force. So it's not really safer in wartime. If a ship goes down with all hands, like the Sydney did in 1941, that's a tremendous hole out of your navy. So it's not really safe.
- 40:30 But whilst you were still in the ship, you were sleeping in a comfortable bunk or a hammock. You could even have sheets. You'd get a fairly good meal. I'd far rather be in the navy than the army or the air force, and I take my hat off to the army and air force people, who had to put up with what they had to put up with. If I had another war and I was a young man again, it would still be the navy that I would join.

Thank you very much. Perfect last words...

NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2008.

Tape 10

01:01 **So, we're interested in the BCOF [British Commonwealth Occupation Force] and that period of time, post-world war, Second World War - of Hiroshima. I want you to describe as best you can what you saw and the impact it had on you.**

After World War II, of course the navy started to get much smaller but there were still jobs to be done up north and from our point of view we

01:30 went off for six or eight months at a time and were really part of the occupational forces in Japan. We took them up in fact. Just after the war I was in a particular ship which escorted the Australian Army up from Moratai where they had been brought together in the islands north of Australia and took them up to Japan and then we stayed around Japan for a bit being part of the occupational

02:00 forces in effect, although it wasn't quite the same as the army. They were ashore with the Japanese living cheek by jowl with them. We were at sea showing the flag around the various ports and while we were in Kure which is on the inland sea not far from Hiroshima, we all took the opportunity of course, of going and looking at Hiroshima. Particularly in my case I was interested because I had, I claim to this day, that I had seen the bomb go

02:30 off which is a bit of an exaggeration. In World War II, right at the end, I had been in a destroyer off the coast of Japan and one night somebody had said, "Come and look at the sunset." and I had seen a most unusual sunset which turned out next morning to have been where the bomb had gone off in the distance at Hiroshima or Hiroshima, I'm not sure of the modern pronunciation. Hiroshima we called it then anyhow. And so when we were in Japan, not long afterwards

03:00 with the occupational forces, we all went and had a look at Hiroshima and the absolute desolation. We'd seen it; I'd seen it in England. I'd seen it in Tokyo too I suppose, but the fact that one bomb had done what that one bomb did at Hiroshima I think, did come home to one much more personally than all the other desolation and damage I'd seen anywhere. I remember picking

03:30 up a particular little souvenir. It was a bottle that had melted and fallen over and then solidified again and I thought this was a very nice little souvenir. I had it beside my bed in my cabin onboard ship for a few months and probably it was giving me all sorts of radiation sickness. I'm glad to say somebody stole it and I hope they are the ones who are now suffering from some radiation sickness. That was Hiroshima.

04:00 **Can you ... describe how that bomb would've destroyed that city?**

I think it's mainly blast, the destruction particularly a city like Hiroshima which apart from a few concrete buildings ...

04:30 The bomb that went off at Hiroshima, one wonders really how it did so much damage and how it killed so many people and I think, without being an expert, my view was that it was the blast more than, and the heat, the enormous sort of pushing outward from the point of the explosion

05:00 at hundreds of miles an hour of very hot air. It would blow every building over; it would literally burn the people that it hit. The after-effects of the radiation aspect was something that we didn't even understand at that stage. All we saw was just like any other place that had been bombed by thousands of bombs, except this was a place that had been flattened by one bomb

05:30 and I think it's purely in our memories that it was the blast and the heat. The after-effect of the people who then got this awful radiation sickness was something we hadn't even heard about at that stage. We all learned about it later of course.

Just tell me about your feelings, the impact that it had for those people it was war of course, but there are a lot of ... the word innocent is overused but I

06:00 **don't know what you would say, but just simply how you felt about that way of ending the war.**

The decision that was taken to drop that bomb was something that I would not like myself to have had to make but I think at the time we all felt thank God it has ended the war. We didn't have any particular feelings of pity or sympathy for the people

06:30 who were killed in Hiroshima because after all we had been killing people in Tokyo and all the other cities with ordinary bombs and our own shells from the navy. The whole world had been killing millions and millions of people. Our fear at the time was that we were going to lose on our side millions more when we came to invade Japan. There's no doubt that we would have lost many millions of American

and Australian and

07:00 British soldiers if we'd had to go ahead and do the invasion of Japan, and so it was a feeling of relief. I'm afraid no personal pity for anybody because that was not the feelings you have very much in war. You tend to say, 'Thank God it's over, everyone can stop now.' The fact that however many thousand people had been killed in that one blast was secondary to our relief that the war was finally going to be over and it was of course only a few days later.

07:30 **Can you talk to me about the Japanese that you met and the relationships that you**

The navy had much less contact with the Japanese people than the army forces of occupation. I suspect that some of our sailors

08:00 might have had fleeting liaisons with Japanese girls. I didn't meet very many Japanese people, certainly not enough to get to know them in any way. The language would have been too difficult anyhow. I remember an occasion just after we'd arrived in Kure, I was the second-in-command of my ship and therefore looking after things on the upper deck and I was discussing with one of my senior sailors how we were

08:30 going to re-rig a boom. A boom is where you hang boats when the ship's at anchor, a fairly technical thing, and a voice beside me suddenly spoke up from amongst the Japanese men we had doing cleaning duties on board. "Excuse me, Sir," he said, "If I were you I wouldn't put a lizard outboard of the boat rope, I'd put it in board." and this was all

09:00 terribly technical. I understood it but the viewer doesn't I'm sure, but he was absolutely right and I turned and I said, "Excuse me, but who are you?" And he said, "Oh I'm sorry, I should not have interrupted but I was Lieutenant Commander Yogi Asuma [?] of the Japanese Navy and it was just that same problem that I had in my destroyer a couple of months ago." So that was one of my first meetings so I realised that they were human and intelligent,

09:30 much more than perhaps we'd been led to believe.

Were you aware of the Japanese war brides being taken back to Australia?

No, I heard about it

I had been in the Australian Navy nearly all the Second World War during which we were fighting first of all the Germans, even the Italians at one stage

10:00 and then finally the Japanese, and our enemies seemed to us to be the fascists or the Nazis. After the war I stayed in the navy, I think mainly because I felt that we had to have a strong navy, or strong services generally, to combat any future threats to peace and gradually it became apparent that that future

10:30 threat was going to be the opposite of Nazism and fascism, it was going to be Communism. Although we'd been on the same side as Russia, Russia had suddenly shown her true mettle after the war when she took over half of Europe and in this part of the world she took over the northern part of Korea, America took over the southern part and Russia immediately made the northern part Communist. So we suddenly began to realise that our future enemy or threat was

11:00 Communism, which was something we'd not really thought much about during World War II, because after all as I say, our enemies then were the Nazis. But gradually as we spread ourselves around up into Japan and the Pacific waters we realised that here and there, for instance in Vietnam it was beginning to show, although it wasn't turned into a war for us for many years. Certainly the demarcation line

11:30 between North and South Korea had become another flashpoint. We didn't really expect North Korea to walk into South Korea when she did in 1950, but it was the sort of possibility that we were beginning to see and so those five years after the war when I was still in the navy, when a lot of my friends had left the navy and gone back to making fortunes in civilian life and leaving us to be penniless in the navy, the young

12:00 chaps were joining the navy not being quite sure why, but perhaps with the same sort of fear that perhaps one day we'd be fighting the Communists. The Cold War was beginning in other words. When the Korean War finally broke out that was the flashpoint I suppose of the Communist world beginning, in fact we were quite sure it was going to turn into a fight against China and Russia when that first blew up. In fact it only turned out to be

12:30 North Korea and China eventually against us, if Russian had come in it would have been World War III and I hate to think of the results.

Just talk to me about what you the times that you went home, about the political view, we're moving into the Korean War now - but just the view of the threat of Communism and Korea. It didn't gain much publicity when it first began, there were floods in the north that got front page and

13:00 **so Korea, right from the very start was not figuring as an important ...**

I don't think anyone in Australia had ever heard of Korea really, unless they had been up north like we had, near Korea, being in Japanese waters. The general public I'm sure if they read about Korea were not aware of the danger there of the Communist threat from the North. Australia, although the Cold War

- 13:30 was beginning, although Communism was beginning to be the threat, was still enjoying the fact that the war was over and for those five years from 1945 to 1950 it was probably one of the happiest times. Everything was coming back to normal. We were no longer rationed. We suddenly were able by 1949 to fill the petrol tanks of our cars instead of being told you can only have four gallons from those little ration
- 14:00 tickets that you were allowed. So it was a great time in Australia. It was the time of the baby boom if I remember. Everyone was busy having babies and saying what a wonderful life. So I'm not sure that there was terribly much public awareness then of the Cold War. I think the Cold War really came after the Korean War. For the next twenty years after the Korean War the Cold War got more and more intense and the fear of Russia and America actually having a go at one another became more and more
- 14:30 frightening and real. So those years before the Korean War were the happy years shall we say.
- I was in a destroyer called HMAS Bataan, a destroyer being a couple of thousand tons of fighting fury with a couple of hundred men on board. We'd spent most of 1949 up in Japan on occupational duties. We'd gone back to Australia. We'd had a refit.
- 15:00 We'd had some leave, seen our loved ones and then we were sailing again for similar duties in Japan. We'd been in Hong Kong on the way for a couple of days and in fact, the day we sailed from Hong Kong to go to Japan the Korean War broke out. We certainly hadn't had any advance notice that there was any danger of such a thing happening. I don't think anyone else really knew either that it was an imminent as it proved to be. The North Koreans,
- 15:30 who had been building up against their southern brothers and cousins, suddenly walked over the border, the 38th Parallel where the artificial delineation line had been made at the end of World War II - they suddenly invaded South Korea. Our immediate reaction on board was to say, 'Oh I hope it lasts long enough for us to get into it!' because when you're in the navy, you expect if there's a war that you should
- 16:00 be in it with feelings of terror sometimes, but feelings that we're doing our job. And our feelings as I say was it'll all be over in a couple of days, the Americans will move in and the North Koreans will be pushed back and we'd better get there quickly. So we hurried north from Hong Kong. Sure enough we were put straight into the line as it were. The ship that we were about to relieve on Japanese occupational duties, the [HMAS] Shoalhaven stayed there
- 16:30 and the two of us immediately, the first job we had I think was to escort some ships across from Japan into Pusan, the southern port, still saying I hope it keeps going long enough for us to see some action. In fact as we let the ships enter Pusan we were told, "Your job is finished, you can go back to Japan for the next job." and my captain said, "No, we're going into the harbour." and I said, "Oh Sir, but we don't have to."
- 17:00 He said, "I know these things of old, Dacre, if we go into the harbour it might just make the difference between somebody getting a medal for this war because we'd been into the harbour, as opposed to if we haven't been into the harbour they'll say you never took part in the war." Looking back it's ridiculous now because the war went on for three years and we had plenty of action and plenty of occasions to win that peculiar medal. Medals are something that mean something to the services.
- 17:30 They give too many of them these days but it was still something that was in our minds, 'Will it last long enough?' The Americans were just saying at first, 'We'll finish this using the air force, send in the air force, navy escort a few ships across, army won't be needed.' they said in those first few days. How wrong they were. Within two weeks the North Koreans were at the outskirts of Pusan, that city port in the southern part of Korea
- 18:00 and the whole of South Korea had been taken over by the North Koreans in two weeks. It was the fastest invasion probably in history almost, and then the Americans and the Australian Army started coming into the equation I suppose is the word, and they were finally sent into the southern part of South Korea in time to stop the final invasion of
- 18:30 Pusan, which would have meant the war was over in two or three weeks if they hadn't stopped them just on the outskirts of Pusan.
- Certainly once the war became a proper war and we found ourselves firing guns and realising we were in a war, we had no idea really what we were going to face. In World War II our main
- 19:00 enemies had always been aircraft of the enemy, submarines, surface ships occasionally. None of those really eventuated in Korea but we didn't know that at the beginning. I think we were the only ship that ever attacked a submarine in the Korean War. I don't know to this day whether there was really a submarine there. We thought there was, we got all the signals from our sonar and we attacked it.
- 19:30 I suspect to this day it might well have been a Russian submarine that was there having a look at what

was going on. We didn't know whether the North Koreans had submarines. We didn't know whether the Russians were going to come in with their submarines. So we probably had that one and only experience with submarines. For the rest of the war no submarine ever appeared on the enemy side. Similarly with aircraft. One of our chummy ships, a British destroyer [HMS] Comus was actually attacked by aircraft, but

- 20:00 nearly every ship avoided - or not avoided - was not attacked by aircraft during the whole war. There were a lot of aircraft ashore of course, bombing the armies of both sides but the navy didn't have to so we had a much easier time of the war than we had in World War II shall we say. Surface ships, certainly almost nothing, one or two small North Korean surface vessels
- 20:30 made forays down into the southern waters. We never actually met a surface ship. So our main warfare was against the shore batteries which were very efficient. Within days of getting into South Korea the North Koreans had set up very efficient shore batteries, radar guided. The first action by the Australian Navy of the whole war was on 1st August which after all was only a month after the war began.
- 21:00 We were off the South Korean west coast and we were going in to examine a couple of junks who were suspected of running supplies down to help the North Koreans, who by that time were right down the whole west coast and they had already obviously, we didn't know this, set up this very efficient shore battery which opened up on us, straddled us immediately at the range of six or eight miles and
- 21:30 we had a very hot blooded exchange of fire with them. We fired I think, a hundred and fifty rounds from our four point seven inch and they kept straddling us. We were very lucky not to be hit. So they were very efficient with their shore batteries, but that continued right through the war to be the main threat, if ships were silly enough to go within range of North Korean shore batteries, they would sure enough be shot at and most captains learnt to stay out of range.
- 22:00 Mines were the other danger. So that right through the whole three years of war I only experienced the first six months of it, the busiest six months of it, but right through the whole three years of war mines and shore batteries were really the navy's only enemy, apart from the natural elements because the weather in winter was beastly. We'd never struck anything quite as cold as that anywhere I had been in the whole world in World War II.
- 22:30 By about October, November 1950, there was still tremendous movement to and fro on the South Korean and all of the Korean peninsula. The North Koreans had still occupied
- 23:00 most of South Korea and [General Douglas] MacArthur who had taken over the supreme command of the whole war. He, having been in Japan since the end of the war organising the peace, he was suddenly given the war to run, and I'm told against the advice of all his staff, he said, "We will land an amphibious landing behind the enemy lines and we'll do it at Inchon on
- 23:30 the west coast of Korea." which is the port of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. And I'm told his staff said, "You can't possibly do it." and he said, "We'll not only do it, we'll do it in three weeks time." And he somehow put together sufficient forces to do a landing there which completely caught the North Koreans by surprise. We, by that time, the Australian Navy had been augmented by another ship of the same
- 24:00 class as my ship, the Bataan, the [HMAS] Warramunga had joined us. We were both Tribal class destroyers, we were working as a pair. Our job in the Inchon landing was fairly annoyingly dull because we were escorting a British aircraft carrier on the outer perimeter of the waters of Inchon, so we didn't actually get in close and fire our
- 24:30 guns or take any part in the landing. Nonetheless we were very much part of the whole naval force - American, British, Canadian, New Zealand, Australian that covered the landing at Inchon, which was enormously successful. It was of course, behind the enemy lines and that was the beginning of the whole push back into North Korea of the North Korean forces which started
- 25:00 down near Pusan with the army pushing up. But the fact that we'd landed behind their lines meant that we were able to cut across, and generally it's an army description that you should be getting rather than from me, but that was the moment of everything turning and going in the right direction at last. And MacArthur himself almost single-handedly had said, 'That's the way we'll do it.' So I had great admiration for him. We'd all heard of MacArthur a
- 25:30 lot during the war. I'd met him after the war in Japan. I'd gone up and met him and his wife, because his wife had actually launched our ship, the Bataan. Mrs. MacArthur had launched that ship during the war in Australia and we'd named Bataan as a gesture to the battle that MacArthur himself had fought as he got out of the Philippines when the Japs came into World War II. So that's all past history
- 26:00 but, so I knew MacArthur, I knew a lot of him but I had not actually experienced his brilliance, I think, in making those sort of decisions.

Just give me a bit of an opinion of him, a profile, in your opinion - the sort of person he was because you hear a lot of descriptions.

The only time I ever met MacArthur was when I did, train up to Tokyo the year

- 26:30 before, Mrs MacArthur having launched our ship. My captain said they could go up to Tokyo, call on her, give her a present of a ship's crest, one of those nicely cast brass crests. So I went up and I met her and I gave it to her and she was very charming and she gave me a cup of tea. And then the great man himself returned from his office and I met him and I had a drink, I think of bourbon, with him and it was my first and only meeting with him. He was very pleasant.
- 27:00 I think I would have been frightened of him if I was meeting him in any other circumstances than that happy gathering in his house. Had I been before him on the mat for doing something wrong, I think I would have been scared stiff because he was a very commanding presence. He had a great Roman appearance, a Roman nose and ... a figure that would put fear into
- 27:30 anybody who was meeting with his displeasure I feel, but he was, from my point of view, extremely pleasant. He found time to chat to me and as I say give me a drink. So that was my only meeting with him. From then on it was all knowing what he was doing rather than actually meeting him personally. I think his reputation from World War II had gone against him a bit. He'd been almost too demanding of publicity for himself and for the Americans
- 28:00 during the South Pacific campaigns. The Australians, he tended, if they won a victory, he always tended to say, 'Allied forces have gained a victory at Buna or Gona.' or wherever it was, whereas if the Americans gained a victory he said, 'American forces.' So he had a bit of a bad reputation but my own personal meeting with him I forgave him all that that I'd heard because he turned out to be a nice fellow.
- Just tell me briefly about**
- 28:30 **the gamble that he took, I mean it paid off and everyone says, well good and pat him on the back but it was a gamble, and as you say the advice was against it, so very briefly**
- The gamble that MacArthur took by organising and ordering the landing at Inchon was something that, had it gone wrong it would have probably
- 29:00 finished the war because we were already almost pushed out of South Korea. This was well behind the enemy lines. It was against the advice of all his staff and they would have turned on him, and if we'd been flung off the beaches it would have been a disaster that would have been very hard to recover from. We had no idea personally how many forces we had. I think in retrospect they only just
- 29:30 had enough to succeed if surprise had been complete. Fortunately surprise was complete. If you're landing where the enemy are expecting you, such as Gallipoli or somewhere like that, you have much more trouble than if you're able to rush ashore when the enemy are looking the other way. He was able to achieve surprise. It was a gamble that worked and from then on everything, until the Chinese came in a
- 30:00 month later, everything was on his side and everything went well.
- In December 1950 there took place what Robert O'Neill, the official historian of the Australians in Korea, says, was the most dangerous naval action of the war. The Chinese had entered the war. They were sweeping south through North
- 30:30 Korea, pushing our armies ahead of them. Chinnampo was the port of the North Korean capital Pyongyang, and caught in Chinnampo were eight thousand American and North Korean troops who had to be got out by sea quickly or they would have been enveloped and either slaughtered or captured by the Chinese. Six destroyers, three Canadian,
- 31:00 two Australian and one American, were ordered up the river to cover the withdrawal by merchant ships and junks and everything that was available of those eight thousand people. We were told we had to get up there in a hurry so the trip up was at night, a very dangerous navigational trip at night because it was a channel miles away from the land. You had to feel your way with sonar. There were
- 31:30 mines there. Our chummy ship, Warramunga ran aground on the way up and missed all the fun. One of the Canadian ships not only ran aground but also got a mine mooring mixed up in her screws. Why it didn't, the mine didn't go off, I don't know. She was very lucky. So they both missed the fun. We got up there, found that we weren't really needed quite as quickly as that. All day we stayed at action stations at anchor in the waters off Chinnampo whilst we watched the
- 32:00 ships loading with American and South Korean troops and slipping off down the river.

Tape 11

- 00:37 By December 1950 two things had happened. Firstly, winter had arrived and we hadn't really been ready for it and it was a terribly bitter winter as every Korean winter proved to be from then on and secondly, the Chinese had come into the war on North Korea's side. We were in the waters right up river at

- 01:00 Chinnampo which is the port for Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. We were very cold. We had been in pancake ice outside in the Yellow Sea before we went up river. It was so cold, ice actually on the sea, that we were pushing our way through. Our superstructure was covered with icicles and everything had ice, all the guard rails, and we were up there trying to cover the evacuation
- 01:30 ahead of the Chinese advance of a lot of our friendly troops. We were at action stations. We were there all day waiting. The boys began to get a bit nervous and fidgety. You do, when you can hear the Chinese advancing over the nearby hills and the guns and see the smoke going up. My captain suddenly turned to me and said, "First Lieutenant, paint superstructure." I said, "Sir?" And then I
- 02:00 realised I shouldn't be questioning him and I said, "Aye aye Sir." and I realised what he was up to. He knew that idle hands made worried minds and that idle hands were best occupied with something. So I said, "Right, one man from every gun crew, go down below to the paint shop. Get a pot of paint, bring it up. Hands - paint gun mountings and superstructure, but make quite sure that you don't leave your action stations.
- 02:30 Use rags to wash off or to wipe off as much of the ice and snow as you can and then put the paint on." So by the time we carried out our final duties that night of bombarding the shore after all the troops had come out, the ship was looking like a new pin. It was probably the most handsome looking ship in the whole of the Korean waters and off we sailed after the operation was successfully carried out, down river again and down to
- 03:00 Inchon which was the port for the South Korean capital, where we were expecting much the same thing to happen a couple of weeks later. In fact on Christmas Day we were anchored off Inchon. I was on the bridge. The captain was down below enjoying Christmas dinner with the troops and the weather had improved a little. The temperature had gone from minus twenty which it had been at for some weeks by then up to zero
- 03:30 and as I looked I suddenly, to my horror, saw that all the lovely paint that I'd put on the guns and superstructure two weeks earlier, was falling off in bedraggled strips and I couldn't work out what was happening until suddenly it occurred to me, of course the temperature had risen. We had painted without knowing it over a thin layer of nice dry cold ice, and that ice was now melting and all the paint
- 04:00 was dripping off. By the end of that little episode we were looking the ugliest and untidiest ship in all the Korean waters.
- Off Chinnampo, while we were waiting for the army to evacuate themselves down the river, we took our sailors' minds off the worries of the moment as the Chinese approached, by getting up some pots of paint and getting them to
- 04:30 paint the gun mountings and superstructure in the vicinity of their action stations. We finished up looking very nice as the result, probably one of the nicest looking ships on the coast and two weeks later we were down off Inchon, much the same operation was probably expected. I was on the bridge. The captain was down below enjoying Christmas dinner with the troops and I suddenly saw with horror that all the paint I'd put on a couple of weeks later ... earlier was falling
- 05:00 off and I worked out, all too late, that in fact when we'd put the paint on the temperature had been minus twenty degrees. There had been a thin layer of ice all over the whole ship and the paint had been put on over that thin layer of ice. The temperature had now risen on Christmas Day to zero degrees. The ice had melted and all the paint fell off in sheets. That was the unfortunate result of
- 05:30 not really understanding the conditions of a bitter Korean winter.
- Just talk to me about your impressions of the climate and Just in a very general sense.**
- Our ships of course had been built for the tropics. All our war, World War II nearly, certainly the Australian Navy had been in the tropics. Some of the
- 06:00 British Navy had had cold weather and I had experienced that, but our ships were not designed for cold weather. When the Korean winter hit us much, much colder than anything we'd ever met we were quite unprepared for it. We were still almost in tropical clothing. We found enough to keep warm sometimes below decks. On deck we didn't have anything really warm enough. In the mess decks
- 06:30 I looked hard, after all I was responsible for the comfort and well being of my sailors, and I looked hard for radiators. We didn't have any on board either fitted or loose. There's a funny thing we use in the navy called a yardarm group. It's a parabolic mirror shaped reflector, I suppose is the best word,
- 07:00 in which we have ten or twelve electric light globes and this is, we call it a yardarm group because at night you can hang it from the yardarm and it lights the whole upper deck very efficiently for something you were doing in peace time, on the upper deck at night. I found enough of those in the store to put one in each mess deck and switch it on in the hopes that the light and the heat from ten electric light globes would take the chill off the air. I don't think
- 07:30 it did, but at least it was an attempt to make up for the fact that we had absolutely nothing to deal with the cold. The army ashore, I'm sure, was suffering it far more than we were, but an iron ship with no heating in that sort of climate is a very uncomfortable thing to live in.

INTERVIEW ENDS