Australians at War Film Archive

Geoff Cornish (Geoffry) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:30 **Well, Geoff, if you can just start by telling us where you grew up and what life was like for you as a young man?**

I grew up in a suburb of Perth, Western Australia, about five kilometres from the city and

01:00 about six from the City Surf Beach, so straight away you had my two big interests. And I went to the local primary school and then on to the secondary school. As soon as I had a bicycle at about the age of ten I used to push out for the surf beach in the morning at about five o'clock and have a bit of a swim, surf and a run along the beach and then come home again.

01:30 And of course I was quickly a member of the Surf Lifesaving Club of the city of Perth. And that was one of my main sports. From the day I can remember wanting to do something I wanted to do medicine and nothing else. Reports from school said, 'Has a definite scientific bent that should be encouraged',

02:00 that was my, apparently, report. And I did enjoy science, but particularly medical things. But it was the Depression, Dad had come back from the First World War and married Mum, he had started at fourteen in the government railways in the accounts branch in Perth as the office boy. And he retired at sixty-five

02:30 as head of the West Australia Government Railways Account Branch. So that was so simple, one girl, one home, one family, but it was a happy family home. I had three younger brothers and a younger sister. They gave us a lovely background and a very stable upbringing and I think that helps immensely.

03:00 Because it was the Depression we boys particularly knew that we had to leave school at fourteen to help Dad support the family. There was never a question of whether you did anything else, that was the proper right thing to do and we just never questioned or queried it at all.

03:30 So I studied at night school then, seven to ten, pushed my bike into Perth to the technical college four nights a week, and the fifth night I went to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] to the gymnasium and a club where I met guys of my own age in quite a different setting from all walks of life. And that formed one of my cornerstones, I think. We had a youth director from Queensland then, Ivor Hanger [?].

04:00 He was a great man. Because it was the YMCA, he said each one of the clubs had to have a Christian motto and ours, which I remember very well indeed, was a quote from the Bible, Luke Chapter 2 Verse 52 which says 'Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in faith with God and man',

04:30 and he said, "You won't get a better way to motto to model your life on than that." You try to increase in wisdom, in other words your mental development, increase with stature, increase in favour with God, we will call in philosophy and in favour with man, social aspects, your family, community, etcetera. But do it equally, and aim for the biggest square that you can and keep pushing wider

05:00 the boundaries of that square. That was a wonderful motto and it never let me down. Wherever I felt I was getting rattled or something like that, I would quickly say, "What am I doing on this mental front, physical, oh oh I haven't taken my family out for about nine months, too busy or something like that."

05:30 So that was the background that I grew up in. About that stage I finally matriculated to do my science degree, I thought, "I will do a science degree first and with the money I earn in science I can save enough to finish off in medicine." Because the Depression was on

06:00 most of the fathers in my class were either prospectors or geologists. And as geology was a science subject I studied that with my friends and the science master said one day, the geology master said one day, "There is oil in Western Australia, we will find it one day." And I thought, "My God, if I specialise in oil chemistry, in geology I can be a member of a team searching for oil, and if we find it

06:30 and I buy shares in it there is my medical degree paid for straight away." And so I studied it pretty earnestly and I liked geology. In January 1939 I finally matriculated and started my part time

07:00 science degree. My job when I left school at fourteen was the cadet in the chemistry department at the University of WA on seven [shillings] and six [pence] a week. It was, I found out that cadet was a very fancy name for the cleaner. You had to sweep all of the floors in the laboratory, fill all of the bottles, empty the bins, do the blackboards, clean the professor's room. But they were so friendly, Professor Bayliss, our professor of chemistry,

07:30 he was a young guy only thirty-one. But he might come into his room of a morning and I might not have finished cleaning, and he would say, “Good morning Geoff, how are you? Any problems, anything I can help you with?” and if you said, “Yes.” he just sat down and had a one on one tutorial with the professor. So I enjoyed that and I was so grateful for the wonderful attitude of helpfulness.

08:00 I had only just started by about a month when the RAF [Royal Air Force] advertised in all of the Australian newspapers for Australians aged seventeen and half and twenty-five to apply for a short service commission as pilots with the RAF. The reason was that a few years previously, about 1935, when Hitler started to rise, they knew that they had to build

08:30 a powerful Royal Air Force capable of opposing him. But how to do it quickly and pay for it was another matter. So the application was for a short service commission, in other words you were an officer, they gave you a commission straight away, but after six years serving as a pilot anywhere they sent you, they paid your fare back to Australia and gave you five hundred sterling gratuity.

09:00 Now that would have bought Mum and Dad's home, that was an immense, and it would have been a wonderful leg on to me to do honours and start my science degree. But then every year for the next four years you had to be on the air force reserve and you had to be called up for three weeks and you served somewhere in Australia with an Australian squadron honing up your

09:30 flying skills so that you were right up to date with what had happened in the years since you had pulled out of the air force full time. But of course you were on the reserve, if there was an emergency and you were on the reserve you could be called up immediately. Now that gave them a very big reserve of highly skilled pilots not on the government payroll. We were all earning our own living as soon as we finished our six years but we were

10:00 obliged to come in in case of an emergency. So that was when a huge arm that enabled the RAF to successfully oppose Hitler and went the Battle of Britain. It is not known very much but that is actually what happened. There just would not have been enough pilots around to replace those that were lost, the Battle of Britain was very high on losses.

10:30 So twenty-two of us left Australia, I was selected from Perth on the Orana that was an Orient cruise liner, and she picked us up, the boys from Brisbane, Sydney, so on around the coast, and we were halfway to England, past Colombo and almost to Aden when war was declared. So all of our lovely peacetime plans of six years serving somewhere in the world,

11:00 gone. And when we reached England on the 13th of October '39, only five weeks after war started of course, there was pandemonium. We were put straight into training and we were given a very thorough training course. I did what they call my elementary flying training school just outside of Coventry

11:30 at a place called Anstey, A-N-S-T-E-Y, flying Tiger Moths. And they were just a joy, you can imagine a seventeen, eighteen year old let loose in a Tiger Moth, that was great. And then when we had completed that, that took four months, we then went to Cranwell which is the permanent

12:00 college of the RAF, and we went onto flying training. And I learnt that I would be going on to twin engines because my report from the Tiger Moth said, ‘ Works well under responsibility', and apparently that damned me for Bomber Command, into Bomber Command and not into fighters, the guys who didn't have much sense of responsibility but who could look after themselves were the fighters

12:30 of the future. I enjoyed very much my time in Cranwell and from there we went down to St Athan which is a huge RAF aerodrome in South Wales right on the Bristol Channel and we did a navigation course there, because the bombers we were going into, you had to be able to navigate the things at night,

13:00 and as the second pilot that was your main role, you wouldn't get a look at the controls unless the pilot got injured through an engagement with the enemy. But I loved maths and I enjoyed the navigation part. Then I went to operational training unit. That was at a place, at an aerodrome,

13:30 Upper Heyford, just out of Oxford, the aim of that operational training unit was that you first then got into the aircraft that you were to fly and fight in, in our case a Handley Page Hampden twin engine bomber. Of course there had been pilots flying non-stop virtually since the beginning of the war,

14:00 by this time that was twelve months gone, and they had been under tremendous strain and they had done a lot of work. And when the first of those reserve officers that I had talked about finished their training, they went back and relieved them and the guys who had been flying non-stop were sent back into training command to help train

14:30 the new kids on the block. Fortunately for me, the guy that came back and was my first pilot, and I am very proud to have my name in his log book, was Guy Gibson, the dambuster and Victoria Cross winner,

do you remember him? A very famous pilot .and he taught me to do things

15:00 with the bomber, with the Hampden that the manufacturer had said should never be attempted, he was a wonderful pilot and a great teacher. From then I was posted to a squadron.

Sorry, can I just ask what some of the things he taught you were?

Well, you were taught never to dive beyond a certain speed and not to pull out beyond a certain number of miles on your clock you see? Well, he ignored that, the danger was

15:30 that the tail would fall off because of the tremendous geared strain that you put on it. But he knew that the risks were not as great as the manufacturer said, because they had to leave a leeway because the planes would get a bad name if people went one or two miles over the top speed, he knew it was more like twenty. And of course if you got that top speed you could do a lot more tossing the aircraft around and getting out of the

16:00 way of fighters and whatever. Manoeuvring into tight corners. So his very expert guidance was great. When we went onto the squadron our expectation of life, this was October 1940, was six weeks. When you're nineteen and you have six weeks to live

16:30 on average, we were a pretty wild bunch. You name it, we did it, we had no future and we were determined to have at least a brief experience of what life was all about.

Can you describe what sort of things you did and whether there was a fear there?

Well, the moment you got weekend's leave you shot down to London and did a round of the pubs and RAF club and that sort of

17:00 thing, saw a show, met as many girls as you could of course. Because at eighteen, nineteen, well, we had been at school virtually the whole time so that you had no money to take girls out up until then, but by gee you wanted to then.

So given that timeframe, this grim statistic, how did that affect you, knowing you wanted to be a doctor someday?

17:30 Oh, that was put on hold, you pushed that right to the back of your mind and you never really thought about it. because there you were, unless you gave it your full attention of learning properly and thoroughly and let your thoughts stray you could have been in trouble, with your own life. Because you wouldn't learn as thoroughly as if you had paid full

18:00 attention. So that was it. I was posted to 50 Squadron and they were a wonderful bunch of men with that. And I flew with George Weston [?]. He was a New Zealander and he was my first pilot, I think for about seven missions and then, basically

18:30 through boys being killed, I was promoted to captain. And that was a proud moment, I was one of, if not the youngest skipper in Bomber Command then when I got my promotion. And no more rank, stayed a pilot officer, but you were the skipper of the bomber.

19:00 And we were given a lot of diverse, fascinating but highly dangerous missions to carry out. Across from Brest in the tip of France, down to Bordeaux, to the Bay of Biscay, over to Hamburg, to Berlin, to various targets throughout the Ruhr Valley.

19:30 And it was on, I think, my eighteenth raid, that I was caught over Holland. Up until then the German searchlights had been what they call sonar-controlled, that's a big sound bell that follows you like a pair of ears does, if you have got two ears like this you can say, "Well, that is where the sound is coming from, over there." and the search lights

20:00 were trained to follow that, but this night that we went over the Germans had put radar control on the searchlights for the first time and that was very accurate. And the night that we crossed the Dutch coast and were heading to Düsseldorf to bomb it, there was something not right, you

20:30 could tell something was wrong. There were no search lights, there was no anti-aircraft fire, and you couldn't see any night fighter machine gun fire, because they had tracer in it, you see and you would see this burst of tracer as they tried to hit somebody in the sky, there was none of that at all, so it was eerie. And then all of a sudden, when I was just south of Eindhoven in Holland,

21:00 a terribly bright pale blue searchlight came on flat on the ground going exactly along my track, switched on and that was where I was going. And then he brought the beam up until you just couldn't see, it was very bright. And then as soon as he got me about

21:30 three hundred search lights were given a height to cone on, and I was sitting in amongst these search lights. Just like the star on a Christmas tree. No, whatever you did, wherever you went, whether you dived, climbed, went sideways, combined all three, you were going straight into two or three searchlights and they could hold you. So as it was the first time that new weapon had been used, it was quite successful. I can show you from the records they got four Hampdens in ten

22:00 minutes, all going to Düsseldorff. I was the first of the four. So surprise was a great element. And the first thing I knew having been caught in the search lights was this tremendous roar and damning thud as heavy cannons from the Messerschmitts, they were the twin-engine ones, 110s, who were above us, they came screaming down and firing as they

22:30 went. The leader hit my armour plate, that is up behind the skipper's seat. And of course that's like being run into by a car from behind and about five hundred miles per hour, it's a terrible job. And as he pulled away he hit my

23:00 starboard motor on the right side and set that on fire. And he also got the intercom, the microphone that I talked to each of my crew members. So I couldn't communicate. Now the Hampden is a very narrow aircraft, you can do that and hit either side of the cockpit. They call it the flying suitcase, and it is a bit like a suitcase with a tail on it. The other name for it was the flying tadpole

23:30 because it is about the same shape as that. And then, just after he pulled out, another one came in, but then your second pilot is sitting down in the nose of the aircraft, in front, at the bottom corner of that box, because he is the navigator and front gunner as well. And there was standard drills for everything, so should we lose our intercom,

24:00 which we had done, and he wanted to communicate with me he had to stand up, turn around and he could then see the soles of my feet on the rudder bar and he had to tap the sole of my right foot and I knew straightaway to bend down and there would be a message there, and his message pad was there. And when I pulled it up there was just a lot of splattered blood on it and the message, "He's got me."

24:30 He had wounded Johnny Radcliffe. And I had just barely read it when slam! The next guy came in and the one after that. So I was just dropping, because both hit me and I was losing a bit more control every time, a bit more of the controls were damaged, it was like being in a running accident, you lost a little bit more control of your vehicle.

25:00 I think about the fourth guy, it is very difficult to keep it serially related, but he shot away the canopy that you pull back so that you could get in or out of the aircraft, because it is minus twenty degrees at that height. And of course when you shut it there is nice silence in the cockpit and you can hear what you're thinking about.

25:30 But that was just blown off completely. I left something out here, when Jack said that he was wounded I thought, "Well, if they have hit my armour plate and they have hit me, they have gone right through the wireless op behind me and/or the rear gunner." and I turned around and they were both slumped unconscious in their seats. So I thought, "Well, there is no point

26:00 in pushing on, I have got a dead crew and an aircraft that is crippled, I am over Holland, I have got to jettison my bombs safe." because Holland was of course a friendly country, and there is a toggle, very much like a rifle bolt on the side and you have to pick it up in your hand like that and push it forward and lock it down in place and that opens the bomb doors and allows the bombs to fall away safely,

26:30 as I reached for the toggle it disappeared, the next guy had arrived and he shot away that side of the aircraft, another half a second sooner I would have lost my right hand. You don't dwell on that thought, it is happening so fast. Just after that all I can remember is that it was as if

27:00 we just, all of a sudden all of the controls went, they were just floppy and useless and we were just tumbling through like a paper bag in the sky. Not like a paper bag because there was weight in it, but you were just tumbling out of control through the sky. Apparently, they did, they got all of the controls, but then the next guy who came in, I suppose was most

27:30 junior in the fighter squadron and he got so excited about pressing his cannon he forgot to pull out and so he slammed into me at full throttle in a dive at a huge speed and of course when he hit me his petrol just went right through my aircraft apparently, and the starboard engine is on fire. So the next thing, you have just got two hollow aluminium cans

28:00 and bang! They exploded, and that apparently blew me out into the air, because there was no cover over me to keep me in, that must have happened. Of course I was concussed, I have no recollection of that at all. But I came to freezing because, as I say, minus twenty degrees and my parachute was open and I was picking up my levels of consciousness wondering what had happened.

28:30 But I realised my parachute was open and found that the rip cord was still in my hand. So it shows you how thorough the RAF training was, that even when you were unconscious you could carry out automatically the training that you were supposed to have done. And of course that saved my life. But when you come down at night by parachute,

29:00 I was just seeing what was happening when I saw the same search light catch my best friend, Dave Powell. I took off and he took off, same squadron thirty seconds after me going to the same target. And I saw him caught in the search lights and of course by this time I must have been some thousand feet below him dangling on a parachute

29:30 and I was yelling out to him, "Dave, look out for the bloody 110s! Look out for the 110s!" and then I saw

them come in screaming and catch him and I saw him catch fire and start to fall and he was shot down also. Then, of course when you're drifting through like that it is completely silent and after the roar and bang of

30:00 battle and the explosions and things, you're wondering if you're still alive and you're floating down to heaven instead of up to heaven. You're just completely bewildered and then you get your senses back again and I thought, "I have got to land this parachute." and as I dropped towards the ground in Holland I could see that I was

30:30 over a very big forest that had a canal running through it, and right next to one bank of the canal there was a little cleared bit of land. So I had to aim my rigging lines and try to land in that. Otherwise you land in a tree or a canal, neither of which was a very tempting prospect under those circumstances. The one great difficulty, of course, was at night you cannot

31:00 judge how far away the ground is because it is pitch dark. You do not know if the ground is one centimetre away or one hundred metres, so you hit at full speed coming down, thump! And that once again just winded me completely., I think I passed out for a while I am not sure. But I came to and I was aching

31:30 all over in every joint and every muscle. But when I landed the little bit of cleared land turned out to be a farmyard. So of course the dogs started to bark as soon as they saw and heard this strange vision arriving, and it woke all of the fowls up and they were clucking and squawking all over the place. And then a young

32:00 boy came out, remember at that stage I was nineteen, this boy was about eighteen. He came and unlocked the farmyard gate and he sort of helped and half dragged me and lifted me up and I got to his father's house which was not far away. His father was the local schoolmaster and when they took me into the lounge room it was full of kids,

32:30 apparently they had thirteen kids and they were all there to see this airman who had been shot down. Seventeen-year-old girl was Wilhelmina, remember it was Queen Wilhelmina of Holland at the time. And she was slim and dark like you, and spoke perfect English, so she is telling me how they watched the whole event taking place, so they

33:00 knew virtually who I was and where I had come from. They didn't know my name but about everything else they knew. And she is saying, "Unfortunately, because of the fact it was a new weapon they put on, the Germans were expecting to catch somebody." as I say, they got four of us in fact in ten minutes, and she said, "They heard the dogs and all of the noise and they are doing a house-to-house search now."

33:30 And I don't think she had finished speaking when the door was just blown open and in walked the Germans and I had a loaded revolver pointed at my head, put onto full cock and the German officer saying, "For you the war is over." And I remember thinking at the time, "I hope it is just the war." because you don't know whether he was going to pull the trigger, that wasn't a thrilling moment either.

34:00 But he didn't, and I was marched off to a car outside and taken away up to Amsterdam, and that was Easter Thursday 1941, and I spent Easter Thursday in gaol in Amsterdam. And then I was taken by train down the Rhine to Stalag Luft 1, which was well down in the southwest corner of Germany. No, the transit camp, sorry, Dulag Luft.

34:30 We were interrogated for about four or five days and then a batch of us, about twelve of us who had been shot down over those two or three nights went by train up to Stalag Luft 1. Stalag Luft is a contraction, Stammlager is the German word for permanent camp, and Luft is of the Luftwaffe [German Air Force] so Stalag Luft 1

35:00 means the first permanent camp of the Luftwaffe. And we spent one year there. There were three or four huts, very few of us, bitterly cold, but then it was inadequate and they had constructed Stalag Luft 3 southeast of Berlin, between Berlin and Breslau at a place called Sagan, S-A-G- A-N or Z-A-G-A-N.

35:30 It is still there and it is now in Poland. This one they said was to be escape-proof, and they transferred us all by train down to there in April 1942, into East Camp. And a year later they had finished the big camp which was North Camp,

36:00 and we were moved there the day that it was open. And that was the one from which we dug the great escape tunnels.

Can I just ask, when you were captured the first time and you were trucked to the first camp were there men who had been shot down the same night as you?

Yes.

36:30 There was a Wellington crew, Bertie Bowler [?] was one of the officers of that, I remember. And Squadron Leader Torrens was shot down the night before, I think in a Wellington, yes, there was a whole bunch of us went up there together.

And when they were interrogating you what kind of information were the Germans hoping to get from you?

37:00 What your squadron number was, what sort of aircraft you were flying, where you were going, where you came from, as much searching information as they could. Of course we were told to tell them nothing except your name, your rank and your number. So you just stuck to that, told them name, rank and number. And the next question you just repeated your name, rank and number, and when they realised they weren't going to

37:30 crack you they stopped interrogating you and tried to get somebody who was probably not quite as guarded or concentrating as hard, it was difficult to concentrate, particularly if you had been wounded and were feeling very sick and sorry.

38:00 **So when you were all going on the train to the first camp did you know where you were going or what was going to happen to you?**

No idea. Absolutely none, but you were young, very fit and you just knew that you had to ride with the punches, and

38:30 we did.

Was there much support among the men, did you bond with the people that you were…?

Oh yes.

Tape 2

00:42 So on Easter Monday we were taken down to the Rhine to Frankfurt, to the

01:00 interrogation camp it was called, and there they questioned you, tried to get information about you more than your name, rank and number but it was fairly easy to resist, there was no torture or anything like that. If you didn't answer you didn't answer. And then you were released into the main camp. There must have been about a hundred people in the camp,

01:30 but from there they were dispatched out to the various permanent camps, and the one that a group of us, about twelve or fifteen went to was Stalag Luft 1. Right up on the Baltic Sea, east of the base of Denmark, towards Stettin, and it was bitterly cold and very barren, most unhospitable, which

02:00 I suppose is why they put us there. Of course when you got there and there was very little food, we were starving hungry. Because in the air force in our mess in aircrew you had everything in the way of food. Everything. It was nothing for us to fly an aircraft up to

02:30 Scotland to pick up some salmon, from Oxford say in the middle of England, or over to Northern Ireland to pick up some beef or butter or something like that, which were heavily rationed in England. Because, as I said, you had to flight test your aircraft before you went on operations somewhere, so you took it to somewhere where you could come back laden with beautiful food

03:00 and so we didn't really want for anything. And to give them their credit the air force made sure that their aircrew did have the best of food. But the Germans weren't so thoughtful and it was stinking cabbage, sauerkraut, rotten potatoes and horse flesh occasionally. Which I never really enjoyed.

03:30 But when you got into a room and the cook produced lunch you were so ravenous you ate it, and after a while you adapted to it and you learned, your stomach definitely shrank, because we had been overeating far too much. In ordinary life if you are hungry you can always go to a cupboard and get something,

04:00 there was absolutely nothing. And of course, every book that you picked up to read to take your mind off where you were would describe the most magnificent banquet that the hero or heroine were just sitting down to. You would think, "Oh, not another one!" and change to another book. But

04:30 after a while you got to take, you ate everything that was given you. If a new boy who had just been shot down came into the room and said, "Oh, I don't eat that, I couldn't eat that." Whip, he didn't get a second chance to say he wouldn't like it, it was divided up amongst the other guys and it was gone, and he soon found after a few days that he suddenly had a great liking for this particular food.

What were the quarters like where the men were?

05:00 **How many men to a cabin or wherever you stayed?**

In the first camp up there, we only had four in the Baltic, and then it went to six. And then over the years that was accentuated. When we first went to North Camp we had eight in a room and we finished up with eighteen, six three-tier bunks in exactly the same space.

05:30 And the feeling of being hemmed in by people was huge. You wanted to bust a chap's nose in just because he was there and he was too close to you. As they say, invading your space is the term now. You

knew it was no good losing your temper or picking a fight or something like that because you had to live with him twenty-four hours a day. Okay,

06:00 there were some minor scuffles in the first week or so. But people soon learnt to control their temper and to control their attitude and to be more thoughtful of others. In that way it was wonderful discipline, you had to pull together as a unit and you did.

Was there a kind of pecking order in how the men were kept in line or was in rank, how did order be maintained?

06:30 It was treated as an RAF station. There was a senior British officer, the most senior ranking from our side was in charge of the camp. Although we didn't have to obey him, unless he had flipped his lid and was, but that didn't happen, we would do what he suggested. And in the north camp there were fifteen different huts, three rows of five,

07:00 and there was a senior British officer in each one, and a deputy who was slightly junior to him, and they would communicate all of the info from the senior British officer in the camp. And his adjutant there was a guy in each camp who used to keep us up to date with what the Germans were requesting should be done . We used to keep them right at

07:30 arm's length from us. As far away as we could possibly keep them, and as long as we were courteous and complied as much as we felt that we should they left us fairly severely alone. Because if they didn't it just made a lot of extra work and a lot of extra trouble. The difference between the prisoners and the guards

08:00 was that the quality of the guards, on a scale of A to Z, they were Z. Because anybody with any intelligence or ability was at the fighting front. And the guards that were too old or too stupid but were in the services were sent to be guards to us. That suited us fine because to be in aircrew your education level had to be high

08:30 indeed. And we had twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week doing nothing but plot how we would get out of it. and how we would outwit the Germans psychologically, physically, in every possible way, bluff, whatever.

Can I just ask, did you have nicknames for certain guards and did you know what they liked, their weaknesses and so on?

Oh yes.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

09:00 They had what they called ferrets, each of the huts was raised about seventy or eighty centimetres from the ground on wooden pillars. They are wood with wooden floors, but of course we had to start our tunnels from the ground level, so the Germans had these ferrets as they called them, which was quite descriptive, funny little men who would go disappearing, trying to find holes to disappear down.

09:30 And it was their job with a long steel prodder to try and find a weak spot and say, "Oh well, that's where they have a tunnel, they have hidden it, put sand over it and a wooden trap." So Charlie was the first ferret. Then there was a keen type who was always terribly conscientious and trying to find it. Charlie couldn't have given a damn, he just filled his day in. He was easy meat, give him a

10:00 cigarette and a cup of tea and he was quite happy. The camp ferrets, in charge was a man called Glemnitz [?] who was an East Prussian and a professional soldier before the war, and he was the equivalent of a warrant officer. He was absolutely unbribable. But he was fair. We would say,

10:30 "Sit down, Glemnitz, have a cigarette and a cup of coffee." "Oh, okay, thank you." So he would sit down and have a cup of coffee. "Have another cup?" "No, trying to find a tunnel, you want to keep me here." And he would walk out. Some of the guys would sit down and have three or four cigarettes and three cups of coffee, we knew which ones would stay and so which clandestine activities we could safely work while they were in the room.

11:00 **So there was a lot of testing of the enemy in that sort of way?**

Oh yes, continually. As I say, it was like an RAF station and the biggest sub-organisation if you like was the escape committee. And they co-ordinated all escape activities, everything to do with escaping. And that was headed by Roger Bushell and he was in our room. So a lot of the planning

11:30 and a lot of the detail was done in our room. And Roger was a very great friend, he was a South African, brilliant lawyer, and a top barrister and he was working in London in the top law branches there. He spoke fluent German, he was brave and he was cunning. He was the ideal type, and he loathed the Germans.

12:00 Absolutely and utterly. Underneath the sub-committee of the escape committee there was the security commission who made sure that nobody talked carelessly and gave away anything. They made sure that people didn't glance the wrong way because they knew that some activity was going on. And if a lot of people glanced

12:30 sideways at a certain spot the Germans would know there was something there. So all of those fine details were taken care of in security.

Can I just ask how the escape committee was formed? Was there a selection process for men that could become part of that?

Just ability, willingness and get the job done. They were tough if you failed, you were out and somebody else

13:00 was put in your place. So underneath this there was the escape committee and then underneath as I say we had the German bribery department, that was about five of us, German speakers, and it was our job to get in contraband like special paper for the documents, photographs, whatever we needed.

13:30 Radio valves, because we had our own wireless set and we had to keep that operating. There was a mapmaking department, forgery department, the tunnel planning department, carpentry, metal work, to name a few.

14:00 And there was a team attached to each of those divisions. The forgery was so brilliant that one day they actually called, the police couldn't tell if we were forgers or genuine and there was one particular incident where they needed to know whether it was a forgery or not and they

14:30 called the Reichsbank officials in to detect whether it was a forgery. When we first went into the campo the German Commandant called about eight or ten of our senior officers into his office. And he lined them up around his desk and they were standing to attention and then

15:00 one of them said, "Can we stand at ease?" "Ja, naturlich [yes, of course], you can." so they put their hands behind their back and just stood at ease but then he was telling them about how escape proof this camp was and how we should just settle down and make the most of where we were, but they, with their hands behind their backs, were quietly turning the locks in the cupboards, the glass cupboards like those behind you, undoing

15:30 it and stepping forward, then putting their hand into the top of it and pushing up the top of their battle dress. Now a battle dress has got a tight belt around it and an open top, and they were stuffing under their belt at the back any of the original documents that they could put their hands on, and then relocked the cabinet .And then when the Commandant dismissed them they went back with every original document and every pass to get into or out of the camp

16:00 and to do virtually any activity associated with it. And that's what caused great confusion amongst the Germans, they thought that there must have been a German providing it for us, either that or our forgeries were brilliant. So we were always on the, a step ahead of them. In the German bribery department you had people with a family, guards with a family

16:30 and they had no scruples about providing us with contraband things providing they got one of the four main articles which came in our Red Cross parcels: chocolate, Nescafé, soap and cigarettes. Those four items, any of them on the black market was worth a fortune.

17:00 A packet of American cigarettes, a tin of Nescafé, so when one of your guards was going on leave, if you were in the bribery department you would say to him, "Look, we're not all the terror fliers" terror fliegen they used to call us. Terror fliers, the Luft Gangsters, the Americans they called Air Gangsters.

17:30 "We're not that at all, here is some soap for your wife and some chocolate for your kids and some cigarettes for you, have a good leave." When they came back they had had a wonderful leave and perhaps six months later they would be going on leave, and they would just say to you, "I am going on leave next week." And expect to be given all of these things, see? And we might give them to them the second

18:00 time too. But on the third occasion, might be a year later, we worked very patiently, we would say, "No, they are in short supply." Well, straight away he knew the children would be whining and whinging, and his wife would be the same and he wouldn't have any cigarettes to smoke either, so we could say, "We do have a few on the condition that you could bring back this or that." "Couldn't possibly,

18:30 no, I would never do that." "Please yourself." But I remember saying to one guy now, "You know I am studying science here?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "I need a magnet because I am studying magnetism and electricity." Well, that made sense to him, he knew it wasn't true but it was enough logic that he could say, "Well he told me that

19:00 and so." So I said, "Give me a small magnet, it doesn't have to be anything." of course that was used for making a compass. Swing the compasses. And you knew from one of the Germans who were already in your bribery, which town he lived in and what suburb of it. So you would say to the guard who was already in your pay, "We want you to go into Bunnings hardware and buy a magnet.

19:30 Throw it away, do anything you like with it but keep the receipt, that's all I want." And when he came back and gave you the receipt you would give him some contraband for his trouble. And then when the little German came in sweating and fearful with the magnet that he had smuggled through and he was shaking with fear that he might be found out and gave to you,

20:00 you would thank him very much and all was well. But then when you asked him for something much bigger, like a radio valve the next time, he went, “No, I will not do that.” You would say, “Well, you have bought us a magnet.” “You can’t prove it.” “Can’t we? You went into Bunnings Hardware, you bought the magnet there” and you could see it was rocking home

20:30 because that was exactly where he bought it. And we had Bush Parker, who was a Queenslander, who was a professional stage musician before he joined up and we would say, “Bush, haven’t you got a receipt somewhere?” And Bush would quietly produce the receipt. And then we would just crumple it up and it was

21:00 gone. So then we would say, “So we will get the radio valve, won’t we?” He might say, “No, a magnet is not bad, I might get a weekend confined to barracks.” We’d say, “You will probably get three weeks’ bread and water.” “No.” Then in comes Jimmy Higgins, that was our code name for the man in charge of all of the guards, he was responsible

21:30 for keeping us in and making sure this didn’t go on. He was completely and absolutely in our pay. So we would say to him, Jimmy, “Corporal Smith is going to come and confess to you about this, he has got to have three weeks’ bread and water.” Three weeks later when he came out of his three weeks’ bread and water, “What do you want next?

22:00 They gave me three weeks!” “Yes, we would believe that’s what happened.” And so then he was easier meat, he thought that they had really done the dirty on him. So we had all of those techniques and we really used them well. And it was fun using them. It was very satisfying to be able to put one over the Germans like that time after time.

It sounds like your manner towards them was very relaxed, the way you played with them. Was that always the case or…?

22:30 Oh no, there were times, if somebody had been shot at or a few times when people were actually shot and killed there was of course a tremendous freeze for a long time. But that got you nowhere, there would be no communication, and you were cutting off your nose to spite your

23:00 face, sort of thing. In other words you had to have the means and the access to get the things that you wanted to go into different escape activities. So we did our best to keep it on an even keel so that we could do that.

Do you think without those Red Cross parcels you would have been basically helpless?

Very hungry and very helpless, yes. We had no weapons then.

23:30 They were our weapons. The Germans were very funny in that way, in that if a thousand Red Cross parcels left Switzerland, they had to come in from the neutral countries via the Red Cross, the Germans would check, and if two were missing they would search out who had taken them and punish them. They didn’t say, “Well, they have got nine hundred and ninety-eight, they have got nothing to complain about.” No. “A thousand was sent, a

24:00 thousand will be delivered.” As if German honour was at stake. And in that way we did get, it was different, of course, for the boys with the Japanese it was a completely different scene altogether.

So how important was it for you to understand, I guess, the German culture and the German psyche?

Vital. Almost literally life and death because…

24:30 **What were your observations about them?**

Deep down, of course they were white and very like, more like us probably than the French were. They often used to say, “You should be on our side fighting against the Russians.”

25:00 A point of view which we never shared. But that was quite frequently said to us over the years. Because of that similarity, you’re able to think like they thought but you know the subtle differences between the way we as British thought and spoke

25:30 and they spoke and thought, we were able to utilise that as well.

What was the hardest item that you ever had to bribe someone for?

26:00 A camera, I think, because it was a thirty-five millimetre pre-war German camera I think, Dillina, D-I-L-L-I-N-A [Dollina?]. I know because it came into my hands because I was taking the photographs. I didn’t get it in but I know they had great difficulty getting it in. because that would have almost been a death sentence if they had been caught

26:30 smuggling it into us.

What did you use the camera for?

Taking the photographs, because everyone who escaped had to have documents, he was a foreign

worker or he was going out dressed as a German to impersonate a German. In which case he had to have a passport. So we had to have the photographs, which were absolutely genuine and passed muster.

27:00 And, as I have said, the forgeries of the documents themselves were brilliant, and if the photographs matched them so much the better, so that's what we use them for. For no other reason.

So where did you have you photographic lab in terms of development, I mean you needed a lab, you needed paper ?

That was hidden in a secret room, I have got a photograph of it there. I will have to describe it to you carefully,

27:30 but yes, we had, I had a very cramped space in which I could operate, operate fully as a darkroom. Remember when I got the job in the university before the war they had a beautiful photographic lab in the chemistry department and I was free to use it any time that I wanted to. So that's when I made photography my hobby. And

28:00 I could sort of develop, print, enlarge, do all of those tricks of the trade long before I joined the air force, that's why I got the job of photographer, and it was very useful.

I guess, what are some of the other things that men would need when they were escaping,

28:30 **I mean obviously they would need clothes and food?**

Yes, they were allowed to send us clothing parcels from England, and our tailoring department could modify them to look like Polish troops' uniforms.

29:00 Some of the English stuff, of course, was much better quality than the continental stuff. But they had tricks like, with a safety razor blade they could shave the outside of the fabric and make it appear just like the German equivalent. They could convert it, well, like you get a cotton or a brushed cotton, they learnt very cleverly how to

29:30 modify the surface and the texture and the colour of the fabric so that it resembled something on the continent and not something that had been imported from England.

Were there times when you had to, say, get an original so that you knew how to exactly copy it?

Not so much get it as sight it. For instance, the guards that came in, they all had a pass to get in or out of the camp

30:00 and therefore to forge one, if we didn't have an original we had to have a good look at one, two good looks and one, and probably three or four good looks so that it was done so accurately. So that it would pass through unflinchingly without a second thought.

30:30 And those had to be accumulated over weeks and months.

I am interested in the daily routine of the men, like how much time of the day could you devote to exercises in terms of getting ready for an escape and how much time were you occupied with other things?

You pleased yourself, I mean you had twenty-four hours a day, the only

31:00 absolute mandatory obligation was if the Germans said, "Roll call." you had to get out onto the parade ground, which was just a flat open area of semi-grass, semi-sand. And we were drawn up in columns of three or five and counted. And if they thought that somebody was trying to escape and might be down a tunnel they would call a

31:30 snap roll call and of course you would have to get the guys out of the tunnel on the double, up from down below and washed so that they didn't have sand all over them and dried and on parade in a couple of minutes. So that's the way they would try and trick us and try and see if we were running a tunnel and if so they could try and locate it to a certain hut.

32:00 Apart from that, no, their only obligation was to make sure that we didn't get out, and apart from that they didn't interfere internally at all. It was just extra work for them, they had no hope of being able to get us on side or to co-operate with them. so you had all day to fill in, in fact it was the sheer boredom did drive some of the

32:30 guys, as I say a bit stir happy, a bit crazy. But to combat that the senior officers in the camp used to organise classes, and there were always elementary German classes, middle German classes or advanced German classes. Or French. It didn't matter what you wanted to do, there was somebody in that camp.

33:00 Remembering there were about two and a half thousand people who had either finished their tertiary education, or were into it before they joined up. If you wanted to learn photography, if you wanted to learn to make wine or distil spirits, there was somebody who would do it for you. If you wanted to learn

Mandarin Chinese, Squadron

33:30 Leader Murray had been in Hong Kong, in the Far East for twelve years and he spoke fluent Chinese. You could learn Japanese, Russian was a very popular choice. A lot of people learned French while they were there. I mean, I had the science master from Edinburgh University giving me one-on-one tutorials in chemistry and physics.

34:00 He was delighted, it kept him interested and occupied and it was great tuition for me.

So it was almost like an extraordinary university in a way?

It was, yes. Even down to carpentry, we used to make our own solder. In those days, I think they still have, some of the packs

34:30 of cigarettes have a silver foil inside don't they? In those days every packet had silver paper lining it. We used to take that out, crumple it up and we would put it in a little tin, those tins, fishpaste and things that you use for spreading on sandwiches, we would take the top off with a tin opener and we would put a piece of wire around the top rim, twist it into a long handle and push it down so there was

35:00 a spout on one side, pushed all of the cigarette paper crumpled up inside of that and we had made a tiny little forge where with bright bits of coal dust we could get the temperature up very high and we could actually melt that silver paper and get it like solder. And then we would take a piece of cardboard with corrugations

35:30 like that. And we would split the corrugation open a little bit and them from the long handle of wire that we put, we would just pour the molten solder down into there and it would cool and solidify as it went down and then you would just break it open, because it would be charred, and you were left with thin sticks of solder to be used for metal work. With a pencil and

36:00 using the tins, ordinary tins that food, like food still comes in, we could open it up, put a pencil in, roll it around and then you had a tube. And then you could solder the tube and you had a hollow tube that you could put steam through. And we used that in a lot of areas with a lot of success.

What other things did you recycle for other uses?

Virtually everything that came in.

36:30 There was a use for everything usually in an escape plan somewhere. I mean, cardboard cartons, okay, from the food parcels, okay, you couldn't hope to use those. But then when the American Red Cross came in, most of their foodstuffs came in in those big plywood cubes. And they made perfect

37:00 theatre chairs, we took the top off it, the front off it, and you just had the two sides, the back and the bottom, then you would model the other part that you had just taken off into a seat and then you had a row of theatre chairs, and we used to, we turned one room into a small theatre, made our own seats and everything. Some of the best actors on the British stage and in early television

37:30 were guys who learnt their trade in acting in our camp.

What sort of subjects were content of the plays or...?

Macbeth, live Shakespeare, comedies, mysteries, everything, you would have a full cast with a director and a producers, lots and lots

38:00 of rehearsals and then put on a very credible show. Say you had a magician, you had singers, we had our own band, and they were a very good band too.

So you had to bribe the Germans for instruments and everything?

Well, of course they had very little leave towards the end of the war, they were all fighting

38:30 because they were going to be invaded and nobody had any time to play any musical instruments. So we were able to offer them a bit of money for them, a bit of money that we had swizzled in. So they sold them second-hand, very second-hand band instruments. But then our boys could tune them up, bring them right up, polish them

39:00 and make them look really good. And they used them. And a lot of people had full musical careers from skills that they learnt in our camp.

How did you get the money in, you said you sort of swizzled it in?

Bribery, I mean that was easy for them to give us money, that couldn't get them incriminated because every

39:30 soldier came in with money in his pocket so we could give him cigarettes to smoke while he was supposed to be on duty in the camp. So he took nothing out and he was a couple of deutschmarks lighter when he left, but we had currency.

Did the Germans ever sit in on your entertainment at all? Were they stuck and bored?

Oh, they invited the commandant and some of his senior officers to some of our concerts,

40:00 particularly the classical ones and things like that. Once again, we used that to our advantage. The best example of that was when in East Camp before we opened the North Camp

40:30 there was a plan hatched to escape in daylight by cutting your way through the wire with a pair of wire cutters which we had made ourselves with material in the camp. But to do that we had to have a big diversion. So many people in the camp were told to take up some sport and there were home made javelins flying in every direction across our open ground.

41:00 Guys doing shotput and discus, sprinting, hop, step and jump, high jumps and this feverish athletic activity. And then we invited the commandant and his officers to come and see us put on a miniature Olympic Games amongst ourselves.

41:30 And when the commandant looked up the date that we were going to have it, it was on the day that our Swiss protecting power was supposed to be coming in and see that the Germans were doing the right thing. Well, if the protecting power could see that they had allowed us to have a sports day they would get great big marks. And they giggled to themselves behind our back, “Oh, they boo-booed this time, they don’t know” Of course we knew.

Tape 3

00:32 **So we will just go from the date you had decided, if you can pick it up there?**

So there was this feverish physical activity of sport going on, for many hours during the day and the days were really good. I mean Lawrence Rimmel Carter [?] who lived in the room that I was in, he was the

01:00 British 1936 shotput and discus English representative at the Berlin Olympic Games. Just three years previously, so if you wanted tuition in those sports he gave it to you. And the standard of ability got very high indeed. But then you would get a directive from the

01:30 escape committee, “While you’re training you have got to fall over and hurt yourself.” No mucking around, it has got to be quite a bad fall, a sprained knee or twisted ankle or something that was quite obvious and not just put on. Which meant then that you had to go to the sick parade and get attention,

02:00 until there were so many people off limping around the place that the senior British officer called off the games. The Germans were horrified, of course, “What is the matter?” “Well, particularly what you call the sports fields is so rough that we can’t train on it accurately.” But also the running track

02:30 which was inside the barbed wire a rectangle about a kilometre around, more than a kilometre, about a mile around really. That was rough too. So we said, “We want a good running track just inside the.” there was a warning wire three metres out from the actual barbed wire that you

03:00 weren’t allowed to go over, that was no man’s land, and you were shot without question if you went over it. So there was a little wire, we called it the warning wire, about that high. And inside that was the running track and it was terribly rough. So we hinted, why didn’t they put some smooth sand on it? They didn’t have grass so there was no way of turfing it, so we just said, “Look, ordinary yellow sand.”

03:30 Because it was black sand on the surface, it was bright yellow underneath and disguising it was one of our major horrors of tunnelling. So we said, “Just put three metres of yellow sand around and we can keep that smooth and train on that.” Well, they thought that was a good idea. So then we could disperse all of our sand on that and people would never know that it was building up.

04:00 When you got a thing about three metres wide and about one and a half kilometres long, it doesn’t change. And that’s how we successfully and unobtrusively got rid of most of our sand. And of course when he did do this, he put these good conditions down then we started retraining again. So we got what we wanted. But it just meant a couple of meetings and they thought out this scheme and the Germans fell for it completely and absolutely.

04:30 **What were some other major diversions like the Olympic Games that you undertook in order to achieve something major like that?**

You might remember that fairly early on there was a thing called the wooden horse and people did actually escape using the wooden horse.

05:00 **I don’t know about that, could you tell me about that?**

Certainly, if you worked in a gymnasium you would know a wooden horse, the vaulting horse that you get from a springboard and get onto the horse. Well that, of course, is hollow inside, so we asked the Germans for timber to build a vaulting horse so that we could do gymnastics on the sports field, and they gave us the timber and we made it.

05:30 So that after roll call and breakfast in the morning we would bring this horse out and put it, but it was always placed very carefully in the same spot, not too far from the outside wire. But in absolute open territory, but it took about four to six guys to lift the horse out because being Germans it was pretty heavy timber

06:00 and they just made light of it and picked it up and put it down in place and started their vaulting. See, we had gym instructors as well, people who were well up in gymnastics, showing guys how to tumble properly and handstand on a vaulting horse, but when they carried the vaulting horse out there were two guys curled up inside it, and when they put it down on the same place and started vaulting over it

06:30 the guys inside just pushed the sand away, there was a wooden trap buried underneath and when they lifted that out there was the start of a tunnel. And so they went down and deepened and lengthened the tunnel and put sand back up into racks within this horse and then at the end of the gym session they lifted up the vaulting horse with the two diggers and all of the sand and take it back into the barracks.

07:00 And then we were able to dispose of the sand inside the barracks, and there is no evidence left, it is all covered over, and the Germans didn't notice of course because different guards on every shift and probably most days of the week. So there is nobody to say, "Why are they always putting it on the same spot?." but to Germans that would be logic. That was the place that it went and it should go there. So there was no suspicion over it at all. So that's the way we used covers like that.

07:30 **Can you just talk us through how you got rid of the sand?**

Yes, at night we were allowed to go between each hut. There were five huts, long huts like that in one row,

08:00 and then a space, then another row of five huts and then another row of a third lot of five huts, and each one had a central corridor with a big door either end which could be locked. And on the outside at nightfall all of the outside windows were barred with wooden shutters like we have got, and the outside doors of the corridors were locked for the night, but the ones that pointed from the end of the corridor, straight down the

08:30 corridor of the next hut were left open and from nightfall until nine p.m. at night we were allowed to walk straight along that line to talk to people in the next hut and the next hut. And then we were allowed to go straight along the line to the next lot. So there was a sort of skeleton pattern in the sand if you like where you could walk to any one of the fifteen huts, but there was no

09:00 crossing in a diagonal, it had to be along that path which was fairly narrow. And if after nightfall you got off that path you could be shot at. So when a couple of guys did get some shots fired on them, fortunately no one was hurt, we asked the Germans to mark it out in something clear so that we knew that we were on or off the path and the only material

09:30 they had was yellow sand which was free and plentiful. So we had nice yellow tracks between these huts which gave us quite a lot of area. The puzzle, of course, was to get yellow sand undetected from the tunnel and onto that without them suspecting that it came from us and not from their regular sources and put on by them. So

10:00 we cut up strips off a blanket, when we were shot down you were each issued two German army blankets, but as quickly as we could we replaced those with good blankets sent by the Red Cross in England. They were much warmer, so the German ones, we used to put them underneath our mattresses, anything you like. So it was no trouble to take a piece

10:30 about that wide, the full length of a blanket and just cut it off and then turn it into a roll, stitch it down so that it was just a tube open at both ends and the diameter of a normal tin can. Then in the end with it was curled over like that, you cut just in the end

11:00 a little hole, a button hole, that's exactly, and we did sew it as a button hole and then another button hole and another, and so you had six or seven evenly spaced around each of the open ends. Then inside that you had, on the outside of it rather, we got a piece of wire, ordinary thin wire about a centimetre long, bent it up like that into a half circle

11:30 and then another straight centimetre and then we stitched the two straight pieces onto the outside of the blanket, and that gave us a figure D up in the air. And then you took the figure D and put it down through the first button hole, up through the next button hole and then down through the next one and eventually it came out and the hole had closed over and the D is coming out through there, you see like that and then you put a piece of wire through that and that

12:00 end was closed over. And from the piece of wire you put through the end you put a loop on the end and a bit of string about that long and you sewed the bit of string about that far along the tube. And then the sand dispersers used to take this and put it under their shirts, under their clothes, around their neck, but then you would unstitch

12:30 the central part around there, the part that went around there and down to there. Then when you went into the room where the tunnel was being dug and the sand was coming up, as a disperser you went

over and you opened up your shirt and a guy put an opened up tin into it, like a scoop, opened up the exit like that and then they shovelled sand into it and you shook the sand

13:00 down right until it hit the bottom and built up to about there, but in your loose pants you could never see that. And then when you had filled with sand you walked out of the door and the guy at the door would tell you, “Go to Hut 123, pick up Bill and Joe who will be your escorts, and you will disperse your sand from here to here

13:30 and come back via this other hut.” So there was no regular pattern, if the tunnel was in an open hut and you had a stream pf people like ants building a nest, going in and out the Germans would say, “That is where the tunnel is” But if the traffic was spread absolutely evenly through the whole camp they didn’t have a clue. And then when you got to where you were supposed to get to you put your hands in your pockets, you picked up the end of the bit of string

14:00 and just pulled the vertical wire out of the end D part, the weight of the sand bellowed the bottom open and the sand came down over your shoes and onto the yellow sand. The escape committee issued an order that everybody was to shuffle, nobody was to lift their feet. And we could walk past a German guard and be actively dispersing sand and he couldn’t tell which one was

14:30 doing it and which one was just shuffling.

So you shuffled all of the time in the camp?

All of the time, yes. And that’s how we got rid of the sand, it was very easy, huge quantities were moved from those three tunnels.

15:00 **At what point did the Germans realise that you were starting to dig a tunnel?**

They knew that we were either planning to imminently start a tunnel or we were actually building one., I don’t think there was ever a time when we weren’t tunnelling somewhere.

But how do you think they knew?

15:30 Well, they had to be suspicious the whole time, because we did make quite a few escapes through tunnels from different camps throughout the years. Some they found, And they sort of put explosives in and blew them up. But by that time when it was well advanced you were usually starting another one just in case it was

16:00 found. So it was cat and mouse the whole time. We never gave them a chance to relax.

Can you tell me about, maybe one time you can remember where they did find a tunnel and blow it up, what was morale like when something like that happened?

Yes, it would be dented of course, but not deeply or irreparably because you knew we would start again straight away.

16:30 As I said, the tunnel had to start from sand under a hut. In each room they had a slow combustion stove and that of course had to be bricked up so that it stood on a brick

17:00 square about one metre by one metre just inside the room with a flue out through the roof. So the coal briquettes could slow burn and we didn’t freeze to death. The Germans didn’t give us very much coal to put in them but nevertheless they were there, and those square brick pillars of course were filled with solid rubble and went right down

17:30 to the ground and then with a stove burning on top that was the perfect place for us to set one of our traps. By using the wood and by making block and tackle wooden pulleys we could hitch one onto, it was a very strong beam of course through the ceiling in all of the rooms. We could actually

18:00 throw a sling under one of these stoves while it was alight, only just alight but it was still burning and warm, and we could lift the whole stove off its ceiling and we then moved it sideways and put it down on the wooden floor, the camouflage people and carpenters then took up the whole of that brick square. Which of course had a wooden edging around it,

18:30 and brick by brick remounted it on a wooden base, put the base back in, hinged it and then we could lift the whole thing up and we had one square of sand we could start digging straight into. And then when we finished the shift just let the hinge back down the floor, went flat again, the

19:00 camouflage boys put bits of dirty sand, old cigarette butts and that so that it looked as thought it had never been moved, lifted the block and tackle, put the stove back on, reconnected the flue and you were ready to go. A German came in for a cup of coffee and spilt it and it spilled over off the stove and

19:30 onto this brick square and of course it ran straight through into the tunnel. And he said, “That is very funny, there is something wrong here.” And of course called the other guards in and they soon found that that was where the tunnel was. So they called the German army demolition experts in because it was quite a problem, and they

20:00 came in with dynamite, and our boys said to them, “Don’t be stupid, you put that big brick heavy cover on it and then you’re going to blow it up? The whole of that section will go straight through the roof and our engineers say it will come back down through the roof about twelve or fifteen metres away.”

20:30 “Ve are the experts.” Boom! Boom, boom, boom, exactly where we said it would come back down through the roof again. Of course then they were absolutely disgraced because we had told them not to do it and it had proven that we were right and they were wrong . And of course they couldn’t stand around because all of the Germans speakers would be ridiculing them, “You’re not going to keep your job are you?” “You will probably be promoted and be on the Eastern Front next week.” “We won’t be seeing you again.,”

21:00 and of course they would be fuming, anything where you could acutely embarrass them you did so. I think the best example of that was not long after we had moved into North Compound and we had the radio going secretly at night and took the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] news so that we were informed of what was going on in the outside world.

21:30 But by detection as they do now the Germans worked out that there was a radio somewhere in our hut. Then Jimmy Higgins, who was supposed to be keeping us in and responsible for all of this, but as I said was in our pay, came in. He said, “Tonight at three o’clock in the morning there is going to be a secret Gestapo [Geheimestaatspolizei, Secret State Police] search

22:00 of this hut because we think there is a radio here. They must not find anything or phht for me!” We said, “Relax, Jimmy, they wont find anything.” Sure enough, three o’clock in the morning tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp and there are thirty guards surrounding just our hut so it is absolutely isolated. They keep the far door locked and open this big one

22:30 at the end of the corridor and in came two funny looking little weaselly Gestapo men in civilian clothes. You would swear that Hollywood had done them up as Gestapo men, they were so typical. Then everybody was told, they put a small table like a kid’s school desk in the centre of the

23:00 corridor and we had to file past them, one on this side and one on this side and be strip searched as you went past, and they did a pretty thorough search and anything they found they dumped on the table. It was a very hot night as well and after a while they got so hot, because they were working furiously to get through this hut they took their coats off and hung them somewhere safe where we couldn’t get at them

23:30 over there, and went on searching. And they soon built up quite a big mound of old maps and bits of compasses and things that we didn’t particularly want. And they were feeling quite pleased with themselves. But there was some stuff that we did want to get out, including the radio. And different guys had different bits of it secreted on their person.

24:00 So we called in Bush Parker, our Queensland stage magician as well, and when one of the Gestapo was searching Bush he dropped a small round compass onto the floor, grabbed it and the Gestapo man said, “Geben Sie mir.” “Give it to me.” And Bush, who spoke perfect German, pretended he didn’t understand.

24:30 The Gestapo man started to prise his fingers open and when he got it open there was nothing there. Bush looked at it, “Oh, here it is, up here.” and produced it out of his hair. So the Gestapo man grabbed his hand and of course the same thing happened, by the time he got that prised open it had gone again. And then he is trying to search him. Bush pretended he was violently ticklish, so the Gestapo man is trying to search him and

25:00 Bush is finally lying on the floor thrashing around being tickled by this Gestapo guy everywhere. And of course he wouldn’t stop, so the Gestapo man said to his mate, “He has got a compass, come over and give me a hand.” So finally they got the little compass and stood up in absolute triumph, only to find that there was nobody left in the hut at all. While they were fighting with Bush on the floor

25:30 everybody with all of the contraband has gone out the other side and they cleared out everything that had been confiscated and reconfiscated it in our own name and the table was bare. They were livid with rage . So they turned around and put on their coats to go out and complain to the commandant. He had told them before they went in,

26:00 “Now for heavens sake be very cautious, they are cunning and will do anything and they will set traps.” “We are the Gestapo, stand aside.” So the commandant and the officers were then as much on our side as we could have them. They hated the Gestapo also. So the commandant more or less said, “Well, I have warned you.” And in they went. And then when they had to

26:30 put their coats on and come out to the gate to come out. Of course they had to produce their pass to get out of the camp and when they went into their pockets there is no pass there. Nor is the Gestapo identity badge in there, we had pinched that as well. And when they said to the guard, “Open the gate, we are the Gestapo.” He said, “No,

27:00 you pull these tricks continually, I know you are not Gestapo. You can stay there.” “Ring the Commandant, he will come immediately.” “I will not ring the Commandant at four in the morning. I will

ring the Commandant when he has had his breakfast at six o’clock.” and he refused to budge. So these little guys have got to walk all around, they were prisoners,

27:30 inside the warning wire, very disgruntled and from our huts of course the German speakers were calling out to them, “You’re going to be executed for this aren’t you?” “You’re Gestapo, you’ve shamed them and let them down.” We could see them swallowing hard and we were hitting home quite desperately .

28:00 And we kept that up non-stop the whole time until the commandant came up, cigar on and they raced up to him and blabbered away this whole story . “Hmm.” he said, “Yes I will retrieve that for you, we know where they hide those things.” And he walked into the hut and through to another hut and of course we gave it all back to him, so he was able to go back to them and give them their wallets

28:30 with their passes to get out of the camp and their Gestapo identity cards. But when they got to the gate to show them and opened their ID card, they looked rather like our letters, we were allowed to write three letters a month and two postcards. And each one, of course, was read by the Germans and then marked

29:00 with a great big stamp, “Geprüfft.” which means approved, “by the German censors Stalag Luft 3” in a great big, with a swastika and a German eagle on top of it. And when they opened their Gestapo passes there was a great big black rubber stamp which we had made from the heel of a flying boot with an RAF wings and the RAF crest and the crown on top. And in

29:30 English underneath, “Approved by the RAF censors Stalag Luft 3.” And there was no way out of it, the German commandant could not take the smile off his face, and he said, “Well, there are your passes, we won’t be seeing you again, will we?” And they knew they were probably, certainly a long custodial sentence as they say. And we never saw the

30:00 Gestapo again for the rest of the war.

Were the Gestapo a different breed, did you fear them more than the ordinary guards?

They were, they had the reputation of treachery and being responsible only, they were the secret police,

30:30 they could imprison you, they could do anything they liked, they had incredible powers and they knew it and used it. But this was one occasion where they were quite disadvantaged and we were delighted to turn the tables on them.

How do you, I mean the way you describe it, it does sound like a movie, I mean it is comical and you get the upper hand but obviously at the time it is extremely serious, I mean how do you keep it together?

We knew what we

31:00 wanted to do, we knew we could do it and we knew we would succeed. And it gave us intense satisfaction to be able to do it. That lifts the mood of the whole camp for months after that, of course the Gestapo…

And did it help your relationship with the commandant and the guards?

Oh yes. Certainly. They didn’t want to see the Gestapo.

31:30 **Did you notice any privileges given to you because of what you had done?**

Oh no. But we knew that the goodwill was there on our side. They were grateful. They had no idea that we could do it. They had no idea we were going to do it. But the commandant, of course, when he saw the pass opened up and the RAF censor had approved it, that was too much.

32:00 He couldn’t stop smiling.

So when you carry out something like that is it a plan beforehand, or do you all know each other so well by then, do you know when he is tickling him we will all get out how do you execute it?

Oh, it would be planned. Planned beforehand. We said, “As soon as Bush falls on the floor everybody out the other side with everything that we need to get out.” Just quietly go through and of course Bush is watching and

32:30 putting on a wonderful stage show of acting, thrashing around the floor.

Were the professional actors among you, were they sort of used more for those sorts of things or was everyone a pretty good actor for that ?

I would said nine out of ten were pretty good actors. Because there was a deadly intent behind it., the intent was very serious, so that you had to make it appear genuine and put everything you could into it.

33:00 **And where was that radio actually hidden, did you have, was it assembled and hidden somewhere or…?**

Yes, it was assembled and perfectly hidden. The German toilet that you sit on was different from the British ones where you just got a pan of water right at

33:30 the bottom. The German one, that's the front of it there like that there, was a bowl which was solid and actually went up and when you flushed it, what you had passed was picked up by the water and dropped down the back. But the base of it, I suppose for economy was elevated, it didn't go right down so that they only had to use

34:00 half as much porcelain. So that left a hollow underneath the bowl and by undoing the four bolts that held it to the floor and the plumbers disconnecting the toilet fitting we were able to put the radio under there, connect it up by wire to the two front bolts. Bringing the wire to the two back bolts and make them so we could plug in the electricity to there.

34:30 So when the guys came to pick up the BBC news at night, they would just connect the electricity to the two back bolts holding the toilet down put the headphones on and lift up and connect it to the front bolt. And they could tune in and listen to the news. And if the

35:00 Germans should come in in a hell of a hurry the guy writing the BBC news down just whipped his pants down sat on the toilet and had paper in his hand. And the German went past and opened the door, "Entschuldigen." which means excuse me. And he would shut it again, and then of course you tear up the news and flush that down the toilet. So yes, it was brilliantly hidden.

35:30 **Very clever. I was just wondering about those Red Cross parcels, whether they knew perhaps what all of you were trying to do and would they send you things of more use or was it only just food and blankets?**

No, because it was the International Red Cross and it was vital for our life, really,

36:00 the Red Cross made sure that we didn't have anything hidden, like a compass or anything like that hidden in a Red Cross parcel. And when they were issued to us, of course with a couple of thousand guys in camp Red Cross parcel day was a pretty major event. They would bring them from the store and the Germans had supervisors, three or four supervisors,

36:30 and each Red Cross parcel had to be opened and every tin had to be punctured by one of our prisoners twice under the supervision of the German guards so that we couldn't keep the intact tin and use it to take out as rations if we escaped. If you had beautiful fresh tinned food, but of course to puncture it means that it had to be used within two or three days or it went off.

37:00 And those guards who were supervising were our easiest targets of course for our bribery. The goods were there that they so much wanted to have and we would just pretend that we could easily slip something over provided we got something in return. So indirectly, though we stuck strictly to the rules about not using or putting anything

37:30 clandestine in the Red Cross parcels, we were able to use them as a very potent weapon very openly.

How was the men's general health, you talk about a lot of exercise but just in terms of the type of food you were eating, were there some common conditions or complaints that men were suffering?

No. The usual thing,

38:00 but nothing that you could say, like you talk about a Bali belly these days, there was nothing like that. We found of course that in ordinary life outside POW [Prisoner of War] camp we eat far too much. You eat because of the lovely flavour of the food you are having, not because it is necessary to keep you alive.

38:30 And we found that we did survive on much less food then we ever thought possible and we still didn't have any deficiency diseases and we still had enough energy to be down tunnelling, and doing a lot of hard very physical work without feeling constrained. But then

39:00 after the war was over and we got out I realised how little we needed really to get by on and maintain perfect health.

If a man did require any kind of medicine or anything were the Germans sympathetic to getting that for them?

We had medical parcels, especially from the Red Cross. Things against bowel infections, things against

39:30 early pneumonias and things like that. Antiseptics, bandages. The Red Cross were wonderful in that way, very helpful indeed.

Tape 4

00:31 **I just want to go back to your initial imprisonment at Dulag Luft, is that right? And you were held in solitary confinement for a period of time?**

Only for about three days, and then an interviewer would come in and for an hour or two hours just ask easy questions, but that early in the war even their interviewers weren't

01:00 as highly selected as they were later in the war. In other words, they were just people who happened to have some ability but not very much and they were very easy to put off and distract and just not answer.

What was your approach to the interview? Was it in the same cat and mouse approach or were you quite fearful?

01:30 No, it was first contact and you didn't know what was happening or what was going to happen next. So you were just cautious, didn't say more than you were asked, you only answered the minimum and just waited to see what happened.

And you had received specific training on how to deal with situations like that?

02:00 Specific, no. I can remember not long after we started on operations a man came around and addressed our squadron and he had been a prisoner of war in the First World War. And he tried to show us or tell us what had happened in

02:30 that time, but of course it was no longer pertinent all of those years later.

So you were given the basic information to give, your name rank and army number, sorry, service number?

Yes. That was it.

And can you tell me a little more about the camp at Stettin?

It was windy and very barren. Right up by

03:00 the Baltic Sea. Cold as cold, quite a lot of snow in winter, dreary. There was nothing to see but rather harsh, extremely flat country side, the odd house, a very small road going past in the distance and that was it.

03:30 Monotony and uninteresting would sum that place up.

Was the camp at Stettin purpose-built as a prisoner of war camp or was it previously a prison?

04:00 I have no idea. Because that was quite early, April '41, it probably was there. It wasn't that new, no, I would say you were right, it was probably a youth camp or something like that pre-war.

And had the culture of, I guess you could say dissent amongst the prisoners developed at that point? Was there the intellectual life and the cultural life?

Oh no.

04:30 We were there one year, we started to do it, yes, straight away, but it was more social intercourse, discussing things, I mean we were all new to each other, we had a lot to learn about each other, a year later, by the time we went down to Stalag Luft 3 we knew each other very well indeed. And there was less of that and more branching out into other areas of learning and passing the time of day.

05:00 But initially it was get to know you, combined with as much tunnelling and other activities as we could muster.

So there was tunnelling going on at Stettin?

Oh yes, the second day I was there, I went in with Paul Royal [?] who came from Perth and he had just started a tunnel under his room. So I put my hand up to join that and that was the first tunnel I had a hand in

05:30 digging and I had only been two to three months in POW camp then.

What sort of instruments were they using at that early stage, or what sort of instruments were you using?

I think it was just a Red Cross tin, which instead of a long cylinder we made it into a coal scoop without a handle.

06:00 So you just had a thing you could, it was quite difficult clay so we dug it out with a knife first of all. The Germans gave us, of course a knife, fork and spoon and they were solid German steel and they could withstand any punishment and we used to sort of

06:30 open up the clay a bit with them and then with this tin scoop get it out into space and then out in disposal.

And your disposal methods weren't as elaborately developed at that point?

No, and the soil, because it was only five feet down to water level and it was hard clay, so we didn't have to line anything, you just went down

07:00 until you were virtually a centimetre or so above the water level so that it wasn't too cold and uncomfortable to work in and then kept a hollow tunnel going along. Because it was so shallow we used metal rods which were part of the window fittings, we took one of them off, sharpened it so that it was like a

07:30 piece of steel about that long and we put it into a wooden handle and we used to push up through the roof, twiddle it around and bring the clay down until we broke through and got fresh air through to the tunnel face that way, which we had to be very wary about because

08:00 it wasn't long into our first tunnel when one of the Alsatian dogs, the guard dogs, came around and we saw his nose twitching, and of course he went straight over to where this warm smelly air. It was pretty smelly, you were pretty dirty down there. And in the end we had to put a guy in a deck chair reading a book right over the exit every time so that the dog

08:30 couldn't come near us and give away where the opening was.

So in the early days at Stettin was it a less formal collaboration of men who were escaping, there wasn't the official escape committee?

Oh yes, there was still an official escape committee, not very early on, probably the first three to four months there wasn't the cohesion, there wasn't the central committee.

09:00 But then Roger Bushell did arrive, Jimmy Buckley first of all, he was a little, short, very tough Lieutenant Commander RN [Royal Navy], he had drowned, he had escaped and he and a companion we trying to cross the Skagerrak to get to Sweden and they were never heard of again, great shame. He was a wonderful man.

09:30 But so we did have, yes, an early escape committee, but because of course like anything you have got to learn lesson one and make lesson two out of that. And build up on it, we learned as we came across our difficulties.

On day two when you arrived in Stettin and found out they were digging in your room, when you decided to become a part of that group, what

10:00 **was your prime motivation? Did you really believe you could escape?**

Oh yes.

Did you do it to keep busy?

Oh no, escape. Yep.

You really believed that with those men you would find a way?

Yes. Oh, the tunnel did very well. But unfortunately the thaw beat us.

10:30 It was frozen for the first foot or so of clay but then when the thaw came and it started to get wet the roof started to fall in. And the Germans brought these coal briquettes in by, of course, ox-drawn carts, solid wheels, narrow steel rims on them.

11:00 Lumbered along and one wheel suddenly disappeared down to the axle because he went over the top of a tunnel, and the snow had melted and the tremendous weight of loaded briquettes was enough to drop him into a tunnel and that gave it away. We had things like that which were discouraging

11:30 but never completely put us off.

Why was the desire to escape stronger than the risk of being killed for the escape attempt? Why wouldn't you just wait out the war?

Our average age in the air crew who were shot down was probably twenty-two, twenty-three, whereas in the naval camps and the army

12:00 camps where a whole group of men were captured at once, you had everything probably from a lieutenant colonel or a senior officer right down and they had learnt a lot more of the common sense you are talking about. We never had any other thought but to get out tonight, or at the very latest tomorrow. And that was the overriding

12:30 consideration or motivating force all of the time. All right, there were one or two exceptions, there were intellectual guys in the camp and they were deeper thinkers and they were inclined to be a bit older and they were less enthusiastic about escape activities. They never

13:00 denied us that we should do it or could do it, but they didn't enthusiastically join our ranks straight

away. They tended to be apart. Senior accountants, all sorts of people joined air crew and they tended to watch the numbers a bit more than we did. We had no idea of caution or whatever.

For you personally what did escape mean, did it mean freedom?

13:30 Freedom, oh yeah.

Or did it mean the freedom to start fighting again?

Well both, to get free and to start fighting again. All you wanted to do was finish the war and get home, get on with the rest of your life.

You talked about Paul Bushell's hate for the Germans, what were your personal feelings towards them?

14:00 There wasn't any hate for any individual or even for a race. The Nazis, yes, quite early on, see, April '41 and it was June

14:30 that Hitler invaded Russia and they took tremendous numbers of Russian prisoners, hundreds of thousands of them, and they just marched them east, and if they dropped they shot them. They had ruthless disregard for Russian prisoners' lives.

15:00 And in truth the Russians seemed to hold little value themselves on their own life. And around our camp they had many Russians camped under far less guarded conditions. Because they were, by then, thousands of miles from home. They had no ways,

15:30 no means, no intellect, no schooling, they had never been trained, no soldiering, they had just been pushed to the front. And the dislike, the hatred that you spoke about came in one episode where the Russians were

16:00 so hungry, because they didn't get any Red Cross food, that at night they used to break into our camp, climbing over the wire. They would be shot on the way in. But they would break in at night and get into the bread store. Which is exactly what it is, a small wooden hut which held the bread stores for the next day. And they would get inside there

16:30 and stuff themselves with bread, and they would stuff loaves under their uniforms. And then crawl on their hands and knees under search lights and machine guns to get out and back to their own camp. And although the Germans shot quite a few of them it got to the point where they got sick of shooting them, and one day when the

17:00 Russians were in there they just locked them in. That was during the night, while they were feeding and getting away with the bread. And then in the morning they brought in about three or four Alsatian dogs whom they had starved for a few days and then they opened the bread stores and let the dogs in. Well, the yells

17:30 and the screams and the fight, they locked them in. It went on for quite a long time. Then the Germans, if you can have a cross between glee and grimness they opened and told the Russians to come out, thinking a lot of them would be wounded, or the

18:00 dogs had ripped into them. The Russians came out with broad smiles. As soon as the dogs arrived they set about them and they killed them and they skinned them and they ate them. And they made the typical Russian headgear out of the skins of the Alsatian dogs, and they came out with these brand new Russian

18:30 headdress on, grinning broadly. We admired the Russians so much for that and, too, we thought it was a very cowardly and filthy thing for the Germans to do. But to see the tables turned again. I mean there was no subtlety about it, the Russians wanted to eat the dogs so they just set about it and killed

19:00 them on the spot. And all of the yelling was coming from the dogs more than the Russians.

For a young man from Perth who had presumably had a good life with the RAF to be exposed to that sort of desperation and anger and bitterness between the Germans and the Russians, and the lengths they were pushed to just for food, that must

19:30 **have been quite shocking for you?**

It was, well, as you would appreciate, you would never have experienced that here in Australia in your life, and neither had I. But it was a fact, you had to adapt to it, you had as best you could to lessen what was being wrongly done, try and see

20:00 justice. That was really our aim, always to keep the guards within bounds as much as we could within our very limited ability. But they came to respect our attitudes as well. And I am sure if we hadn't done anything we would have been bullied and smashed around, if they knew they could get away with it they would have done it, but they knew they couldn't and they didn't try.

20:30 **Are you talking about almost a friendly intimidation tactic that you employed? Was there an**

intimidation that came from intellect and the outsmarting that didn't require hostility?

Yes, outsmarting was the best thing. If we could do it without losing our temper or shouting or anything like that then we

21:00 did it. Because as soon as you did raise your voice or retaliate the Germans would just point a rifle at you and you had to back right off. So we quickly learned that that wasn't the way to achieve our aims. And, as you say, we adapted very early on.

Did the motivations for war and the consequences of war take on a new reality for you, particularly seeing the Germans and the

21:30 **Russians, the way they treated one another?**

Oh, certainly. I mean, when you're part of an air force fighting a war you're never involved in, you never saw the wounded and the destruction, buildings falling down that you saw when you were in the army or when towns were

22:00 being bombed. During the bombing of London I was there, and the sights of destruction there were something terrible. Several times we were caught in London on leave and you just stayed on the streets trying to help people

22:30 put out fires, stop kids from screaming, generally to try and help restore a bit of law and order. There was little you could do but you tried to do it.

In experiencing the bombing raids in London, did that make you question what you were doing to the German people or did it in fact fuel your desire?

At that stage we weren't doing much to the German people, a mass air raid on Berlin was twelve aircraft.

23:00 One an hour to keep them out of bed. We were bombing factories and railway lines. But we never deliberately bombed the population, not in those stages of the war, okay, later it did happen, but we didn't. it was a different war earlier on.

Did meeting the German guards and experiencing the German people as humans change the way you felt.

23:30 **about the conflict and what you were involved in?**

Very little, I would say. I mean, you soon realised that they were human beings and a little like us, but essentially different. So your attitudes were set fairly early on. And we seldom had reason to

24:00 change our initial impressions, well, not so much our initial but our very early impressions. They were usually pretty right.

You mentioned subtle differences between the English and the Germans, what were the differences you identified?

First and foremost I would say no sense of humour. No lateral thinking. An order is an order. "Befehl." that's a command. "Befehl is befehl."

24:30 A command is a command, an order is an order and they would carry it out and then stop. Whereas our side is, "Well, I don't think that order is very good, I can vary it a bit and get a better effect." And you would, and I think that's a typical Australian attitude and I think that's why Australian armed forces are very good. Because

25:00 they tend to think for themselves and act logically and well. As opposed to senselessly and just because you're blindly following instructions.

I would like to get back to tunnelling technology and they way your tunnelling developed in the early days. Were there some key technological breakthroughs or engineering breakthroughs or breakthroughs in the

25:30 **thinking of the men that dramatically impacted your tunnelling activity and the speed in which you were able to do it?**

Yes. Our beds were three tier wood. Just a corner post, about six centimetres by eight centimetres, four corner posts and then a

26:00 horizontal board going right around and then slats on which a straw mattress could be laid. That was your bed and there was another above it. Now, the bed boards were about ten centimetres wide and just loose, they just laid them down and it was a loose floor with a rail that sat on either side. Because we were digging in sand we soon

26:30 found that the sand that dried out when it was exposed tended to slip and run. And the technique that we modified was to cover the entire vertical shaft of the tunnel in wood. We had the long bed posts

coming down,

27:00 the German would surely miss the bed posts? No, they didn't, because they had a quartermaster who was due to supply us with everything, make sure everybody had a mattress and a pillow and a bed, etcetera, and he had to keep records of this. But we were able to sit him down and while he was having a

27:30 cup of coffee and a cigarette take away his record and alter it. We would just forge his number of entry, we would say that twenty-six beds came in when he had thirty down and the next day we would complain that we were four beds short, and he would say,

28:00 "That is impossible, I brought in the right number." And we would say, "Come and count them." The four that he had brought in and we had taken off the list were moved up through the roof, that was timber and we could get up into the ceiling quite easily. We dismembered each of the big bed frames and made them look like

28:30 joists in the roof, with the same sort of struts and the same sort of tip of an ordinary roof. And if they went up to have a look they just saw ordinary structures and then if we wanted timber for down the tunnel we just took an entire bed, four vertical columns for the corners, four bed boards for around the side and our little

29:00 beams that the bed boards rested on made the sides of a ladder and the rungs. So you opened up the trap, walked down the ladder to the bottom floor and then dug it out and gradually dropped it down until you got the ten, eleven metres that we had to go to get beyond the range of the earthquake detectors the Germans put in to pick up the thump of our tunnelling

29:30 activities. And then, you were then in the bottom of the tunnel and that was, it was wider than the top and on this side there was a hollow chamber in which the air pump was stored, and on that side was a hollow chamber going back from the base in which the sand was stored as you brought it back from the tunnel. And in the hollow

30:00 tunnel behind you there were your long johns for digging, because you couldn't have sand staining your body and get a snap roll call. And spare instruments and spare bed boards so that as you dug further forward the man digging would yell for another set of boards, and you would send them up tongue and grooved, so that he would put one on the floor when he got to there and when he got

30:30 another fifteen centimetres further along he would flatten the bottom, put a horizontal bed board next to it, slip the tongues in there, put the vertical sides in and they were cambered just a little bit and then slot the top piece in, back, fill in behind quite solidly and you had another four inches of tunnel. That was cause and effect and evolution.

31:00 Early on, as I say we hadn't thought it through and we got falls and we could have had fatalities. Quite a few of us were pinned early on, by the shoulders and you just couldn't get out yourself, luckily your team mates just grabbed your heels and hauled you back and got rid of the sand. So it was evolution really.

31:30 That's how we covered it, we falsified their records. The engineers and the electricians tapped into the main voltage supply so that we had the good three big tunnels, we had electric globes running right down to the face, before that we had candles made out of German margarine which was stinking stuff.

32:00 We took a cocoa tin, you know they are quite small but they have got a solid tin lid on. And in the front we would cut it down and brought it in so that like a tongue came sitting into the centre of the tin. We cut a slot in the tongue, put a bit of pyjama cord in it, melted margarine in the bottom and

32:30 then set that pyjama wick alight and you had a lamp, put a tin handle on it and covered it with old bits of clothing. Of course the inside of the tin was shiny so you had a good little torch. But of course the black smoke that came from it was choking stuff, and that's why we had to have a

33:00 good air supply as well. So we made our pump. Flying boots had big leather tongues and so they took some of this wood that we had around and just built a frame about that big.

33:30 Solid down each side of that frame, so it was hollow inside. And then they cut a hole in here and a hole in the other side and they tacked the top of an army or air force kit bag to it and one on the other side. And that whole frame they mounted on four wooden wheels

34:00 which we made ourselves with flanges on the inside. The Russians got us an old pram handle from the tip which we attached to that frame, and in the air chamber you could then get a hold of that pram handle and push the trolley on its wooden wheels away from you, and as you pushed it the kit

34:30 bag this side was tacked to here and the bottom of it was tacked to a piece of vertical timber here and the kit bag opened up. And inside that square part the flat valves of leather from the flying boots allowed air to come in and fill this kit bag with air. And of course as you pushed that it concertinaed the far kit bag and emptied the air into an

35:00 exit valve which was then pumped down through our lines of hollow tins right to the man at the face. And then if you pulled it back towards you, you refilled that far kit bag and concertinaed this one. So just going like that you got probably two big kits bags full of fresh air to the man on the face. Simple and very

35:30 effective and good for breathing.

You mentioned that there were near fatalities from the walls collapsing, did people suffer from breakdowns or claustrophobia or not cope with the tunnel conditions?

To a minor extent only. If you were susceptible to that you tended to gravitate voluntarily, you didn't volunteer to do the tunnelling because there were tons of other jobs that required even more skill. The tunnelling was

36:00 manual labour stuff really with an aptitude. So there was no need for anybody with a claustrophobic intent to go down. And we didn't get them. The movie did show a guy who packed it in and got claustrophobic

36:30 but of course that's just a bit of Hollywood exaggeration, never happened.

What about in terms of the air down there, did anybody suffer from having bad air or not having enough?

Oh, you just yelled out, "Use that pump." and the air is fresh again.

So the pump came quite early?

Oh yes, it was essential. Otherwise when we had these little,

37:00 in Stalag Luft 1 when we had to push these air holes up and it was just over a centimetre wide you would be sucking the fresh air down because your lungs were bursting with carbon dioxide, so that was a huge progress when we were able to pump it down in a pipeline right down to the face in any quantity that you wanted.

37:30 **And do you remember any specific punishments that were handed out for tunnels that were found to individuals or the group?**

Oh, they would just lock us in our huts for whole morning so that we couldn't get outside, that was alright, you just read a book, diverted your attention. You minimised its effect

38:00 on you because the Germans wanted to have a maximum effect and you of course thought the opposite. Without being physically violent, and they were not, there was no real deprivation or punishment they could inflict, you had already lost your liberty and that was the bottom line so to

38:30 speak. You couldn't get below that.

What about nastier punishments handed out for people attempting to escape who were caught in the actual escape attempt?

Bread and water, the cooler we called it, where you just cooled your temperature and your feelings and came out a lot hungrier and a lot quieter but back into it of course probably within

39:00 half an hour of getting back into the camp.

No one was actually shot or hurt for their escape attempt?

Oh yes. But that was their line of duty, I suppose we only lost in Stalag Luft 3, the big camp, we would have lost

39:30 two to three people shot deliberately by the Germans. There was, I think, at least two that I know of suicides where the boys just ignored the warning wire, straight up to the main wire and started climbing over it, and of course they were shot, machine gunned. We weren't allowed to go and help them or anything.

40:00 They just died there and then. That was horrible to see. I don't want to dwell on that one, it was awful.

Tape 5

00:30 **Geoff, I was wondering if you might be able to now explain for us the Tom and Dick and Harry tunnels and the infrastructure and plans that were put in place for what became the Great Escape? Could you talk us through your experience?**

Yes. They were just code names, of course, so that if

01:00 you talked about Tom or Dick or Harry the Germans would have no idea it was a tunnel you were

referring to. Each one had their own virtually separate teams, loosely, I mean you were on one tunnel but somebody might get sick and so you would whip over and do a shift on another tunnel. The idea of building three at once was that we realised

01:30 in 1944, we started in the middle of 1943, that the invasion in Europe would be coming along probably within twelve months and that therefore we needed, we couldn't afford to dig that and if that was found dig a second and if that was found dig a third. We knew by then that we had the

02:00 organisation and the materials to dig all three at once. And with three separate entrances and three separate destinations and three chosen roles they would coalesce very well.

What do you mean three different roles?

Well, Harry was always the shortest

02:30 way to go. So that was ultimately our aim to get Harry out. Tom started from a different part of the camp and had a longer distance to cover to get to the safety of outside of the wire and into the woods. And it was to be one of those. And Dick, that was the tunnel I was in charge of, that was the back up

03:00 tunnel for Tom. Because we felt knowing what had happened in the past when they had discovered one of our tunnels. They just filled in the entrance and that was it. We thought, "There is no way they are going to go along and risk their lives underneath and fill it all in from the face back down." so

03:30 that will still be there. So we started Dick back further from the wire and in a different hut. The next hut to Tom. Running parallel towards the same fence but capable, if they found Tom was to just turn forty-five degrees and pick up Tom down the track.

04:00 That was already dug and we would surprise the Germans by being almost out, you see? So that's what I mean by separate roles and separate destinations.

And what did it mean to be in charge of one of the tunnels, what were the responsibilities of being in charge of the digging of Dick?

It meant that you were probably the most experienced tunneller on that particular job,

04:30 and because of the intimacy of the very small teams, you know, the capabilities and the strengths and weaknesses of every member of the team. I mean, we all had our weaknesses and had our little foibles. Some tried to dig too quickly and tended to get out of line. Others were absolutely square and dug fast but they were slow, and of course what you

05:00 wanted was somebody who kept absolutely on track and dug quite a fast speed and reliably and was a good team member. So taking all in all, like any foreman if you like, I suppose that would be the best way to describe it, yes, 'foreman' would be the best word.

And what were your weaknesses or your foibles?

I think I was always one for speed, I would try to break the last

05:30 guy's record. But on the other hand I did like things done exactly. And I know where it comes from, my Dad's motto is, "If a job is worth doing it is worth doing well." and I want it done just like that. Mum's motto was "Near enough is good enough." and I can see in my attitude

06:00 to many things in life a combination in various proportions of one attitude or the other, or really an equal portion of both.

What sort of things do you think would send you in either direction of those extremes? Like, were there events or circumstances that would lead you to take on one?

Yes, depending on what you were trying to do. I mean, if speed was essential then you swung to 'near enough is good enough',

06:30 in other words it is the end that you want, the means don't really matter. But if you would probably sacrifice or muddy the end point by not being exact then the doing the best that you possibly can was the shortest way to do it really.

And what do you think your main strengths were? What was the main contribution that you were able to make?

07:00 I think I was a logical thinker. I was taught scientifically, I naturally thought that way, I mean, some guys were dreamers and they couldn't hold their concentration for a long time under difficult circumstances. That you had to do. I liked the saying, "Never lose sight of the main picture." in other words no matter what the distraction,

07:30 that's what you are trying to do go ahead and do it. Yes, I think that was probably why I did what I did.

Of course in training you had been noted well as working well under responsibility?

Yes.

Where do you think that came from?

That came from your early flying training, when

08:00 you were put in charge of a particular job, whether it was to make sure all of the four aircraft that had just taken off came back and were properly parked and battened down for the night. Those little light Tiger Moths, unless you tied them down by the wing tips firmly, and then a storm came up in the night, we did come out once and two of them were flipped with the wind,

08:30 well, that was two useless aircraft. So that sort of responsibility. You had to recognise the points that had to be done very well and with absolute certainty in any job that you were given. I suppose that would sum it up.

And can you see where from your childhood that might have come or what was it in your personality that made you good at working under responsibility?

Well, I think Dad

09:00 relied on me being the eldest and then I had two younger brothers, a sister and then another brother. But I think to keep the younger two, Keith was two years younger than I was and Gordon was another three years younger than him. So I was the one the foreman, if you like, of that trio in our very early school days. Up until the time when I went

09:30 to work, I think that’s when it broke, when I went to work at fourteen.

Now, can you tell me a bit about the team that you had working under you on the construction of the Dick tunnel? How did you select the men and who were they?

I couldn’t pull that out of my head right now, it has just been shut away for far too long. I think I could dig it out with some thought.

10:00 **Would you have people who were particularly good diggers, a good electrician and engineer? Did you have people who were good at certain areas or were they just diggers?**

Mainly you chose them for their, their main digging, that had to be a main feature, but each one would have different allied skills and you learnt to use those and let them use their

10:30 skills.

And where was the access point to your tunnel?

That was in the middle of the shower room. As I mentioned, there was fifteen identical huts with a central corridor and most of them were dormitories with eighteen guys in each room. But halfway down

11:00 the hut there was one that had a concrete floor sloping towards a drainage pit in the centre with a wrought iron grille over it and about four showers down each side and a hand basin or two along the edge, that was naturally the washroom. And that was where we started Dick, because being solid concrete it was right on the ground. There was no hollow underneath

11:30 the hut, between the floor of the hut and the top of the ground. And because you had this pit where all of the dirty water, and we were a pretty dirty lot too by the end of each day in camp, the hole into which it dropped was square and it was about sixty centimetres square and the Germans had just put four concrete slabs

12:00 down so they they joined on the corners, overlapped and they were sitting on the edge of an equal concrete slab at the bottom, so they just poured a bit of concrete around and set the lot. And then when the dirty water came in the sort of sediments and heavier muck settled to the bottom and the outlet pipe

12:30 was up under the grille on one side, so the clearer fresher water flowed out through there and every once in a while, like about every few months, the Germans would get some Russians in and clean out the bottom of the sump. Our engineers and camouflage experts, of course, just lined up the three fire

13:00 buckets which were in the corridor always because they were all wooden huts, so they had three fire buckets empty, they could just fill them and start putting out a fire quickly should one start. They walk in with the fire buckets, put them next to the grille, bail out the muck from there into the fire buckets, with an old rag dry it and clean it, and then they unpicked the concrete at one corner and

13:30 then along the bottom until they could lift one slab, vertical slab straight up in the air. And there, of course, underneath it on the side was just the dirt packed in under the foundation for the concrete slab. And we just went sideways then underneath the concrete. And about sixty centimetres,

14:00 sixty-five centimetres further out we then start to go vertically down. So to get into it you just dropped your feet into this concrete thing in the middle, straightened your knees, slid out at an angle like that, wriggled your bottom in, rolled over and you were then starting to go vertically down that shaft, that’s where it was hidden. Because they didn’t think that the dirty old hole of black sloppy water

14:30 could possibly hide, they never thought about even hinting of looking there. So that made it very safe.

Were there any major challenges or interruptions to the flow of digging Tom, Dick and Harry?

Yes, things like, as I say, we had the electricity connected

15:00 by our electricians and I think some German electricians doing repair work in the roof almost stumbled upon it, the boys just had time to scramble up, undo it and hide the fact that they had screwed in and were taking electricity supply off it. We had a lot of near misses like that where the completely

15:30 unexpected happened. I mean, there was no way we could go in and block a German's way, if he came in to inspect the electricity wires in the roof we couldn't stop him. but our aim was always of course to pick an electrician as he came in the gate by his tools and then track where he was going and then if it was obvious he was going to, because they weren't very subtle in their approach to which

16:00 direction they went in. Shortest distance would do them. We would think, "Oh oh, he is heading for Dick." and somebody would race over and say, "Disconnect the electricity to Dick." and it would be done and the guy would be down out of the roof before the German arrived so in all of the plumbing, all of those departments we had all of these, you didn't call them emergencies but they could have been a setback if we weren't on our toes.

16:30 **Was it some time during the digging of those tunnels that you started to develop your relationship with the doctor and began studying medicine?**

When did I meet him first? No, that would have been probably, I started

17:00 being tutored by him before we started the Great Escape tunnels.

Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with him?

Well we met, as I say, quite causally, he was a friendly man. I can't remember our first contact, probably I reported to sick bay with a sore hand or

17:30 something like that. But he was always interested in everybody in the camp, as a doctor should be, we were his patients and he was very professional, in who we were, what we were doing, what our interests were. So I probably, I can't remember, I probably confided in him that I one day wanted to be a doctor too.

18:00 And that would have been something like that anyway. And then he would come in and just sit down at a table with me and he had been trained at the Middlesex Hospital in London and he had been through his exams about three years when he joined the army and got posted to France and got caught at Dunkirk when the British Army retreated from France and the Germans pushed them out of Europe.

18:30 So he was not that much older than we were. And, as I say, because nobody else in the camp wanted to talk medicine we gravitated together because I just loved hour after hour of medical talk where I was picking up and I was learning well, private lectures instead of being in a class of a hundred, it was one on one with a wonderful

19:00 teacher. So it fostered and we became very very good friends.

And he would help you with your German medical book that you managed to acquire?

Oh yes, he couldn't speak the language, I had to translate into English what was being said and from that what my problem with what had been said was. And once he grasped the problem then he was a very

19:30 good explainer and he would sit and make sure I understood and having solved that problem we would get on with the next one.

Could you tell us how you came to acquire the book?

Bribery.

What did you have to provide as a bribe to get your hands on it?

I would say probably cigarettes, that was our commonest because the others as I say soap, Nescafé

20:00 and chocolate for the guards, that was more for their families, the cigarettes were for the men. So I suppose on any trade done in the camp, three out of four were done with cigarettes. So that is a hunch, I can't remember what I used.

And what was your doctor friend's name?

Norman Montennuis [?].

20:30 He used to say, "It is tennis with a U-I-S." It was Spanish, he had quite an olive complexion and he used to say his ancestors probably came across with the Spanish Armada and that could well have been so

too, he looked Spanish but he was very English and very proper because he had, of course, many generations in England.

And what was his medical specialty?

General medicine.

21:00 He had just graduated so he hadn't had time to specialise in anything, but he had a wide and well-taught, Middlesex still is a wonderful teaching hospital. And he had been well taught there.

And how would medical treatment work within the camp, would people come and visit him or would he be doing regular rounds?

There was what you called the sick parade and a little hospital and a room in it where, I think, ten o'clock, you came if

21:30 you were sick.

Was that one of the huts or separate to the huts?

No, it was in the hospital, it was apart from the separate huts, it wasn't even in the compound, there was barbed wire and a gate between us and the hospital.

So he spent the majority of his time actually off in the hospital?

Oh yes. And you had to go through the gate to the hospital for sick parade, they would form you up outside the gate, count you and allow you through

22:00 and then count the numbers on the way back and hope they tallied.

And at some point you began assisting him in the hospital?

Not at that stage. That's when he said, "They are transferring me to this camp where all of the new people are going and I will be the only doctor there and I want you to come with me." And that's where he started to teach me as much as I could, doing the things like how to bandage properly,

22:30 what ointments to use on what simple stitching, how to put in a local anaesthetic. How to work with simple aseptic techniques so that you didn't contaminate anything with your fingers. General, the same treatment you would get in a casualty department, virtually identical.

At Stalag Luft 3 what were the main medical complaints?

23:00 Some forms of gastroenteritis or chest infection or skin infection. Or just ordinary cuts and scratches and bruises apart from that. We never had any serious illnesses. A couple of suspected meningitises, which didn't turn out to be so. Which, of course, we did have one guy, an American,

23:30 Lowen Delp, D-E-L-P. He did contract meningitis and he was slammed straight into a single ward in isolation and I volunteered and went in to be, sleep and nurse him and be with him. Of course I ran the risk of meningitis but it was better for me to do it than the doctor to do it.

24:00 I could see that this was a duty that I could perform, and so all of the meals were cooked in the kitchen and brought around on the tray to here, they would knock on the door, I would open the door from within, bring the meals in and do all of the washing up and things on the plates in the room, and just had the clean stuff back at the end of the meal time

24:30 so that nobody else…The doctor used to come around on his ward round, once a day, but he would of course be wearing a mask and only in for a few minutes. But I just lived in there, I slept there, I was doing twenty-four hour nursing on him. I did that for about a week. He was a quiet, thin, laconic sort of American. Never met him again, never heard of him

25:00 after the war. I hadn't recalled his name for that many years until you asked that.

Geoff, I find it extraordinary that you would risk yourself that way. What inspired you to risk contracting meningitis yourself?

It was to be my life and somebody had to do it. I was just in the spot and I regarded it as my job. What do I do?

25:30 Stand back and say, "No I don't want to do that." And let somebody else do it? I volunteered, I had agreed to go and join him, I had agreed to do what he asked, he didn't have to ask me that, I said, "I will do it." Somebody had to do it because it couldn't be him, because if he caught it the whole camp was in trouble. So you have got to sort

26:00 through it and as they say, the buck stops with you. Luckily it didn't stop permanently.

It seems like you really were committed to immerse yourself in the study?

Oh yes. I definitely intended, it was the opportunity I had been asking for. To be able to do medicine, that's why I joined the air force in the first place as I say, the end picture that I never lost sight of.

26:30 And here was a huge step forward closer towards it, actually being as close to a real medical school as I could get. And I learnt a tremendous amount in that year with him. A tremendous amount.

What was it about medicine that was so strong that you would maintain your focus on it regardless of your circumstances? Through all of the changes you would have gone through,

27:00 **and the states of mind and the different opportunities that would have come your way, what kept you focussed on it?**

I just thought it was the most wonderful challenge and the most wonderful vocation or profession to be involved in, and to be able to do it and above all to be able to do it well. And to have the

27:30 opportunity to do it, I couldn't ask any more in life. No, I didn't ask any more in life, because it fulfilled everything, it gave you a hobby, it gave you a focus, it gave you hope and you were looking towards your own future as well and helping in the present. No, I think I was very

28:00 fortunate to be in that position.

And again, it was a position of great responsibility for people to entrust their health to you?

Well, as I said, goes back to my early school notes, "Works well under responsibility." I enjoy it, I like to be given responsibility and once again I think that is my Dad's training.

Has that responsibility ever become a burden?

28:30 **Is it, I mean with responsibility comes the responsibility of having people's lives or health in your hands, has that ever been too much for you?**

It wasn't too much. Had it been I would have said, "No, I will give up medicine." Because I wasn't equal to it, because if you are given a responsibility and it is

29:00 as deep as somebody's life you have got to be up to the job and if you're not up to the job get out. I would do that today if I didn't feel as though I was still helping people medically, I wouldn't be in it, but you have got to have a passion for it, there is no doubt about it.

And I imagine you have got to have

29:30 **a mix of a commitment to learning and knowledge and reading as well as that hands on deck on the front line experience like you had yourself?**

Yes, well, it is personal communication. You have got to know how to question somebody to know how to get underneath. They might be trying to hide something. They might not be able to describe what is going on inside them too well.

30:00 And you have got to guide and put in just a bit of a key word here, "Oh yes, that's right, that's what I feel. You're right. " And have them follow your lead closely and then take the lead from you. But to be able to start them in the direction so that you have got the most information out enabling

30:30 you to make the correct diagnosis. Because there is a saying in medicine that the most important thing in medicine is diagnosis, the second most important thing is diagnosis, and third most important thing is diagnosis. In other words, if your diagnosis is correct your treatment is virtually out of a textbook and that becomes the easy part. But if your diagnosis is incorrect then you are getting yourself and your patient

31:00 into deep trouble and you have got to realise that you are not in the right direction and dig in your heels and head in a fresh direction.

And that lateral thinking you have must be a godsend amongst diagnosis?

It is essential, without that forget it, if you are down one track and you are not capable of thinking of alternatives, they call it in medicine a differential diagnosis. In other words, you say, "Well this is almost certainly what it is, but there is one chance in ten

31:30 thousand it could be this and one in half a million it could be that." And it is your job to make sure that if it is the half-millionth one you have picked it up and you won't miss it. If it is a high temperature and he is a bit disorientated and shivering and twenty other people in the camp

32:00 have got the flu, "It's the flu." then you could be missing meningitis. You have got to examine each one and make sure you don't skip any bits. It is a method.

Not much room for the near enough is good enough diagnosis.

No room at all.

Was it frustrating during your time as a prisoner in terms of resources and access to medicines in terms of treating people,

32:30 **were you limited or constrained?**

We were very limited, the Germans didn't have much themselves and what little they had, that was where Norman Montennuis relied on me. Being able to speak German, having been in the bribery to be able to cajole them to get anything. I got a lot out of the German doctor himself. He was also, Schtaps Sart Hildebrandt [?]...in other words he

33:00 was the equivalent of a captain in the German medical service as a doctor, and he had the sabre cuts, quite a frowning expression. But underneath it there was a twinkling sense of humour and a most correct most punctilious, I think the nicest German that I met

33:30 ever was Hildebrandt. And he was also the doctor, that was his main post, to the Luftwaffe experimental aerodrome which wasn't far up the road from us, about twenty or thirty kilometres I suppose. We would just see the machines taking off and landing and he told us that he was the doctor there and

34:00 he was lent from the base, this was almost his second job. So that if I wanted something desperately and he knew he could medically help a sick man, it didn't matter that he was a prisoner, he would bring it in. He wasn't supposed to but he would bring it in. There was nobody to question him because he was

34:30 the head of his own department. Until it was questioned from above and he was fired, what he was doing was correct. But of course he was so good at his job and caused them no ripples whatsoever that there was no chance of that happening. And he was an absolute asset to our medical system. Some of the earlier German doctors hadn't been as co-operative or as helpful.

What was his name?

35:00 Hildebrandt. H-I-L-D-E-B-R-A-N-D-T. I have forgotten his first name now, of course. I tried to track him through the Red Cross after the war but never got a lead on him. I really hoped that he had survived and been alright. But you didn't know whether he finished up on the Russian front

35:30 and of course they butchered the people like doctors, they weren't terribly nice to them at all. But I couldn't follow it up, of course, I would have liked to have done so.

You mentioned the American Delp who you were helping with meningitis, what were some of the other nationalities at Stalag Luft 3?

36:00 Mostly English, Commonwealth, and then Americans . We had quite a few French from the French Air Force who fled to England when France fell and were retained with the RAF. We had some Dutch for the same reason, the Dutch Air

36:30 Force, some of them rode boats across the Channel to get to England. Belgians. Danes. Norwegians. Poles, quite a lot of Poles.

They were cowboys weren't they?

Yes.

I have heard they were a bit dicey?

Yes. I say if they wanted to shoot somebody

37:00 they would just ram him, take themselves with him if they had to, but boy, no German was ever going to get out.

A hatred for the Germans?

Yes. Well, after the bombing of Warsaw and the sacking of that that really put them into a seething frenzy.

An extraordinary diversity of nations represented under the RAF banner?

And it is funny how your past catches up with you.

37:30 When Sydney was on the short list for the 2000 Olympic Games with Manchester, Sydney or Beijing. And each nation had an International Olympic Commissioner, the IOC and they would ask three or four selected by the International

38:00 Red Cross, they would ask them to come out, not by the Red Cross by the Olympic Committee, they would ask them to come out to vote for one of the three. And I was contacted by the RAAF headquarters in Sydney to say did I remember a man, a prisoner of war

38:30 from that camp whose name was "Jarbloff" or something or other. And I said, "Spell it." And he said, "S-T-A-U B-O " I said, "Jani Staubo, I sure do remember him!" He was part of my digging team and a wonderful guy. "Oh, thank heavens for that.

39:00 He is Norway's International Olympic Commissioner." Before the war he had been in their Davis Cup squad. And he was a champion cross country snow skier and a wonderful sportsman right up to, virtually Olympic standard. But when he was shot down he,

39:30 when Norway fell, like the Vikings a few of them just pushed a boat out into the sea and like the Vikings just managed to sail across to England. And land in England and join the RAF and be retrained and get back into combat. Then he got shot down again and captured. And he got away and they recaptured him and he got away

40:00 again. And when they recaptured him again the next time they had him in manacles with a length of chain in between. And he had, he was being brought to the main camp by train and he was sitting next to the window there with a German armed guard there and a German armed guard there by that window.

40:30 And I don't know who was in the fourth seat, but there he was and he waited until the train got up a lot of speed up and it was rocking around the bend like that and then when it started to sway the other way he just went phew. And as I say, being an ex-Olympic guy, he was tall, about six three, he just shoulder butted and flat on his back and he just off, running like only he could run. Straight down the train. Now those trains, rather like the trains here they have a

41:00 sliding door between each compartment and he ran through, doors open through it, tried to shut it behind him to be able to get to the end of the train to be able to jump off and get free. Well, he almost got there when they went around a bend the wrong way and he was pinned half through a doorway and with his manacles he just couldn't, and a guard was after him. He said, "Hande hoch."

41:30 which means, "Put your hands up." So Jan had his back to him, the German guard was behind him and he didn't know where he was. But there was a rifle there somewhere of course so he just pretended he was going to put his hands up like that but as he brought them up he had a double length of chain between them and swung around and was going to kill him and the German fired his rifle almost touching his chest. I have seen the burn.

Tape 6

00:30 **Okay, if we can just take the story form the point at which he was shot by the German guard?**

Well, of course he was straight off to hospital and very ill for quite a long time and eventually came to our camp into our hospital for final rehabilitation. And that's where I met him.

01:00 He was very keen to get involved in the escaping and that's where we became closely associated, but we were separated at the end of the war when I stayed in the hospital and he went out being marched away in the snow with the rest of the camp and I lost contact with him. but then this man from the Olympic Committee rang me and said, "Did I know of him?"

01:30 And when I said, "Yes." He said, "Can you think of anybody else who knew him in the camp?" and I nominated two more and we finished up with fourteen contacts. His letter said he was coming out to inspect Sydney for the Olympics and while here he would love to catch up with some of his old ex-Aussie POW mates and that's where the

02:00 lives started to intersect again .And they flew me down to Sydney for a meeting. They gave us a two-hour briefing, first the Sydney Olympic committee on Homebush, they had a model four metres by four metres I suppose and you had to try and memorise everything that was there so that you could explain all of the virtues of it to the visiting

02:30 delegates. And then they said, "You have got a lunch with Jan Staubo at the Oxford military barracks." the old, barracks in Sydney. "You have got four hours to convince him that Sydney is the place." So when I went to the Oxford barracks they picked us up by car and he was being introduced to the guys as they came past

03:00 shaking his hands and he caught sight of me and he just ran straight to me and he said, "Geoff, I would like you to sit next to me, please?" and I said, "I would very much like to, Jan." and so I sat next to him and it was on. And I said, "If you can, when you're finished with Sydney come back and have a couple of weeks on the Gold Coast with me and we will have a real…"

03:30 "Oh." he said "I would like that but I think they have got me on a tight schedule, I have got to get up to Beijing yet." And next thing I got a letter from Oslo saying he was sorry he couldn't get the time in. "Anyway I hope courtesy of QANTAS to be back one day and I will see you again in Sydney. Now he did not mention the Olympic Games but we knew damned well that he was voting for Sydney and that was the

04:00 deciding vote. There was thirty-four all and Stabo made it thirty-five, thirty-three. And Sydney got the Olympic games just through a chance association that I picked up his name.

That's an extraordinary story.

It is true, absolutely true.

Amazing. So yeah it was certainly like a mini-NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] convention in the camp, wasn't it?

Yes.

04:30 **So in the Dominion Forces were there anyone from New Zealand or anyone else from Australia?**

Oh yes, there were a lot of New Zealanders, a lot of Australians, not many in the RAF but a lot of RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] boys. South Africans, Rhodesians. Big bunch of Canadians and quite a few Americans in the Canadian Air Force, you see America

05:00 stayed out of the war until December '41, until Pearl Harbor, but some of the American guys who really weren't American isolationists just travelled north to Canada and joined the RCAF [Royal Canadian Air Force] and trained with them and travelled to England and joined operational crews there, and they had the American insignia,

05:30 and we called them the Eagle squadrons because they were American citizens but in Canadian uniform with their American flash on the side. So there were quite a few of those, but many Canadians, quite a big Canadian contingent.

Geoff, you spoke about the night which you were shot down, you saw your mate, Dave was it?

Dave Powell.

What became of him?

06:00 He was killed. The next morning when they let me out of gaol for exercise and the next thing out come three other airmen who I recognised as Dave's crew the three of them and the only one that was missing was Dave Powell. Now there was thirty seconds between us, otherwise everything was identical, all of my crew were killed

06:30 and I was alive. And in his plane all of his crew were alive and he was the only one killed. I was pretty fatalistic after that for a long time. I believed that if your number was on it well, and if your number was not on it then you were lucky. He was a very nice quite bloke, Dave, it was a bad blow.

07:00 **Geoff, what point in the plan had the Tom, Dick and Harry developed, what stage was it up to when Norman asked you to come and be his assistant interpreter at the new camp?**

We were about halfway through. We moved into North Camp in April '43 and I moved into the hospital, I think about October, November '43 and the Great Escape was March '44,

07:30 doesn't matter, it was the end of '43 that I moved out and into the hospital with him.

That must have been an extremely difficult decision for you to make given how much time and energy you had given to the escape plans?

Your phrasing is right, it was a difficult decision to make,

08:00 once you had made it it became clear that that was obviously the only decision to have made looking back on it, but looking forward and trying to work your way through it it was a hard one, I must admit. But I know I made the right one.

And the escape committee respected your decision?

The escape committee said I couldn't do it, I couldn't pull out unless I had somebody else capable of taking the photographs for the forged passports and documents.

08:30 And that's when I found Charles Hall who had done his full apprenticeship in the RAF as a photographer and then got onto photographic reconnaissance on the Spitfires. They were the unarmed ones that flew very high over Europe and photographed all of the German fortifications and that sort of thing. He got shot down doing it. But of course photography was his game. He was much more professional than I was.

09:00 He did, of course, a better job because of it. And that was when Roger Bushell said, "You can go." but up until then, no, he wouldn't let me go.

And how did you feel about their unwillingness to let you walk away from the project?

Oh, you accepted it, it was an order and it was given to you very clearly and with good reason. Obviously if you were the

09:30 only man capable of doing a job that was completely essential to the successful escape, well, he was right and it was obvious that he was right. So it was just my good fortune that I found the replacement I was looking for.

Did it take you a while to find Charles Hall?

10:00 **Was there a period of flux there?**

Not long, no. I think about a week to ten days, because you just sort of asked around and people in the, as I say there was a member of the escape committee in each of the fifteen huts and would probably do a survey, “Who knows anything about photography?”

10:30 No, it didn’t take long.

Did they think you were mad not wanting to go with them?

Oh, he told me I was mad, Charles Hall said, “You’re crazy, you’re giving away this opportunity?” I said,” Yes and I am not changing my mind, I am off, this is all yours.” And he couldn’t believe his luck. Well, he hadn’t had to do anything at all for it.

And what became of Charles?

He was one

11:00 of the ones they executed. So yep. Once again, if your name is on it, it is on it. And he was an only son and I could not go back after the war and visit his parents, ninety-nine percent of me said

11:30 that I wanted to, but what could I do? It was four years since it happened, no, it was eighteen months later that I got back to England, they were probably just over most of their grief and what was I going to do? Knock on their door and say, “Here I am, I am the lucky one, I am so sorry that Charles was killed and I wasn’t.” I couldn’t say that, that was a lie, I wasn’t.

12:00 It was a lose-lose-lose situation. So I just said, “I will let this one go quietly.” It has troubled me a bit since then but I still don’t see that I could do anything else. Sometimes you get decisions that are not clear cut and

12:30 never will be. But almost it becomes philosophy then rather than a reasoned approach.

Was it the going to see his parents that bothered you or the fact that he died?

Oh no, telling his parents. I mean, we were realists, we accepted we were in it and we could be killed, that wasn’t a problem. But for his parents to reawaken their grief

13:00 and to be greeted by the guy who stood there when it should be their son there. No, it had no appeal at all. And I couldn’t see it had any benefit to anybody to reopen wounds that had almost healed.

What was the name of the camp

13:30 **that you moved to to work in the hospital?**

Beliria, B-E-L-I-R-I

It is Italian for beautiful air, clear air. It was much higher altitude than Stalag Luft 3 although it wasn’t that far away and, I don’t know, there must have been some Italian village or something in the middle of Germany, you know how you get a little

14:00 enclave of a different nationality in a town and it was called Beliria. But it was much smaller, we would have had eight hundred in it I suppose, maximum.

Eight hundred? RAF?

Yes, they were RAF overflow after they closed Luft 3 because it was full, the balance came to

14:30 Beliria. But then when the Russians started to advance the Germans evacuated the camp and of course we all had to move out.

How did the hospital compare to the hospital at Stalag Luft 3? Did you have any better facilities there?

15:00 No, they were all scaled down, but they were correctly scaled down. In other words we had as much gear for eight hundred, proportional to what they had for two and a half thousand in Luft 3. They had more doctors and consequently a broader range of medicine. They had, I think, five or six doctors in the main hospital. There was certainly a South African one,

15:30 but the other I can’t remember now, I knew them once.

And you lived in the hospital?

Oh yes, Dr Montennuis and I shared a room and of course that was a relief in itself rather than being one of eighteen, that’s it, what I was trying to study under. But then just sharing with the doctor I could be tutored privately non-stop as long as I wanted to

16:00 in the hospital on nothing but medicine. That was just a utopia, that was just an upward move that was beyond, I just couldn’t believe it.

And what do you think you had to contribute to Dr Montennuis to, if you like, make it worthwhile ?

If you like, I was his nursing staff.

16:30 **On a personal level though do you think do you think there was something you could offer that he saw value in?**

Oh yes, an isolated medical opinion, you can never get a second opinion. Doctors always like to talk over any difficult case with somebody else and have a fresh slant at it from a different angle. And you always do a consultation with a colleague or have a conference if you possibly can,

17:00 when he is working on his own he has nothing but his own thoughts but then as he trained me he would say, “Now, this is what it says in the textbook.” and we had Price’s Textbook of Medicine which we used extensively. Because he only had three years experience and that is very little, so he would say, “This is what they say here, but this case is different in this aspect and this aspect, what else makes it different? Is there

17:30 anything else that we’re missing?” and we would nut it out together, I am trying to, you never said anything frivolous in those circumstances. It was serious, and he was asking aloud for a second opinion and you tried to make it a semi-professional one anyhow, or as far as your training would allow you to make a professional one.

18:00 So yes, I think I was able to help him bounce ideas back from a different angle.

Were you aware of any escape attempts going on at Beliria? Did anyone approach you for counsel or tips about their escapes?

No, I think at that stage the Germans were so cunning and

18:30 there were other things. The barbed wire was much further from the huts. We never tried to dig a tunnel, I never went underground, of course, because I went straight into the hospital, so I never knew what the sub-soil was like. But there was nobody in the camp, you see they were all new boys and they didn’t have time to pick up the skills

19:00 we had learnt over the last three years. And I think they were trying to learn them, but by then the Russians advanced and the war was over.

Do you remember hearing news through the grapevine, I guess, of the escape having gone ahead?

Oh yes. They told us at roll call the next day that last night seventy-six

19:30 prisoners had got out and we were elated. And then ten days later the German captain came in and said seventy-three of the prisoners have been shot evading capture. And the senior British officer said, “How many were wounded?” And he said, “None.” “In other words.” he said, “You murdered them.” And the German just hung his head in shame, didn’t answer and walked off because that is what had happened.

20:00 They said they were shot trying to avoid recapture which was absolute rubbish, they were executed. So there was elation for a couple of weeks and then very deep gloom after that for quite a long time from which we never really recovered throughout the war.

Was that the case for yourself?

20:30 Oh yes. Well, they were my best mates. All of the keen ones were the ones involved in the tunnelling and all of the activities and they were the ones that you associated and planned with and they were my best mates. No, that was a hard one really, particularly when you knew you should have been amongst them. “But for.” as I say, “the grace of God.”

21:00 **How did you deal with that trauma for yourself?**

I suppose you could say fate dealt you the hand to deal with it because I had the hospital work to keep me thinking and active and tired, there was a huge amount of work to do. Montennuis, as he said,

21:30 could never have satisfactorily coped on his own. And then the Russian front advancing and following that and watching them get closer and closer to our camp until we could see the flashes of artillery at night and hear the gunfire. And that’s when the Germans evacuated everybody but left me in charge of the hospital. So I had plenty to do then, there was no thought of,

22:00 I was the sole doctor. I was in charge of the hospital then.

Why were you chosen and not Montennuis?

He had gone with the troops, you see?

But why did he leave somebody so inexperienced as the only doctor?

Because, as he said, there was a couple of thousand of them going on that march and everything that

comes up will be a new problem

22:30 and that’s where I am trained. Here, you know every diagnosis and you are the guy that is carrying out the treatments for me, I used to take the tablets around and change the dressings on the wounds and that sort of thing. So I could run the hospital exactly the same as it had run with him in it, unless something happened new. Well, that’s the luck of the Gods. But he said, “Well, you know everything about it and you can run it.” And the Russians will have you free

23:00 in two or three days, and I spoke Russian, enough Russian to, I had learnt in camp to be able to communicate well enough. “Niepa Russki pie Angliski [spelling approximated].”

What does that mean?

Don’t speak Russian, speak English.

What's don’t shoot?

That’s a German one. “Kein schiessen. Nicht schiessen.”

23:30 So that’s why he left me in charge, and then from somewhere the Germans got a load of filthy old cattle trucks and loaded all of these boys on stretchers two deep into those and loaded us on the train right through the night clear across Germany to the Western Seine [?] to Nuremberg, and I was the doctor on that train looking after them all. And then when I got to

24:00 Nuremberg, we weren’t there very long before Patton crossed the Rhine and advanced straight to Nuremberg and they picked us all up and force marched us back towards Munich, and I had about two and a half thousand, only two hundred RAF, but the rest were United States aircrew boys and I was the doctor for the whole column. And at the end of the day they would billet us around, because we were

24:30 walking though the country they just threw a cordon of sentries around a village and you had to find your own hayloft or barn to sleep in where you would be warm because it was, of course, freezing cold. And then they would just start marching you off the next day. Okay, you might have escaped but you only had days to go to the end of the war and the German civilian population would have

25:00 probably murdered you if you had got out of under the guards’ reach.

Sorry, that was under the American guard? Sorry, I thought you meant you had caught up with the Americans?

No, Patton was chasing us and Goering said, “Move them away.” He wanted us as hostages to guarantee he would get to South America. And so I had to look after the gang, but then at the end of each day’s

25:30 march when you came to a village the chief of the German guards was the same rank as I was so I would say to him, “I want a room in that house for a sick parade for a hospital.” He said, “But that’s the mayor’s house.” And I said. “No?” In other words, “So what?” And the mayor grumbled all along but he was kicked out. Because

26:00 with the Americans so close they sent a dawn patrol, an air patrol out to see that we were safe, to see which direction we were going at ground level. And then he went back to the American lines and at midday they would send another one over to check progress and then they would bed down our night position, so they were very carefully monitoring us from a distance. And I said to the German in charge of the column, I said,

26:30 “No funny business and I will see that you are looked after when the war is over if you act properly.” And in fact I said, “I am quite sure I can get you a very good position as head lighthouse keeper at Kalgoorlie.” Which is four hundred miles from the coast, but he was delighted, to be the head lighthouse keeper.

27:00 Well that’s the way we sort of kept our tongue in our cheek and kept our psychological superiority going. I couldn’t crack a smile at any stage of that one or I think he would have been rather upset.

How were you transporting the sick? You were marching at this point? How were the sick transported?

They were marching with us and then at the end of the day you had to patch them all up.

27:30 twisted ankles, because if you didn’t march you fell by the wayside and we knew that the SS [Schutzstaffel, Defence Corps] was twenty-four hours behind and anybody that they found was shot. So there was a great onus on the doctor to keep the boys marching and a great willingness on theirs to overcome a lot of pain and keep going too, because it was that or nothing.

28:00 And then at the end of patching up my mates, in would come the guards to see Herr Doktor. And when I had a shot of them in came the townsfolk to see Herr Doktor. Because they didn’t have a doctor in these little villages, and I had the medical supplies from the Red Cross, and I could speak it, so I was

28:30 treating them as well. That’s the meaning of the Hippocratic oath, it doesn’t matter who comes to you for medical help, whoever they are, whatever their colour or their creed you help them, and there was a

bloke, if I had tried to escape he would have shot me but that's the way it was.

And you felt confident that you would be free in the near future?

29:00 Yes we, as I say three times a day they reassured us, if you like, they came over, and the midday one was a twin engine machine and he would just feather one motor, only use one engine and he would use one propeller, circle the whole column at about thirty or forty feet, just clear of the tree tops, waggle his wings and disappear again. And of course the German guards knew what the situation was.

29:30 I said, "It won't be long before we're guarding you. And so no funny business." And so that was why we got away with what we did.

Was friendly fire a concern then or earlier in the war, were you ever concerned about allied bombers?

Yes, it was a risk that you couldn't avoid

30:00 but it was a smaller risk than you would think. At Nuremberg the RAF bombed the marshalling yards, the railway marshalling yards at night and our camp boundary was the boundary of the marshalling yards. They dropped, twelve hundred bombers

30:30 were on the raid and the raid was over in about thirty-five to forty minutes and you were just flat on the floor with all of the windows open, not a light showing and your mouth open, otherwise the percussion would have broken your ear drums and you were almost unconscious with the pounding and the roar of these bombs going off continually, and then bang, the raid was over and they were gone. And they did not drop one bomb in the camp.

31:00 There was a German night fighter who was shot down by one of the bombers and he knew that that camp was full of POWs and he was crashing and he just pointed at our hut, pointed his aircraft at our hut and thought, "I am going to take this lot with me." How he missed our roof I don't know, he went over. I still don't know how he missed the roof and he crashed three or four hundred metres away. But of course all of the force was going away from us by then.

31:30 There was no threat and then all of a sudden the threat comes from absolutely nothing. And you just watch, you can't move, you're on the floor anyway. And you have just got to sit and take it, but luckily it went over.

At what point did the leaflet drop occur?

That was after we finished that march

32:00 and we were at Landshut not far north of Munich, the Americans were close behind us. And then we got word from the German guards, I forgotten who, from the guards anyway that the next step was to take the two hundred RAF and march just us to Berchtesgaden, to Hitler's secret hideout in the Austrian mountains.

32:30 And we were to be held there as hostages. It didn't take more than a few seconds to work out that that would be the end of us. If we weren't bombed, because they couldn't bomb Berchtesgaden and not bomb us if we were going to be held inside it, and so we thought, "We are either going to be killed by friendly fire, as you say, or the Germans would shoot us, they're never going to let us, they are not going to die

33:00 themselves and let us go free." So that was when we really bribed some guards and a couple of the guys got into Munich itself and knocked a couple of heads in, people unconscious and got into the German radio station and broadcast a message to England saying they were going to march us to Berchtesgaden as

33:30 hostages. That night the RAF sent over Mosquitoes, very low level, a lot of them and when we awoke in the morning those A5 white leaflets were like snow right through the camp and all around it. and it said "Attention." in German of course, "any man or woman in the armed forces or civilian

34:00 who moves or causes to be moved or takes part in the moving of any prisoner of war from here to anywhere else will be held guilty. Be charged with a war crime. Upon liberation you will be tried by court martial on the spot,

34:30 the penalty is death and the sentence will be carried out immediately. Signed Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, Josef Stalin." We didn't move. But you can't keep those sort of, a lot of the boys did keep them as supplies but I had no room for anything but medical supplies in my backpack, but gee, that was lovely to see.

35:00 And we were liberated only a few days after that, Patton came in himself, and twenty minutes after the tanks had come in and bashed down the gates, the guards had disappeared of course, they heard the tanks coming and just made themselves vanished. Twenty minutes later they had a doughnut van and we were eating hot doughnuts and were as sick as dogs. After our

35:30 food to rich American sweet doughnuts and we were scoffing them you know, gutsing them, you can't

call it anything else.

What were the major medical concerns you faced on the march?

Chest infections, bronchitis, always the threat of pneumonia and of course

36:00 there were no antibiotics in those days. Pontosil was the first German sulphonamide, it was primitive but it was made by Bayers and of course they are still one of the biggest pharmaceutical suppliers in the world. And we did get some supplies which we kept strictly, but because they had never been used before

36:30 they were very effective, in other words you didn't get any resistance from the bacteria to the medication because it was a new weapon against them and they were bowled over and the limited time we had to use it it was highly effective. But certainly serious chest infections were the worst. Gastro, alright, that was like gastro anywhere it is debilitating and it is humbling

37:00 and it is unfortunate but it is not life threatening. But the pneumonia was, because there is no hospital, no follow up, there was nothing more you could do than these primitive, well, they weren't antibiotics then, they were sulphonamides. Yes, that was certainly the only serious problems we had, the rest were just twisted ankles and

37:30 skin infections and fevers. That was all.

And you really only had other casualties to help one another, to carry or assist one another on the march?

People would give guys a hand,

38:00 and of course like all POWs they were very innovative. We went past a rubbish tip and there was an old burnt out pram chassis that had been thrown on. Of course the fire had been through it and it was all blackened and scarred and the axles of the pram didn't go the

38:30 right way and the basic metal frame was all right and the four, no rubber on it but the four wheels were there. So four of us got to work on it and we straightened the chassis and made the axles parallel and we got some old bits of cardboard and bits of timber and laid a base frame on it and then we were able to get our four packs off our back and put them on that. And we found any old bits of string

39:00 which we plaited and knotted together and then on the front of the pram, you know how it comes up to the springs to hold the pram? We tied it on and we put a padded yolk on it and then back to the other one and you had one horse in front pulling that cart. Of course it moved pretty easily. Of course it kept tracking because it wasn't central, but that was easy, we just put a bit of string

39:30 on the outside of the back wheel there on the axle and another one off that way and if it started to veer off there like that you just pulled that one out and it tracked back into the centre of the road again. So four of us, were our gang of four and three guys took it in turn, they rotated position on that and I as the German speaker walking along

40:00 would go into the farm house and ask the farmer and the family if they had any food, knock on the front door and see if they could spare anything at all for us to eat. Well, curiosity brought them to the door to see what these enemy were really like and kept them there talking and finally he would say, "Nein, ich habe nicht." "I don't have anything I can give you."

40:30 And we would say, "We are sorry about that, you don't have anything left either." Because my mates had been around the back and cleared out the kitchen completely.

Tape 7

00:30 **So we might just move quickly to basically the war is over now, how did you get home, what is the process?**

When Patton liberated us, they flew us to Reims aerodrome in France and from there they sent the Americans by Superfortress straight to the States,

01:00 and took the RAF home by Lancaster straight to England. We then went to Uxbridge the RAF collection centre and got civilian clothes and food coupons and that sort of thing, and were given leave. While I was flying, before I was shot down

01:30 I had made great friends in lovely people in Stratford-on-Avon, Colonel and Mrs Bryant. Bryant and May's matches were probably the best known original match firm in England and they had a lovely ancestral home out of Strathford-on-Avon. And they adopted me.

02:00 **Because that was the scheme, wasn't it? I have heard a lot of boys were adopted by English families?**

It was the Lady Frances Ryder scheme, she was an English lady who felt that they should, as we had come over to fight for them, that they should befriend us and make us feel welcome and give us as much hospitality and friendship as they possibly could. And they did that in spades, as they say.

02:30 But the Bryant's connection, do you remember the O'Reilly's in Green Mountain and the crash of the Stinson, the one that went down? And the Englishman who survived the crash and went to get help? And slipped over a gorge in the McPherson Ranges here on the border, broke both of his ankles and then continued to push himself backwards dragging both of his ankles.

03:00 Bernard O'Reilly had heard the plane go over and could see a break in the trees and with his intense bushman skills he found the plane and he found the two guys, Jim Westray had hauled to safety and he looked after them and then went after Westray and he saw him up against a tree but when he got there he was dead with just a

03:30 cigarette in his hand. Well, that was Mrs Bryant's son, and she had come out just the year before the war to unveil a memorial to him on the spot of the crash. And so when she heard that there were Australians nearby training on Tiger Moths, in aviation

04:00 of course, she asked two of us down for the weekend, and we got her story. She had remarried, she was Mrs Westray and that was her only son. She had a daughter whom I met as well.

So when you came back from being a POW she must have been…?

Oh she literally, well, all of the time I was in POW she wrote me letters, she sent me clothing parcels, she sent me everything she could send. They literally

04:30 showered me with things. They were lovely, lovely people. And as soon as I got back she said, "Come and have your recoup leave with us." And I did. It was on four hundred acres, a lovely home. And the sheer freedom of being able to wander anywhere I wanted to be on my own in those glorious woods on my own and without somebody saying, "Hoch!." "Put your hands up." and being

05:00 made to go here. Your soul felt like it could fly. And they were so emotional those first few weeks. I used to just jump on a bus, I didn't know where it was going, and I would get off I don't know where and I might take a walk where I was. I mean I was in England somewhere, I wasn't going to get lost,

05:30 and I just enjoyed the sheer freedom of freedom, but any time I wanted to come home I could stay there. Well, then I got leave for having been a POW over, you got a day for every month you were a POW and it was to be taken at your home address in Perth, and I flew out and had a wonderful leave with my family

06:00 and then back to England to get demobbed [demobilised], and then come back to Australia and start my, having been in the air force in England I had to be demobilised in England, I could have got it in Australia but I sure didn't want it. There was nothing like a free trip around the world after all of that lot. And…

Well, let's move forward maybe to your medical training now, how did that come about?

06:30 After the war you were offered, ex-servicemen were offered a free course at university, whatever they wanted. To help them learn the skills they missed out on while they were serving. And so I was able to get straight into a medical course. There was no chair of medicine in Perth at the time.

07:00 By this time, when I got back to England, I met my first wife and married her, she was a beautiful Welsh blonde and we were married thirty-eight years before she died. She was a very great settling influence because you will gather from my talks that I was liable to just go off because I was

07:30 able to go off and do something. But she was the stabling influence and when I would come home from lectures she would be there, she had a meal cooked and then I would sit down to study and she would sit and study behind me, and I would be writing up my notes from the day's lectures and she would be asking me questions about what happened in the day's lectures, so I had to really pay attention to what was said so I could pass it on to her.

08:00 And in that sense she pulled my dreams down and put them into reality. And that was a lovely part of our marriage, that training together.

How did it feel, I mean, you had had practical experience in the POW camp with medicine, but how did it fell, I mean what you had wanted to do originally, you were finally able to go to university, how was that for you?

08:30 Indescribably lovely. It was just if, you felt at peace because it was so relaxing and just what you wanted. And it turned out always to roll out the way we wanted it to roll out and expected it to roll out. And in place of adversity

09:00 and obstacles being put in your way it was a downhill run.

And you met someone special while you were training, can you talk about that, Weary Dunlop?

Oh yes. I say, he was one of the lecturers who come back from the war,

Sorry, Geoff, I am not going to use my voice probably so I might just get you to

09:30 **say that you met Weary Dunlop so we know who you are talking about.**

Yes, fortunately for me our lecturers were those guys who had been overseas and my surgical tutor just happened to be Weary Dunlop and of course he soon worked out that I was much older than the others and when he questioned me and discovered I was a prisoner of war in Europe and could, and had been involved

10:00 in the hospital side of it, he had a huge gap of knowledge on what had happened and how the conditions were different for them and for us. And naturally he was a very intelligent, very curious man, by curious I mean great curiosity. He wanted to be able to fill in those gaps and fill in the picture of what was

10:30 available in two different sides of the world in hospitals in POW camps. So we spent many hours talking about that, including lovely dinners at his home with his wife and with my wife.

Obviously his war experience under the Japanese would have been different to yours, did you discuss that?

Chalk and cheese. Absolutely chalk and cheese.

11:00 I think I emphasised that the Germans never actually were physically brutal with us with exceptions. I mean if they got you away from the mainstream then they were just butchers. But the Japanese just butchered everybody. The number of deaths in POW camps in Japan compared to Europe were something like twenty or

11:30 thirty times as many per hundred, enormously…

What sort of role, speaking to Weary Dunlop and your own experiences, what sort of role or value is a doctor in a POW camp? Obviously they are someone that the men maybe look up to. I mean Weary Dunlop…?

Oh yes, he is a

12:00 very tall man, about six foot four, and he played rugby for Australia so he was a forceful man. And so if the Japanese were beating a POW Weary just stood in front of the fellow and took the beating himself, he was that sort of guy. His character was like that, he just

12:30 never flinched from pursuing what he thought was right. Not that he was all that serious, he had a lovely sense of humour and quirkiness to him too.

What did he teach you about medicine that you really value?

It was the unique style of his surgical skill.

13:00 After I graduated I specialised in anaesthetics and resuscitation. And I got to do all years and years of doing the anaesthetics for Weary, and of course if you are at the top end and you have got to manage the patient and check that there is no blood lost and everything is running right and you have got to keep your

13:30 patients as well as you can and make sure they survive in top condition, you have got to pay great attention to what the surgeon is doing now, what he is doing next and what he has got to do after that. So that you can prepare the patient, see, patients aren’t automatically ready for the surgeon to proceed, see, if you give a lot of anaesthetic everything goes soft and floppy

14:00 and they can reach into the far corners of the abdomen, but that uses a lot of anaesthetic and pushed the patient into a dangerous situation and so you never use that extra bit of anaesthetic until it is absolutely necessary. And you have to know how long it is going to take the surgeon from tying off that first bleeding to when he is going to want complete relaxation to get to the far corner where they are going to take out a cancer of the bowel.

14:30 And you had to know how Weary operated, whether he took out the lymph glands, first tracked those and took all of that bleeding out and then came backwards and took the tumour out last. Some surgeons take the tumour out first, stitch the bowel up around there and then track it back down all of the lymph glands. So you had to study a surgeon and be aware of his techniques and that kept you on your little

15:00 tippy toes. So when you got to be teamed with a man, that made it easier for him because he didn’t have to say, “Well, you have to give him more anaesthetic, he is too tight.” You never had to be asked or told that because you were aware of when it was needed and you were just in advance of what he needed, so you always had as

15:30 near perfect conditions for him as you could get.

Do you think having experience in a POW camp as a doctor and having to operate under difficult situation made him more of an extraordinary doctor in civilian life, in risk taking and

knowing what you could and couldn’t do? Could you talk about that?

16:00 More experienced in different situations. Yes, because in civilian life you would never be anticipating doing the type of operation that he had to do there, tropical ulcers and amputate limbs because of ulcers because you couldn’t control the infection. There where you have got intravenous drips and antibiotics and everything

16:30 that can be controlled and the surgery you are required to do is quite different, so he had all of that background of the, if you like, the rougher surgery where you had to make shift with instruments, techniques and the people assisting you. You seldom got skilled assistants, your instruments were far from perfect, they were little short of, just what was necessary usually, with no

17:00 frills on it, and then he had to adapt to all of the most modern techniques and availability in the Royal Melbourne and the Freemasons and the top hospitals. And he did that, of course, very well. But I used to go and give his anaesthetics in those big hospitals as well. And then he came out regionally to where I was, fifty kilometres out

17:30 of Melbourne because the doctor that I was associated with had been his best mate from the time they started to school together, they went to school together and they joined up together and were captured together, and they went back to their practices together separately at the end of the war. But he was a physician, this friend who I worked with, so he used to get Weary down to do all of his difficult cases on the weekend of a Saturday and I used

18:00 to be the anaesthetist who gave Weary’s anaesthetics on those Saturdays. And then the three of us would retire to the local RSL [Returned and Services League] and that was where I had to use a lot of sleight of hand. They both weighed eighteen stone, I think it’s a hundred and fifty kilos and I was sixty-three kilos, consequently

18:30 they could drink me under the table if we drank round for round, so I used to have to slip most of my drinks into the tall potted palm, who dreaded my arrival I think.

Having dreamed for so long of being a doctor how would you sum up your medical career, was it everything you hoped it would be?

Yes. Every bit as good.

19:00 I was in a position where I could chose where I wanted to practice, what type of practice I wanted and how long I stayed at it. I mention I married a lovely Welsh lass, but she had a bad heart. When I met her she made no, she couldn’t disguise the fact that when you fall in love you take the package deal, whatever it is.

19:30 Bad heart and everything. And I took it. But then we set out to do the best we could to keep her heart as well as we could for as long as we could. Nobody in recorded history with her condition had lived to see their thirty-fifth birthday and she knew that from reading the textbooks, and she lived to sixty. Because we were able to pick the very newest things that

20:00 were happening, discuss them and apply them to her, and she was at the right age to accept all of the new changes, and we won an extra quarter of a century through paying attention to what was new and good in the medical surgical world. She had two open heart operations and survived them both well.

20:30 So that developed my special interest in hearts. And, of course, in rehabilitating hearts. Because that was the important thing, to get her off the operating table, but then to restore their health of the whole person, not just the heart, to get maximum benefit out of the heart operation and then the second operation she just had. And we succeeded in doing

21:00 that and the National Heart Foundation asked me to design a program for anybody who came out of hospital after a heart attack or bypass surgery, would I rehabilitate them, so I was able to swing my career over and do something that I knew I could do because I was doing it with my wife and I kept on as a specialist in anaesthetics and used the rehabilitation of

21:30 hearts as my hobby. But when we came to Queensland in 1980 my wife was very ill, it was too cold in Melbourne, she was dying, that’s why we came to the Gold Coast. And I said when we got here “I am sick of anaesthetics.” I had done more than forty thousand of them. I said, “I am going to make my job my hobby.” and my hobby

22:00 turned into my full time job. And I was in a position where I could do it. and so I have been able to follow, follow my star is not right, I have been able to follow what I wanted to do and do it to the best of my ability and maximum enjoyment and hopefully to help the most people. And it is because I still have the

22:30 passion that I am still doing it at eighty-three.

You also have done a fair bit of work with postnatal depression, is that right? You have an interest in that?

No, I couldn’t say that. My exercise of a morning can take anybody, I had trained people to get fit after

their second operation for bypass surgery.

23:00 When they were very ill and nursed them back into health and on the same program, because we walk in circles and the fitter you are the bigger the circle that you walk in in two minutes, I was able to train Kathy Watt's father for the Moscow Olympic Marathon, on the same track and at the same time as I trained a guy fresh out of bypass surgery. And of course because they are walking in a circle it is like a

23:30 roulette wheel. He, a champion runner, marathon runner, never passed the man who was just out of bypass surgery because they all completed the circuit in two minutes, and in between you can have people of all grades. And that to me has been., well that was my invention if you like or

24:00 solely my idea if you like and we were able to train, we have had a hundred and thirty people at once all being trained safely and well.

Is that something that you're most proud of?

Yes. Quite definitely.

And through that you actually met your second wife, Alison, didn't you too?

Yes. She lost her first hubby who, as I said, was a Tobruk Rat through heart attacks at the same time my first wife died, and because of his war

24:30 experiences the war widows picked her up and took her to bowls in the morning and bridge in the afternoon and a show and generally try to soften her grief and ease her widowhood and put some pleasure back into it. And after about eighteen months she said to a friend of hers who happened to be a

25:00 patient of mine, "I am sick of this, I want to get fit again and get on with life." And this lass said, "Go and see Geoff Cornish." So she came in January '85, we were engaged in March and married in May. And neither of us thought we would ever marry again, we had had such lovely first marriages. We thought we would never meet the right lady and, too, we didn't really want to. But of course as

25:30 you have been on your own for a while, when you have had a loving partner there is a void there. And when the perfect person steps in and says, "I have got the same need." bingo!

And how long ago was that?

Nineteen years last month.

I might just ask you a few general questions now about your war experience, firstly, what are your thoughts on Anzac Day?

26:00 Anzac Day is a tremendous, it is absolutely unique, there is nothing has ever been like it and I don't think anything will ever duplicate it. It teaches at once what extreme courage and bravery can do while at the same time teaching the

26:30 futility of what they are doing. In other words, war is futile, it saves nothing. You're going to kill a lot of people and then you have got to settle down and make your peace with the remainder, whatever is left over and hasn't been killed. If you had settled down and talked it out in the first place everybody would have lived happily ever after. War is futile.

27:00 I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said, "The only thing that man has learnt from history is that he has learnt nothing from history." He still makes the same mistakes believing that these circumstances are different from what they were previously. And that war in that stage wasn't just what this one is, rubbish.

27:30 So back to Anzac Day, when you spread Anzac Day out and separate it into its various concepts and what it does mean they all add up, I think, to have a positive feeling towards avoiding war ever again. And to me that means peace for the world. And to me I think.

28:00 that is the finest aim that the war can have; to live in peace.

It seems that there has been more interest, especially amongst younger people in recent years, why do you see that happening?

I think it is a pendulum swing. After two world wars we were sick of war. My Dad was away for the whole of the First World War, I was away for the whole of the

28:30 Second World War and so although we dutifully went to Anzac Day it wasn't for some years until our own memories and personalities were subdued that you took on, if you like, the more altruistic meanings of Anzac Day and began to attend Anzac Day

29:00 for those hopes I believe it does offer the world.

If there can be such a thing as a good war for someone's personal experience what is the good that you can take out of your experience? How it developed you as a man?

29:30 I would say the single most outstanding thing that I found was that I don’t think before I was in the height of war, I had ever had to trust the man on the left side of me

30:00 and the man this side of me and the man behind me, with my life. Know that he would defend it with his own. And then knowing that I would give my life to save his if necessary. In other words a team spirit under threat of death in war and that is what I think makes an army, and by army I don’t just mean land army,

30:30 I mean air force, navy, fighting armed forces. I think it is that. It is the absolute need to have complete and absolute confident trust, not just half trust, “I hope he looks after me and is prepared to do what he should do.” No, you learned that the only way through it was complete sense of unity, complete sense of

31:00 purpose and absolutely one hundred percent loyalty to the death. And I think that helps mould your character and your thoughts and the way that you handle a lot of the rest of your life. You learn to trust other people, depending on them, but not a one way dependence. You are not depending on them saying, “Well, he is not going to repay me.” You know he might start to depend but then you will be doing the repaying.

31:30 **And then the experience in the camp, I mean you were in the élite, you were the élite, to be with so many intelligent men, was that in a way special for you? Just that mateship you had and that trust in the camp?**

Once again that embodied the same spirit, if you were

32:00 underground and something went wrong you knew the guy behind you would give his life to help save yours, that’s where it started I think. So I suppose it is a sense of the ability to build a team and the desire to build a team,

32:30 the best possible team in all circumstances. Whether it is a team to go shopping or a cross country run or whatever. I think you, it binds you, takes away selfishness and brings co-operation with other people and from that great friendships.

And does war actually focus your value system or what you really think is important in life? Did you have a different worldview

33:00 **after being through what you had gone through in the war?**

Certainly.

How did it change?

I felt that before the war and early in the war the guy who was great company in the mess having a drink or was around to dinner and told the best yarns and was the brightest company and always suggested something good to do, really popular.

33:30 He was the guy you thought, “Gosh he is a great bloke.” But then you learned it might be the quieter guy who wasn’t quite so upfront and out public and effusive was actually the better person when it comes to friendship. No, I will go back to a better person,

34:00 he was, I think, a better person. In other words what you think makes up a person, the good qualities; you find you change as you mature. In other words experience makes you learn what good qualities are and they are not what you thought when you were younger.

Why is it important for you to tell your story today?

34:30 If you can truthfully recount experiences which helped you along what you believed the correct route then by telling it you might implant that

35:00 story in the memory of somebody who finds themselves going down the same path. And when they have been given a solution that they know works you have probably stopped them from finding their own solution and perhaps coming a terrible cropper. In other words you have helped somebody by what you have said and done.

35:30 It is not for yourself, I don’t think, it is for, you try to contribute to the best experiences of the world really, in summary, and I think that’s what you should do. I think that’s what friends and family should pass on to the next generation. You must learn by experience, if you start from scratch you will start over making the same mistakes and civilisation

36:00 will never progress. You have got to read over and listen to the correct decisions and mistakes that have been made and either avoid the mistakes or build on the correct decisions.

And do you have any regrets at all throughout the war experience or post war life?

No real regrets. Because as I have said, I think you have gathered

36:30 from my attitude I have said time and again if your number is on it you will get it. Regret means a diversion from that, the fact that I think that was almost what you were pre-destined to do and I don’t

think you can regret something

37:00 that was part from you and part pre-destined.

Did being a survivor of the war make you embrace life more and…?

Oh, indeed. You value every minute. And once again you learn to put your assets in a different order. Your health

37:30 is absolutely, by far and away your greatest asset. And any financial planner who is going to help you save and make your fortune and doesn't mention that health is your best asset; drop him, because he is only interested in promoting himself primarily and you secondly.

38:00 **Was there any final thing that you would like to say today, maybe to your grandchildren or whoever might come any final words?**

I think just to reiterate that message I got at fourteen. Luke Chapter 2 Verse 52. "Jesus

38:30 increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man." And if you can ever find a better way of conducting your life than that, please tell me about it. This one I know works and I trust it and it has never let me down. It is a saying that I have been able to use for the background for questioning for virtually every patient that I have treated.

39:00 You can begin by subtly asking them what they are doing in the study scene, what their hobbies are, in other words their mental attitude, you find out what their physical sports and their physical requirements are, you can softly get their philosophy and perhaps some of their religious objects spelt

39:30 out and by observation and questioning you can find out their sense of social, and then you can plot them one to ten, award them points and then all of a sudden you see a glaring disparity and it is up to you as a doctor to help them draw out their life in that direction, so that once again

40:00 they are equally expanding their lives in those four directions. And I would say that was the biggest help to me in practicing good medicine than any other sentence or any other textbook. Just that one little verse was enough. Because it is what it is

40:30 about. The Reverend Cornish is now shut up!

Thank you so much, it was a real pleasure.

INTERVIEW ENDS