Australians at War Film Archive

Clarence Singe (Des) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:36 **So Des, you were born in Western Victoria, can you tell me a little bit about growing up?**

Well, I was born in Maryborough, which is in the goldfields in Victoria. I was born on the 8th of August, 1920. At the age of five, I started school at State School 404,

01:00 West State School, Maryborough. And my Dad went to that school as well. As a matter of fact, one of the ladies that taught my Dad taught me as well. It was getting towards the Depression years, 1925 I started school. And it was starting to get into the Depression at that stage. I actually finished state school in sixth grade,

01:30 barefooted with probably the backside out of my trousers. But everybody was the same in the Depression. Nobody had anything, really. It was just the sort of thing that everybody did, and no one took any notice. We used to walk to school, about a mile and a half. After school, we'd walk home. If it was raining, we'd sail our matchboxes down the gutters and that sort of thing, as all kids did.

02:01 **What did your father do?**

My father was a carpenter and a cabinet maker. During the Depression, he had to go away from Maryborough to get work. He used to go up as far as Pinnaroo and Nhill, up around that way, building wheat sheds and that sort of thing. He'd come home once a fortnight. That went on for quite a long while. And then

02:30 my Dad got a job at Maryborough knitting mills, making packing cases. He was there and my brother got a job at the mills as well. He was older than me, of course, he died about five years ago. I wasn't able to get a job. By the time I was fifteen, I had to leave school anyway. They couldn't afford to keep me at school. But I had started to learn the

03:00 piano when I was at state school, and I only went there...less than nine months because apart from being too expensive, my teacher wrote a letter to my Dad saying she couldn't teach me, because I used to play it without the music anyway.

So you had a bit of a talent for the piano?

And from that time on, I never learnt music. Except when I joined the Maryborough band as a junior,

03:30 I learnt to play the cornet, and I learnt to read music a little bit there. And we were playing in the junior band, and in 1932 we played at the Maryborough station. A whistle stop for the Duke of Gloucester who came through. But it was only a five minute stop or something. Then in 1935, we left Maryborough to go the city, so that we could get more work. We lived at Coburg, which

04:01 might be fifteen miles out of the city. And my brother and I used to ride our bikes from Coburg to Sunshine to the Massey Harris Harvester Works, where we got a job. Dad worked there as a carpenter foreman. And we worked there for....five and a half years. I was apprenticed to turning and fitting.

04:32 **What sort of subjects did you enjoy when you were at school?**

Well, I used to enjoy engineering drawing, algebra, I was all right at algebra....But I wasn't a good student, I don't think, I used to play the fool too much. I don't know that I qualified very much for anything. I got my Junior Technical Skills certificate. And my headmaster was a fellow

05:01 by the name of Rex Cutter. And he was the only fellow that I've ever known that could start and write with his right hand, then he would write with his left hand, and he would write two lines at the same, and they'd all be different writing, and he'd continue...Amazing.

That's an unusual talent to have. So this was your headmaster?

That was my headmaster at the Maryborough Technical School of Mines.

What was discipline like when you were in school?

05:30 It was good discipline. They weren't severe, but you had to do what was expected. There were certain rules that you had to stick to in those days. Most of the kids were pretty good at it, but some of them used to go over the fence a bit, like all kids. I was mainly, I used to play by the book, mainly. I didn't get into very much trouble at school.

06:00 Then when I left school I realised, the best years that I should have had were in school, and I didn't put in as much as I should have done. I did get my junior tech.

Did you play any sport?

Yes, I played cricket with the church cricket team. And I didn't play football at that stage, because I was trying to teach myself the piano. And I used to sit at the piano and

06:30 play and play and play, most Saturday afternoons. There was no radio or anything in those days. We had a crystal set, with the little whisker of a crystal in it, and Dad used to put the headphones into a basin, so that it would sound and we could all hear it, instead of only one having the headphone. We had no electric light either, then, back in those years. We used to play cards on a Sunday evening

07:00 by the lamplight. We enjoyed it. It was something that everyone had. It was just a way of life…The Depression years, when you look back on them, it was very savage, actually.

How did it affect your family, the Depression?

Well, it affected us by the fact that we had to leave Maryborough and go to Melbourne to get work.

Was Maryborough a small community?

Maryborough was a town of about eight thousand people, and it still is today.

07:30 It was a great railway centre. And my mate Norman Huddle and I, we got into trouble one day, but no one found out about it. They had a great coal stage, where the forty four ton trucks of coal would go right up this big lift, and they would empty them into the engine, which went in a row…They were all steam engines in those days. And we were playing up there

08:00 one Sunday morning, and Huddle's stood on the brake, and it let it off. He just stood on it to get into the truck, and the brake let itself off and the truck started to roll. You can imagine that two fourteen year old kids couldn't stop a forty four ton truck. It went straight down the ramp, straight through the railway gates and into Maryborough station. We weren't there by the time it

08:30 got there, of course. We had gone down to the park. But no one found out who did it. It was just an accident as far as everyone was concerned. But it could have been very dangerous, because the railway gates crossed with the level crossing, and there could have been a car or people or anything. The truck went through and smashed the railway gates….the gates actually pulled it up.

That must have been a pretty terrifying moment….

It was, we were really scared.

09:00 We didn't do it intentionally. It was just something that poor old Norm, stood on the brake…We shouldn't have been up there anyway. But you know what kids are like when the railway engine's about. We used to go into the engines and the fellows would tell us all about them. Then, when my sister Dorothy was born, she is five years younger than me, and Mum used to make us take her a walk in the pram and on a

09:30 Sunday morning, and we'd take her right up this railway bank, and we'd all get on the pram….How we didn't kill her, I will never know. It was a terrible thing when you looked back on it. But they were the things we used to do back in those days. Of course, the Mildura Express used to go through Maryborough at five o' clock most afternoons, not at weekends, and we used to pinch tomatoes from the Chinese Market Garden and throw them at the engine men,

10:00 and they'd throw coal back at us, and that was what we wanted, actually. Because it was pretty hard to get firewood and coal and things, in the Depression. But that was school days. And then the circus would come to town and all the kids would be all excited about it.

That was a big thing?

Yes. And New Year's Day was a big thing in Maryborough, still is. It's a high gathering, I think it's been going for about two hundred and three years or something,

10:30 I've forgotten how many years, but we used to spend New Year's Day in the park, on the highland days. When I was in the band, it was different. I joined the band when I was eleven, I think. And of course, the band had entrance to everywhere, that was good. Then when we left Maryborough, and worked for Massey Harris….

How old are you at this point?

I was fifteen. And I

11:00 joined the Sunshine Band. 1935 was my first Anzac Day march, I was only fifteen. And that was the year that the Shrine of Remembrance opened in Melbourne. So I marched in the first Anzac Day march when the Shrine was opened in 1935. I think it was '35.

11:30 But since then I've marched in the Anzac Day march fifty six times, in Melbourne, and once in Perth.

What were your impressions of that first march?

Well, I couldn't believe the number of people that were on the sidelines. They were in their thousands, in those days. My greatest memory was of a mate of mine, I went to school with him. His name was Max Oppy.

12:00 And Max became captain of the Melbourne football. But his father died on that march. He collapsed and died on the very first march I was in, so that was a bit sad. That was all the talk of the town, of course.

Did you talk to many World War I veterans?

I've spoken to quite a few of them, actually. My Dad's friend, by the name of McCarthy, was a VC [Victoria Cross] winner. And he

12:30 used to tell me bits about it.

What did he tell you?

Well, he didn't tell me how he won his VC. I don't think they ever tell things like that. But he told me….I suppose what I'd tell the kids today. You tell them the nice bits, nothing nasty. I don't think it's fair to tell them. They can learn that later on.

It's interesting he didn't tell you about the VC, though….

Well, I had read it,

13:00 and I knew what it constituted, the Act. I've forgotten the actual words these days. But he was a big man, and a very brave man, indeed, but a very quiet man. Mr Mack as we called him. Great bloke. I actually handled his VC. He died, it must have been ten years, twelve years ago now. And I don't know what's happened to his VC. I don't know whether it went to

13:30 Canberra or not. I don't know.

It's interesting, from what I can see, they never really talked about their experience…

No. Did you know David hasn't asked me one question about the war, and David is nearly fifty-two. And nor of his boys.

See, I find that surprising. As I mentioned to you before I come

14:00 **from a family that was in Second World War, and I started drilling them at the age of eleven.**

I have to say that as soon as I start to mention anything about the war, David thinks I'm skiting, so I don't say anything. Funny, isn't it? But he's never asked me one question, in the whole of his life about the war…Even when he was a boy, he never asked me one question…

14:31 **Well, maybe what we're doing today will help spark him to ask you questions?**

I don't know that he would be interested you know. It is a past thing as far as David is concerned. But the boys were both in the cadets, in fact one of them was still in the cadets at Christchurch Grammar. He's a sergeant. But the eldest fellow, he was dux of Western Australia in the Cadets, and he became an officer in the Cadets.

15:01 And he wanted to be a pilot, but he wouldn't study enough. He was clever enough, but he wouldn't put the work into studying. I said to him "Look, if you want to be a pilot, you will have to do very well at maths and physics and things like that." He said "Oh, I couldn't be bothered." So he's now started at AWU this year, doing

15:30 science, but I don't know what he's going to do. The other fellow has just started Year Twelve….

So you got a job as an apprentice fitter and turner. Can you describe that sort of apprenticeship?

I used to go to night school, two nights a week, to the Sunshine Technical School, and it was pretty hard going, because I wasn't

16:00 the best student in the world, I don't think, but I used to try very hard. I passed all the exams, and in my fourth year, I was well into my fourth year, I was transferred to the munitions factory in Gordon Street, Footscray…I don't know, they apparently knew more about the war coming on than we did. We didn't care, in those days. I brought my first motorbike. I was eighteen at

16:30 the time. And I used to ride my motorbike from Sunshine to Footscray, which was better than riding my

pushbike from Coburn to Sunshine, which is about twelve miles. One day, I said to my boss….The war had already started. I was at church with my Mum on the Sunday night, the 3rd of September, when war was announced by Mr Menzies. And I

17:00 said to my Mum "I think I would like to join the Air force." "Oh, no," she said, "you don't want to do that." And I said "Who do you think would be able and willing to go to the war, if it weren't fellows like me?" She said "I will think about it." And she did think about it. My Mum was English. I got her permission, if I could get out of the

17:30 munitions factory. So I went to my boss and I said "I would really and truly would like to get out of munitions. I know it's a protected industry." He said "Well you are in a protected industry." And I was making, at the time, brass parts for navy torpedoes. I don't know what they were called, but they were a quite long brass thing, and it was tapered and it had a thread in the centre and a thread in the back,

18:02 and I said to him "Would there be any chance of me getting out?" "Oh no," he said, "you've got no hope." I said "What if I write a letter to the boss?" He said "Yes, you can do that." So I did write this letter, and about a month later, I was on afternoon shift, from three to eleven, and I got called into the office to say the boss

18:30 wanted to talk to me, the big boss, and it happened to be a fellow by name of Essington Lewis, and he was the head of BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary]. I don't know what he had to do with munitions, but he must have had an awful lot to do with them. Anyway, he talked to me for about ten minutes, and I answered a few questions for him. He said "I admire your spirit. He said "You're a good, strong

19:00 lad, so I think perhaps I will let you go." So he did let me go on the Friday night, and on the Saturday morning I joined the Air force. And that was September, 1940.

Just rewinding a little bit there, can you describe the munitions factory in Footscray for me?

Well, it was a huge factory. There was a lot of women working there.

19:30 We had a nice canteen. I was working on one of the big Capstone lathes. I don't think it was called piece work, because it was exacting work, and it wasn't always that you could do everything quite quickly, you had to be very exact in what you did, and we worked to tolerances and gauges to within ten thousandths of an inch.

20:02 A Capstone lathe has a head on it, with six different tools on it, and as you wind the wheel back, it turns to the next operation, so you wind it through and do the next operation. And after six operations the component was finished. So then you take it out and start again, and that's what you'd do all night. It was very detailed work. I was glad to get away from it.

Were you still an apprentice at this time?

20:31 I hadn't finished my apprenticeship, and I didn't finish it, nor did I go back to collect my qualifying certificates, after the war. I just couldn't be bothered. I didn't like engineering of any type after the war, and that's when I started cabinet making.

With the munitions factory, how many people would you say worked in there?

There would have been…

21:01 upwards of a thousand. It was quite a large factory.

Was it all dangerous work?

No, it wasn't dangerous work. The dangerous work was at that Deer Park, where they made all the fireworks and the bullets and explosives of all descriptions. As a matter of fact, there was a big explosion at Deer Park, in 1938, it was. And they used to

21:31 have this little hut in this big sand bank revetment. So if there were any explosions that took place, it wouldn't go to the next house, because of all the revetments and sandbags. I think there were two women killed in the explosion. I'm not quite sure. I know there was one anyway. It was a nasty explosion.

22:01 **It's just interesting, if you were working in a munitions factory, it can't be the safest place in the world.**

Oh, where we were was all right, it was just like an ordinary big factory, but we were making munitions. I didn't see any other part of the factory, because you only went into your own little area. All these fellows would go to their own area, whatever shift they were working on. It was much the same at HV Mackay. They had seventy-five

22:30 acres under roof when I worked there. In the morning you would start work at seven o' clock. But when you got to the gate to go in, there were five or six tractors with trolleys on the back. And you would have to get on the trolley to go to whichever one you wanted to go to. Otherwise it would take you half an hour to reach your job. At night-time they didn't supply them. You had to walk back in your own time. But in the morning, they made sure you got there in time to start.

23:00 And they used to work twenty-four hours a day there.

It sounds like it was incredibly repetitive work. Did you find that mindlessly dull?

Oh, yes, it was terribly dull, and I was glad when I was transferred to the munitions factory. That wasn't quite as dull. And when the war started, I was eager to join the air force. I always wanted to join the air force, because when I was a kid in Maryborough, Kingsford smith landed at the Carisbrook

23:30 Racecourse, in the Southern Cross, and we didn't have bikes or anything, and Norm Hubble and I ran out from Maryborough out to the racecourse to see Kingsford smith and the Southern Cross. It would have been 1932, perhaps. I always wanted to join the air force from that point onwards. I think it might have spurred me on a little bit.

How about some of your mates? Were you all

24:00 **trying to join up?**

Well, my mate at the munitions factory, Snowy Wickham, he was a nice fellow, and his mum wouldn't let him join. No way in the world would she let him join, and I don't know what ever happened to Snowy. I think he would have been called into the army, somewhere along the line, but I lost contact with him when I left the munitions factory. You didn't get the chance to have many mates at the munitions factory. I had one fellow

24:30 by the name of Ross. Eric Ross and I were good mates and in 1939, there were huge bush fires in Victoria. On Friday the 13th of February, it was still the record temperature for Victoria, it was a hundred and fourteen degrees, and the bush fires were everywhere. Rossy and I….He lived at a place called Warrandyte, just out of Melbourne. A very bushy area, and the River Yarra

25:01 ran through, still does, through Warrandyte. And we went out on our motorbikes to fight the fires, and he said "We should chain our bikes together through the front wheel so no one will pinch them." And unfortunately, after we got back at four o' clock in the afternoon, or thereabouts, there were the motorbikes chained together, burned to smithereens because they couldn't shift them. So we lost our motorbikes. But that was that.

25:33 Neither of us were insured. My motorbike, I remember to this day, cost me seventy-nine pounds.

How did you save up for a motorbike?

Well, I was paying it off and my Dad finished paying it for me when it was burned. I don't think I got into another motorbike until after the war.

26:00 The bush fires were terribly sad. They had thirty-nine bush fires in Victoria, and it's still on record as being one of the worst, until Canberra happened a couple of years ago.

That sounds absolutely dreadful.

They were shocking.

So how did you go about actually signing up?

Well, I caught the train from Sunshine into the city and I went to Vaughan House, which was

26:30 Number 108 Queen Street, Melbourne. I passed that place a few times, thinking 'Gee, I don't believe I ever signed up in the Air force in this place.' It was so long ago. But there were people there doing actual fitting work. And there was a fellow with a hacksaw, and I can still see him using this hacksaw, one stroke a second, and I thought 'Gee, that's slow.'

27:01 But I learned later on, that's the right way to use a hacksaw, otherwise you burn the teeth out. This was happening around us. It took eight hours for the medical, but there was a bit of time in between different medical things.

27:30 **Quite a bit of waiting around?**

A bit of waiting around. I was only half-dressed half the time. But they were very particular. I had a mate, he was rejected. He wanted to join the aircrew, and apparently at some stage in his life, he had had an insect in his ear, and he had the remainder of this insect on his ear drum, and they rejected him.

28:03 He couldn't get into the air force because he had the remains of an insect on his ear drum.

Bizarre. Did you notice that they were very particular when they were going through your medical?

They were very particular.

Can you remember any of the questions?

No, I'm afraid I can't.

You haven't got any insects on your ear drum?

No, I couldn't have had, or I wouldn't have got in, would I? But

28:30 I got in as a flight rigger, which was an airframe fitter. And I started my training at Laverton, which was a pre-war base. A big base. I don't know what's happened to it these days. We started as rookies at Laverton. That's when you learn to do your drill

29:00 and your saluting and your rifle drill, and everything that all the Forces do so that when they go on parade, they march well. It takes about six weeks to learn that. And one day, this sergeant came down and he said to the corporal "I would like to talk to your men." So he spoke to us and said "Does anyone know anything about music?" And my mate Mick Hunter called out

29:30 "Singey does!" He said "Well, you and Singey go and move the piano in the officers mess." And I said "Hunter, I will kill you." So we had to go and push this damned piano all around. And the VWO, the Warrant Officer, he wanted it here, then he wanted it there, and then he wanted it somewhere else. Then we had to put it up on the stage. It took us about four hours to move this darn piano. Anyway, that was just another incident.

30:03 **What did you think of your rookies' training?**

I liked it. I belonged to a rifle club at Sunshine before the war, and when war was declared they confiscated all of our rifles. I had a beautiful rifle, and it hurt me to hand it in. My brother was hurt more than I was, because he was a very good shot. And he was due to go to England to shoot for the

30:30 Queen's prize, with Perce Pavey. I met Perce Pavey once, my brother knew him very well. My brother was a crack shot. He was trained with Perce Pavey, and Perce had won the Queen's Prize twice before that. And Len was due to go to England with Pavey when the war was declared and that was the end of that. He was in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] and I was in the air force.

31:06 **So the guns that you actually had, they didn't belong to you?**

Oh, they were ours. I paid for it and brought it through the rifle club. The rifle club, apparently, were contacted by whoever it was, the authorities, and they said that the rifles were needed, and they all went to the AIF.

31:31 And I thought afterwards, well, it was a good thing anyway, but I didn't think so at the time.

I hadn't heard about rifles being confiscated to stock up. So what was an average of being a rookie like?

Well, I used to rather enjoy drill. I enjoyed rifle drill, so much so that I remembered it right through

32:00 the air force, although we didn't have rifles for very long. We had to carry rifles when we left England to go to the Middle East. But that was only to get the rifles out there. I really enjoyed rifle drill, and I was what they called a marker in the squadron. They'd call out a marker, and he was the first man out on the parade ground, then everyone would dress to the marker. That's how much I liked it. And I was tall

32:30 enough to be a marker in those days. I think I might have been the tallest in the flight, so that helped me as well.

Was it good to be tall as a marker?

Well, the marker…In the flight, they take them from the highest man down to the shortest in the squad, and I happened to be the tallest. I liked it anyway, it suited me. I knew about rifles and I was lucky enough to win the…

33:00 After our training with rifle drill, they took us to the shooting range and I scored the highest points in the shooting range, because I had an advantage over them. I had been using a rifle for two years anyway.

What were the facilities like that Laverton?

Well, we had nice tin huts….At the beginning of the war,

33:30 they built these brand new tin huts. I think there were thirty men in a hut. A full flight was in a hut. The beds had leg that folded under, and you had to fold your blankets a certain way every morning. Which was good discipline, because the blokes were pretty untidy sometimes. They'd have a hut inspection to see if everyone…They taught you how to fold your blankets all the same way, and you'd have to wrap them in a certain way…

34:04 I liked discipline. I thought it was good. I'm still a disciplinarian.

Sounds pretty crowded, having thirty blokes in one hut…

Yes, well, it was a bit crowded, but the huts were pretty long. I suppose there was six weeks between beds, and the corporal had the first bed inside the hut and he was in charge of the men in the hut. He gave us a lecture, in the hut one day, to say that

34:30 that if you fold the legs of your bed under and sat on your bed, it would collapse. But he said "You will never catch me because I've been used to it for too long." And while he was saying that, one of the blokes was folding his legs under. He sat down on his bed and it collapsed.

A roar of laughter...

Oh yes, Well, you know what Australians are like. They tried him right out.

How about mess facilities?

They were good. We had good food.

35:02 Exceptionally good food. We always had porridge and eggs and bacon. We didn't have sweets, of course, but we always had plenty of food at Laverton, and we also had sheets on our beds. Then about six of us were transferred to Ultimo in Sydney, to do extra training at the Sydney Technical School. We were there for,

35:30 I think, for three months.

So what sort of things did you do as part of this training?

Well, they taught us things like theory of flight. Which was very, very hard to understand. For instance, not many people know what makes an aeroplane lift off the ground. The engines roar, it runs along the runway, but how does it get off the ground?

36:02 There you go. That's the theory of flight. And you have to learn these things. The air speed over the top reduces the pressure underneath, and up. The shape of the wing. That was part of training for a flight rigger. Flight rigger looked after every part of the aircraft except the engines. Had to learn

36:30 hydraulics, for the ailerons and the undercarriage. And how to repair. Different ways to repair different things. And of course, having been three quarters of the way through an apprenticeship, I was home and hosed on that part of it. Then I remustered to a Fitter 2A, which was Group A.

37:00 Flight Rigger was Group Two, and you can't get past a corporal. When you get to Group One, you can go as high as you like. I was doing reasonably well, and I was remustered to a Fitter 2 A.

You were in Sydney by this stage. Did you get any leave?

No, we didn't have leave. I suppose in those days it would have been hard to give everybody leave

37:30 and pay all their fares back to where they had to go. Some were in Queensland, some were from Western Australia and Victoria and Tasmania and all over the place, you see. In the six weeks or whatever it was that we were there, we didn't have leave. But we had weekend leave. We didn't work on weekends for instance. It was just like a daily job, while we were learning. We always had freedom on the weekends to go down to the harbour or to the zoo, or whatever we wanted to do.

38:05 I was never one...Although at school I used to get into mischief, once I turned into the air force, I was old enough to know better. I didn't get into any trouble once I was in the air force.

So you were about eighteen years old at this time?

Yes.

What sort of uniform did they issue you guys with?

Well, I didn't have a uniform to start with. A lot of us didn't have a uniform,

38:30 so I said to my Mum, "I haven't been issued with my uniform." And this went on all the while I was in Sydney, and after about five weeks she said "Why haven't they issued you a uniform?" And I said "Well, I think there is so much of a demand for them, and I'm a little bit bigger than most of the blokes. They haven't made one in my size, or there isn't one available at this stage..." And she said "Well,

39:00 I think you should have one made by somebody, if it is possible, and I will pay for it." So she paid seven pounds to have a blue uniform made for. Then of course, I had two uniforms. After about three weeks I was issued with one. I used to keep the tailor made one for special occasions. It was different material, but it was the same colour. It was like a blue suit, more than an air force uniform. It was a better fit, of course.

39:34 **That was a nice thing for your mum to do for you?**

My Mum was great.

So how did you feel you went within the course? Did you really enjoy what you were doing when you were in Ultimo?

I always enjoyed what I was doing, because I was keen to learn, because I don't think I was a bright student. I had to push myself hard, and I did that

40:00 all the time. I'd study everything, while the other blokes were out...Perhaps some of the brighter ones

wouldn't even bother to study. But I felt I had to study to get there and I got there.

You were pretty determined...

Well, my Dad was a good tradesman, and he said to me "Always do your best." In fact he got my nickname, he always called me 'Mick.' From the time I was a kid he always called me Mick.

40:31 And when we came back to Melbourne, I went to the Melbourne Showgrounds, Number One Engineering School, to finish the training there, which we did. And I think I was there for four or five months, then we were qualified as an Aircraftsman, First Class. Then I was posted to Mount Gambier, as a first air

41:02 AC1 [Aircraftsman]. When we got to Mount Gambier, we had two aircraft. Two Avro Ansons.

When you were getting transferred around the place, are you flying?

No they would post you to a certain place, then you would get a leave pass, then you'd get a ticket to go wherever you were going, on the train. It took us a day and a half to get from Melbourne to Mount Gambier by train.

41:33 We got to Hamilton, then we had to wait four hours for the train to go to Hayfield or something else, then we had to change again to go to Mount Gambier in South Australia.

I was just wondering by this point had you been up in the air?

No, no. I didn't fly until I got to Mount Gambier. That was the first time I had ever been airborne, and that was a great thrill.

Tape 2

00:31 **Des, did you go to Melbourne to any engineering courses from Sydney?**

I came back to the Melbourne Showgrounds. That was Number One Engineering School in those days, and that's where I finished my Air force training to become a First Class Aircraftsman, and that's when I went Mount Gambier, when I finished there. In fact, I had two options. I could have come to Cunderdin.

01:00 And I thought 'I haven't even heard of Cunderdin.' Someone said to me "It's way out in Western Australia." I said "Well, I'll go to Mount Gambier thank you very much."

How long were you at the Number One Engineering School?

Only about five months, and we were posted to 458 Squadron. We didn't know we were going to England. We had our summer uniforms taken from us, and we were given blue uniforms and great coats

01:30 and it sort of clicked that we were going somewhere cold. But we didn't know. We were in Sydney for three or four weeks. And all we did while we were there, at the base at Bradfield Park, was marching. We'd go for a route march everyday. Because that's all there was to do while we were waiting for the boat.

02:00 I think one weekend we went down to the harbour and the two Queens were there, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, both in the harbour at the same time. We thought that was unusual in wartime, but that was when they were taking all the AIF to the Middle East. And gee, they were huge ships. We did go out and see them.

If I can just rewind you Des, and ask you what you were learning at the Number One Engineering School?

02:31 Well, they were just finishing us off. They were teaching us about propellers and speed, tip speed of the propeller, you had to work out the diameter of the propeller and the number of revs it does per minute and what speed it travelled at. They also asked you a funny question, "What would you do if an

03:00 aircraft carrier landed on the aerodrome?" And most blokes didn't realise what the bloke had said. I answered him by saying "I think I would torpedo it." He said "Where would you get your torpedo?" I said "The same place that you got the aircraft carrier." And I got rapped for that. And they asked

03:30 the full class the question, "If you had an inch square hole, and an inch diameter rod, how would you fill that hole without showing a gap?" And I was the only one that answered the question.

What was the answer?

You cut it off exactly an inch long and you put it in sideways.

04:00 I had learned that when I was doing my training as a...they weren't all fitters and turners, you see, they were recruited from all sorts of places, and they just them in wherever they wanted them. I was just fortunate enough to have done fitting and turning and I was able to answer it.

Did that give you an edge throughout….

Yes, that gave me an extra boost. But when we went to 458 Squadron, we were told before we went that we would not get promotions while we were

04:30 overseas, because the full squadron had been allotted, and you wouldn't get promotion, unless someone was killed, and if you were in line to go up, you would get promotion. But I never got promotion until I got home, and I was only made a corporal anyway.

Why were you told that?

Well, we wouldn't have to go…If you wanted promotion, you could stay at home. But I found out after the war,

05:00 that those who stayed home didn't get promoted anyway, they got posted to different places where they weren't promoted anyway. Everyone can't be promoted. But we were certainly seniors in the….

When you talk about promotion, was there a healthy amount of competition?

No, it wasn't that so much. When you go to your squadron, they have A Flights and B Flights. And

05:31 A Flight has, say, four corporals, two sergeants, one flight sergeant, and that's it, and you do your work…And that's how you go all the time. It's not likely that the flight sergeant will say "I'm going home." Then one of the sergeants is made a flight sergeant, so then they promote another corporal to sergeant, and another LAC [Leading Aircraftsman] to corporal. With about nine hundred men

06:01 in the squadron, you had Buckley's hope of being promoted. So they told us, and rightly so, that we wouldn't be promoted while we were in the squadron. And I didn't care. I just wanted to go to the war. That's what I joined for. As a matter of fact, being a bandsman, they said "Why don't you go to Point Cook and join the band? You won't have to go to the war." I said "I've been in a band and I want to go to the war." And that was my attitude all the way through. I didn't want to be a bandsman and stop

06:30 home from the war. I didn't join to be a bandsman, I was already a bandsman.

So did you join the squadron at Mount Gambier?

I was posted from Mount Gambier to join 458 Squadron.

How long were you at Mount Gambier?

07:00 I'm not sure, five or six months. But when we were there, we had to…All of our petrol came in drums, and we had to dig the hole to put the big petrol tanks in. And I objected to that. I said "I'm not a hole digger, I'm an aircraftsman." And they pleaded with us to dig the hole. So we all got in and dug the big hole. And one of my mates, Roy Rabin, who now lives at Hamilton,

07:33 because he was a farmer, he was able to drive a tractor and a grader, and Roy drove that grader for nearly six months to make the airfield. All the bracken ferns, there was miles of it, and Roy had to go up and down for the length of the runway, to get out all theses ferns, to make the runway. And I think he was the only bloke who worked on that jolly thing.

08:02 But we worked pretty hard, and then we had to do guard duty at night. For goodness sake, guard duty at Mount Gambier. We were seven miles out of the town and the only thing there was foxes, and it was cold…My goodness it was cold. And I was on guard duty one night, and it must have been four o' clock in the morning, and I was walking around these petrol drums, that were all in one place, and one of the drums was half empty and

08:30 I don't know what the cold had done to it, it either contracted it or whatever, and it went off like a gun. And I nearly died. Big brave soldier. It went off like a gun

If the airfield hadn't been constructed at Mount Gambier, what was there when you arrived?

Nothing. There was just the huts for the men to live in, and they were the same as the huts we had at Laverton. I suppose it was standard to have

09:00 those huts. They were pretty good huts, Mind you, they were cold, we didn't have any heating in them. Then they built a gymnasium. They called it the theatre, because they used to show films in there sometimes, but it was really a gymnasium. It was quite a big building, a nice building at that. And they put a piano in it and that suited me. There was another fellow, who was a really good pianist and I learnt a little bit from him.

09:30 Apart from that.…When we got some Avro Ansons, I think we got another six or eight Avro Ansons, then we got a couple of Fairey Battles. They had been in England, and they bullet holes right through them, and we thought that was great, to see aircraft with bullet holes in them. And they used to tow a drogue, and that was for the air gunners to practise, they'd shoot at this drogue that was perhaps fifty or sixty yards behind this thing. They'd tow this thing

10:00 and the air gunners would go up and they'd shoot at this drogue thing.

So were you watching the air crew being put through their training?

Well, they were air observers, navigators. I felt sorry for them. Because they were the fellows with the white thing in their cap. You knew they were aircrew, because they were training air crew with a white thing in their cap.

10:30 The Prime Minister's son?

11:00 Anyway, it was the Prime Minister's son and he trained as a navigator…It wasn't Whitlam I know that, but he was a navigator as well, I believe…But they used to get as sick as dogs. They had all these air bags for them, and the poor blokes would come back and they were green. They would get airsick very quickly. I don't know. I've never been airsick, or seasick, or plane sick or anything. The poor devils, they used to get so sick.

11:30 One fellow forgot to take his bags. They used to have beret? A beautiful air force blue beret with a leather band around it. Well, this fellow used his beret when he was sick, and he had to throw it out of the aircraft. Then there was a nasty collision. Two planes collided in the fog, and one crew was killed.

At Mount Gambier?

Yes. A fellow by the name of Peacock. He had come out from England. Flight Lieutenant Peacock.

12:01 You couldn't forget name, could you? He was killed. He ran into the other aircraft and chopped the wing off. His plane went down, and the other one came in and landed all right. He managed to get back. That was pretty terrible. We had to go and dig him out for the burial and everything. That was where we got out first training. Tough men, dig him up. I remember my mate

12:30 John Roddel, from Mildura, he came back to me and said "I'm sick." I said "What's wrong, Roger?" He said "I dug out this radio set and it had this bloke's eye stuck in it." That was pretty terrible for him. These are the sort of things that stick with you….Poor old John, he died two years ago of cancer. I went to see him in hospital.

13:06 **Were there many accidents during your time at Mount Gambier?**

No, that was the only real accident. It was in the fog, of course, and there was radar in those days. It was unfortunate.

How was it announced to you that were joining the squadron?

Well, I think

13:30 there was seven of us….We signed to say that we would be on loan to the RAF [Royal Air Force]. It was something they had going with the British Air Force, the RAF, and they wanted Australian trained airmen to go over there, and of course at that stage, we didn't know that all the Australian squadrons were being formed.

14:00 And we were fortunate enough to get into 458 Squadron, which was very good. And I was in the Squadron from the time it formed to the time it finished at Gibraltar. Four and a half years.

How long were you in Sydney, once you left Mount Gambier?

I think it was between about two or three weeks. And we used to do these jolly route marches every day, because that was all we could do. And then one day

14:30 they announced that we would be going that evening. We would be taking….We would be put on the ship to go wherever it was going. They didn't tell us where it was going, until we got aboard, and then we knew we were going to England. We went on the New Zealand ship Arangi, and it was its last trip as a passenger ship. And only a hundred and twenty of us went on the ship.

15:00 And they still had the stewards on. We had first class cabins and everything, before we got to Canada.

Were you on board with civilian passengers as well?

I didn't see any passengers. But they said it was the last trip as a passenger ship, because the stewards were still on the ship, and that might have been the reason. But they used to bring us our breakfasts and everything. It was really top line and that was the last service we really had. And from then on, it went really down to the bottom.

15:32 **So you had a luxury cruise all the way to Canada?**

Until we got to Canada, then a lot of Canadian troops and officers got on, and we were sent down below and the officers took our cabins. We went through the Panama Canal and we sailed up the coast of America to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

16:00 We were there for four days, I think, and we were allowed leave every night to go into Nova Scotia, and we used to go to the YMCA [Young Men’s Christian Association]. That was good. That was our last real fling before we got England.

What did you get up to at the YMCA?

I took a lass out, as a matter of fact. I met a girl at the YMCA. She lived in Saskatchewan, I remember that really well…

16:32 She had an unusual name, I can't think of it now. But my mate met this girl, a mate of mine, we all had a lot of mates because we were all together, and he met this girl, and they fell in love, no doubt about it. And when we got to the Middle East, after we had been in England for twelve months, Laurie Crowley said "I'm going back to Canada."

17:02 I said "What are you talking about? There's no way you can get back to Canada." He said "Yes, I can. I've made an arrangement with a bomber crew to fly me back to London, to England." And he did. He got back to England, but he forgot that in the Middle East he was only wearing shorts and shirt and when he got to England it was so cold he had to give himself up. He had no clothes. And they flew him back to the Middle East,

17:30 he lost his sergeant stripes and he got ninety days behind the wire. And after the war he went to Canada and married that girl, and I met her last year in Orange, when we had a reunion.

So he was going AWL?

He was AWL [Absent Without Leave], all right. Really and truly. He was AWL for nine weeks, I think, and that's not very good.

At least he got the girl in the end…

Oh yes,

18:00 it was true love. There was no doubt about it. I think they had five sons. He's a wealthy man today.

What kind of food were you eating on board the luxury cruise?

I can't remember. I know we had grapefruit for breakfast. We had grapefruit and egg and bacon….I can't remember what our main meals were.

Was there beer on board?

Oh yes, there was beer on board.

18:34 And from that day to this one I'm still a non-drinker, would you believe.

So you were a drinker prior to that?

No, I've never been a drinker. None of my family has been drinkers.

I thought you were going to confess that you might have had a bout of seasickness combined with…

I've never been seasick. A lot of the fellows were, of course. We had to duty when we were on the boat.

19:02 In Naval terms it was watch. We had to do a watch on the gun platform. The Arangi had two front gun platforms and two rear gun platforms, and they had an Oerlikon gun at the back. I think it was about a three inch gun or something. And I had to go on duty one night, I can't remember what time it was, I went up to relieve this bloke, and as I was walking up towards the gun platform, it was

19:30 built especially for the occasion, and I couldn't see him anywhere. I thought 'Gee, I wonder where he is? I hope he hasn't fallen overboard.' And he was lying on the bottom, and he was sick. He was almost green he was so sick. So I had to take him back to his cabin. I told the medical orderly that he was pretty sick…

What were the cannons like on board there?

20:00 They were really good. The fellow I was in the cabin with, John Roger, he died a couple of years ago from cancer, he was a heavy drinker and he was on the top bunk, and of course he vomited all over me. And I said "That's the end of you, mate. You get in the bottom bunk. I'll be in the top bunk from here onwards." We got to know one another on that trip, because we were all going to the one squadron. And we

20:30 became a very close knit squadron, believe me. And right up to this day, although we have lost a lot of our fellows, we still have reunions. We've got one reunion to go. We've decided we will only have one more, after fifty-five years. And I think it will be in Canberra. I was on the executive committee of the squadron, and when we

21:00 had this meeting in Orange, at our last reunion in Orange, and we decided that we were going to make that the last reunion. Everybody was so disappointed, they sent out a letter to everybody in the squadron asking their opinion whether they would have one more reunion.

21:32 And I think it was a hundred percent for having one more reunion. It's pretty difficult for the West

Australians to go all that way over there. And vice-versa. We've had two reunions in Western Australia over the years. We've had them in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, New Zealand, Canada and England. We're getting so short of blokes now, and they're all getting that old that they can't make it very much more.

22:00 It will be sad. The last one will be sad. I'll get through it. I get through everything, because I make myself.

Once you picked up the troops in Canada, what was your next destination?

Our next destination was the River Clyde in Scotland.

22:30 And it was pretty rough trip going across the North Atlantic. It was really rough. In fact, we nearly lost one of our blokes. On the Arangi, mid-ship top deck there was a channel way where you could go through, I don't know why, but it was there. And it was so rough that the water was washing over the top deck, and the boat was leaning so much that as the

23:00 water came over it got hold of this bloke and shot him right across the deck. I thought he was going to go right through. He broke his leg on the railing on the other side, and he managed to hang on. We grabbed him and took him back to his cabin. He was in a bad way, actually. In that very same storm, the piano broke loose in the lounge. Well, you should have seen the damage it did. You'd just go to lasso it and it would come rushing towards you. You can imagine, it was like a bull. Trying to

23:30 lasso this darn piano…It took us about two hours to catch it. And the fellow who got it was a seaman, but he was in the squadron. He rejoined the Air force, but he had been a merchant seaman. He wanted to be a captain in the Merchant Navy, but he was colour blind. He got himself out of it and he joined the air force. And he was the bloke who lassoed the piano and tied it to a stanchion in the middle of the room.

24:01 But it broke all the panels. It made a hell of a mess. But that's just another little incident.

How big was the Arangi?

I think it was eighteen thousand tons, but there was only a hundred and twenty of us on the boat, it was quite good.

24:40 **What route did you take to Scotland?**

Well, we went to the North Atlantic, then nearly up to Iceland. We didn't stop at Iceland, a lot of our fellows did. But we went right up to Iceland and then came down to Scotland and into the Clyde River.

25:00 We got off the ship at Greenock. I remember well, one of our fellows said "Where are we?" And this voice said "Grock!" We couldn't understand what he said. We asked him about four times what it was, and he said the same thing every time. And we didn't know. They didn't have names on any of the stations anywhere in England. They didn't want the signs telling any German

25:31 German paratroopers where they were, you see. So you could go through all the stations in England, and there were no names on them.

How long were you in Scotland?

We got off the boat and got straight onto a troop train and we went straight down to Bournemouth, which was the full length of England. And that was the pool for the whole of the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]…Everyone that went to England, wherever they were in the Air force,

26:00 always went to Bournemouth, and that was the pool to send you where you had to go.

What was at Bournemouth?

It was just a big southern town. And there was nothing there except accommodation, hotels and things, for the Air force. And we were accommodated there until we were posted to where we had to go. And we didn't go to Spalding where 458 Squadron was because it hadn't been formed at that stage.

26:31 So I was posted to Driffield, with all the airframe fitters, Fitter 2As, to learn about the aircraft we were going to have in the Squadron. Because we had only seen the little Ansons. Then we got to see the Wellingtons…I think it was a ninety six foot wingspan. They were really big aircraft. We had to learn all about them before we went to the Squadron.

You must have been excited to be working on larger planes…

Oh, it was really good. We were all

27:00 excited about that. We had a bit of trouble there, because we didn't realise at the time that we were on loan to the RAF, and they tried to reduce our pay to RAF pay, which they did, and they made us wear RAF uniforms. And I didn't like that too much. None of us did.

27:31 And we had to carry gas masks wherever we went. And you know how Australians were for obeying

rules for carrying gasmasks, until one night we had an air-raid. And gee, that was a thunderous thing. First air-raid we ever had. And I rushed into this air-raid shelter. Three feet of icy water in it.

28:00 It cooled everything.

Before I ask you a few questions about Driffield. What was the accommodation like in Bournemouth?

We were billeted. Four of us were billeted out to this lady's house and she had bunk beds, but

28:30 it was terrible, because she had no sheets. We weren't used to sleeping with blankets, and they were pretty hairy blankets, too. They were pretty rough. Oh well, you got used to do. Can't remember where we had our meals…

How long were you there?

29:04 It was quite a while. It might have been two months, before we were drafted to where we had to go. But while we were there, we had a big parade one day. They said Air Marshal Williams was coming down to inspect us, and indeed, he did. It was only 458 Squadron, and we opened ranks and he

29:30 announced that the King and Queen would be visiting. And I shook hands with the Queen that day. That was the old Queen Mum. It was Queen Elizabeth in those days. The King went down one row and she went down the other row, and I was in the row that she went down. We didn't know they were going to get on the boat. Dickie Williams arrived.

30:01 When the King and Queen arrived it was the icing on the cake. It was quite good. I've got a photograph of it. But you're not supposed to carry cameras in wartime.

And did you yourself?

Well, I got it, being the villain that I was.

30:30 **So if you spent a couple of months in Bournemouth, how were you occupied?**

Well, that was the problem. We used to play Two-Up most of the time. I was really fortunate. I had never even heard of Two-up. A Western Australian boy by the name of Time Dale said to me "Come on Singey, I'll take you to play Two-up. He said everybody's doing Two-up, it's the game of luck." He said "You have to throw two heads all the time." I said "What do you mean?" He said

31:00 "There's two pennies, you throw them up in the air and if they land two heads, you win, providing you're betting heads." And I was betting heads of course. Most blokes would throw two or three. And I threw twenty one heads and I won two hundred and ten pounds. Winning two hundred and ten pounds in those days was like winning Tatts. So I gave Tim half of it,

31:30 because he took me into the ring to play Two-up. It was just beginner's luck of course. I didn't know there was such a thing as Two-up. Anyway, I had this one hundred and whatever pounds in my pocket a long, long time. And when we were posted to the Middle East after twelve months, I still had it. And I said to Bob McKinnon "What am I going to do with this money?" He said "Well, if you're very clever you will lend it out to the all the blokes and they will pay it back to you get there," and that's

32:00 what happened. So I lent them money as we went, and made a little note of it. There was only bloke who didn't want to pay me back, and he was a West Australian, and his mate said to him "If you don't give that money back to Singey, I will break your arm." Anyway, he paid me back. I got every cent back. We were a pretty close knit squadron…

32:30 By the time we had been together for twelve months, we all knew one another pretty well, and we had been through a fair bit of bombing, at Holme-on-Spalding Moor. Driffield was no place to be either, because that's was a key war station and it was the nearest station in a direct line to Germany. And everything used to happen at Driffield. All the planes that were in trouble would land or crash at Driffield. It was not a good place to be.

Before you went to Driffield, what were you told about the place?

Nothing.

33:01 **And what were your first impressions when you got there?**

Well, it was a huge airfield, and there were some beautiful buildings there. They were all pre-war buildings and the RAF, of course, was a pretty big concern. They had beautiful billets and the hangars were beautiful. Everything was good. The big aircraft would go into the hangars, and they were so big. So we worked undercover on the aircraft.

33:31 But after the first fortnight, a lot of the hangars were bombed. There was a lot of trouble at Driffield.

How long were you at Driffield?

I'm not sure if it was two months, a bit over two months.

How regularly were you suffering the air raids?

I don't know whether it would be regular, it would be at least two or three times a week. But they wouldn't

34:00 always go to Driffield, because there were a lot of places close together in England, and they would just drop bombs, I guess.

How did you mange during that time when you hadn't experienced something like that before?

It was pretty scary, but because of the attitude of the Poms, which was absolutely top line. They thought

34:30 nothing of it, and we got think the same way they did. All you had to do was take cover and make sure you took cover. Of course, you could be very unfortunate because one of the air-raids had a direct hit on it, and that was the one with all the WAAFs [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] in it, I think. We had never WAAFs until we got to England. There were none in Australia when we went away. And that was a pretty rotten sight.

35:00 Of course the hangars were bombed. And we would just have to make good and work where we could sometimes. But there was always a good spirit. The Poms had a beautiful spirit during the war. Just get on with it. And I think that's what won the war actually.

How did you mop up after an air-raid?

We didn't do that. We were there to work on aircraft. They had special people they called AGHs, Aircraft

35:30 General Hands, and they were like labourers, you know. And they were all in the RAF and they would bring in their trucks and brooms and shovels and whatever. Any heavy lifting equipment that had to be brought in. Cranes and everything. And they would clear the place up. But after another week, it was like it again. They did a marvellous job. I don't believe Australians really know what happened during the war. Only the ones that were in the war knew what happened. Australians in general…except those in Darwin

36:00 and wherever the Japanese bombed…And that was another pretty rotten thing. We were at Spalding Moor, just started 458 Squadron when Pearl Harbor was bombed. We all volunteered to come home of course, and Mr Churchill announced that we were on loan to the RAF and we'd stay there until the war was finished. And that's what we did. But it was pretty crook when you'd hear about on the news

36:30 that the Japanese were coming down, that they had bombed Darwin and everything, and we couldn't do anything about it.

Did you discuss it much amongst yourselves?

Oh yeah, we did. We talked about it. We got to the stage where we didn't talk about it because we knew it was happening and we couldn't do anything about it. It wasn't worth worrying about…It was a terrible thing.

While you were at Driffield, did you loose many planes on the airfield?

Well, we weren't flying as a squadron at Driffield, we were there learning, you see.

37:01 I was working with 104 Squadron at the time, and I don't know how many planes they lost, but there were planes lost. We were quite new to war in those days.

It sounds to me that there was a lot of destruction to planes and hangars?

Oh yeah, there was a lot of destruction from German bombing. We had some pretty rotten experiences with the planes that were coming back. Knocked about.

37:30 They were only kids, the same as we were. I was only twenty one or something at the time. I was on duty one night, and this Hamlin bomber landed. It crash-landed. He just made it. He was also almost out of petrol. And I was detailed to look after the rear gunner.

38:00 The rear gunner was dead, his face was all shot away. He was a blond lad. He was dead. I had to sort of hose him out, not very good.

Did you encounter many instances like that?

That was the one and only I did. But when we were at Driffield, that was the worst that happened to me during the war, I think. I've seen a lot of accidents and a lot of

38:30 dead people, I think. I'd only been there a week or something and this actually happened. I was shocked.

How did you manage your shock?

I stood up to it pretty well, because we had been told it was kill or be killed. You had to be strong. It was pretty hard to be strong, sometimes. I had that small experience at Mount Gambier where I had to dig

that plane out.

39:00 I thought that was bad, but it was nothing compared with what we saw in England. That particular night was pretty bad, because I happened to be on duty that night. Otherwise I might not have seen it. Then they used to call us out at all hours of the morning…Snowstorms, and we'd have these great big wooden shovel things. We had to run across and scoop all the snow off the runway, so they could come in and land.

They didn't have a machine to do that?

39:30 No. And we could do it better than machines could do it, with so many blokes. You could do fifty yards at a stretch. Fifty blokes with a wooden shovel and you just all go together. Then run down and do the next fifty yards, and it didn't take long really to clear a runway. That was in the dark, then they put the landing lights on for a given time, when the plane was coming in. And they didn't

40:00 always land on the runway. They'd just come in and bang.

Were there many crash landings?

Well, I saw about eight in the three months that I was there. And they didn't all belong to Driffield, they just come in because it was the nearest field to land on, depending on what their circumstances they were in, and some of them were bad. I only remember one that wasn't too bad, but it still had badly injured crew in it.

40:30 Mainly the turret gunner.

I imagine that you must have witnessed quite a few casualties.

Oh yes. We lost a lot of blokes. I consider myself very lucky that I got home.

I've heard stories of the German fighter pilots following RAF bombers back to airstrips, tailing them…

41:00 That happened a few times. You couldn't always tell because our fellows flew mostly at night. When we were on the squadron, we'd go out and meet the aircraft coming in, to see if we could help them if they were in trouble. It was a different world altogether. And when we started our own squadron, we started in…November or December, ’41,

41:30 when 458 was virtually formed. It must have been earlier than that, because we were operating when Pearl Harbor was bombed and that was December 7. Yeah, that's right, we were there earlier than that. We were bombed, but it was so cold. It got down to twenty-two below

Tape 3

00:31 **You were talking then about cold it was?**

It wasn't really snow, it was frost. And it was very cold working conditions. In fact, sometimes we couldn't start the aircraft, because the oil would freeze in the engine. And they had what they called heater vans, a great big hose that round, and they'd put one in both motors, and it would take two hours before

01:00 you could get…And we used to turn the props over to try and get the oil moving. Sometimes you couldn't start the motors at all for two hours, it was terribly cold. Then you'd get the motors started and everything would be right, and the all the air crew would come back and someone would say "Oh, well, the weather's gone bad over the target so we've cancelled the thing…" You've worked for four hours already trying to get the thing going, then they cancel the operation. But that was war.

01:30 That was part of it. Then of course, we got bombed at home And Spalding Moor just as much as they got bombed at Driffield. The CO [Commanding Officer] decided that we wouldn't be able to live in the village at Spalding Moor because the bombing was so frequent. They made a camp two miles down the road, and we moved down to this camp. Half of us had to

02:00 live in tents. Twenty two below, I'll tell you, it wasn't very nice. Also the Nissan huts weren't very nice either. They had a little potbelly stove sort of thing. They used to use coal and all sorts of things to try and make a fire. We used to go in there until it was time to go to bed. You had to walk about two miles back to get breakfast.

02:30 I had long sea socks. I think I had eight or ten blankets. And I used to put newspapers between the blankets. Keep me warm, because I used to get very cold. But some of the Englishman used to sleep with their feet out the end of the bed, perhaps one blanket, and they thought that was all right, but I couldn't do that. I said to one of our flight commanders one day,

03:00 "Why did they move us two miles down the road?" He said to me, in a very stern voice, "It's obvious

they're bombing." I said "But yeah, they're not always accurate in their bombing. They could bomb two miles down the road without any trouble." He said "I've never thought about that…" And I said "And you're an officer?" I got into trouble for that. But they don't always bomb accurately, they just let them go. Two miles is nothing

03:30 when you're thirty thousand feet up and you're letting your bombs go, they could go anywhere. But there was a little farmhouse halfway between the 'drome and where we were camped. There was a little girl who lived there, she was about ten or twelve, and she used to skate on this…They called it a pond, we called it a dam. And our silly blokes in their great Wellington boots, all decided they would go in and skate with her. Of course, the ice wasn't al that thick and

04:00 of course they all went through into the water. And then the kid had nowhere to skate, until the next day when it all froze over again. But our great fools spoiled it for her. But that sort of thing happened.

Did you manage to get out and have some leave in London?

I only went to London once.

04:31 My friend, John Rodwell, he came from Mermend, and his Dad was English, he was a captain in the British Navy, in the First World War. And John Keddington-Rodwell was very much English. He may have been born in England, but he never, ever told me. But Roger used to drink a fair amount, and he said to me this night, "Would you like to come and meet my grandmother?"

05:00 I said "Yes, John, I will come with you." And he got himself so drunk, he didn't know where he was going. I said "You can't go and see your grandmother in this fashion." He said "Oh yeah, she'll be right." I said "No, you can't go and see your grandmother. You'll be a disgrace to the family." And her name was Lady Keddington-Rodwell. I thought 'God.' I said "Wait until next week

05:30 until you feel better." I said "No, I might be working next week." Anyway we went. And we went to this place, and it was a magnificent two story home. Great big garden and big iron gates. Anyway, we walked up the path and the butler opened the door and we walked in and there's this marble staircase going up….And we met Lady Keddington-Rodwell and she said "John, your father wouldn't like you like this."

06:00 And he said "My father's not here." Anyway, during the course of the afternoon, he never sobered up, and he said "Have you ever seen the way we jump out of a parachute?" And he jumped off the balcony. He nearly broke his knee. I apologised to the lady, I said "Look, I'm terribly sorry. I asked John to come." She said "I understand. I knew

06:30 about this because his mother told me he was a bit of a larrikin on the drink." So I apologised and away I went. I don't know what happened from that day to this. John's father had a beautiful orange grove and grapes that he brought after the First World War. He had a big acreage of orange groves. And when he died he passed it on to John,

07:01 and because of his drinking habits he lost the lot. He lost everything. And he moved down to Melbourne and they lived in Cheltenham for a while. And he went to work for one of the government people, supplying fruit. And he inspected fruit and all this stuff, tins of fruit, that came from Shepparton.

07:31 And he was still a drinker. He really killed himself drinking. It was a sad case. He was educated at Brighton Grammar School and he went to school with Isaacson. Wing Commander Isaacson. And I asked him to be speaker at one of our reunions in Melbourne. And because Roger knew Zac,

08:00 as he called him "Zac Isaacson," and he came to the reunion as our guest speaker. And he's one of the chaps who has something to do with the Shrine of Remembrance. He was a very nice fellow. He spoke at our reunion, and his wife was in a wheelchair. And I went to see Roger at the hospital and Zac was there. He said "You know, isn't this terrible?" I said "Yes. I spent four

08:30 and a half years with Roger, and I won't tell you the number of times I brought him home drunk." I said "Before we left Australia to go England, I even used to ride him home on his motorbike drunk, at Mount Gambier. He would hang onto me like a monkey." He would go into town, and get drunk and say to me "You ride the motorbike home and I will hang onto you." It was a darn shame to see him like that…He was an absolutely lovely bloke, but when he

09:00 got drunk he was hopeless. He couldn't help himself. I used to try and protect him as much as I could, but it was hopeless.

Did you get to see any of London after it had been blitzed?

Well, I was in London when it was blitzed, at one stage. We saw the East End, the docks,

09:30 on fire, and all around St Paul's Cathedral…It was pretty bad. But the women and children, it would break your heart to see the kids crying in the streets. Australians really don't know what the world was about, you know. But those little kids, some of those were evacuated to Australia. I don't know whether they all went home….

10:00 Everywhere in England was bombed. Sheffield and Coventry. Name it, they were just bombed rotten all

over the place. And of course, when the Air force became stronger, they stopped all the bombings. Hitler never got in, but it was close.

Was it hard to get around London during this time?

Well, there were buses and there were underground…The underground

10:30 was the saviour of a lot of people. They would go down there when the bombing raids were on. The bus drivers were absolutely marvellous. If you were in uniform you just got on the bus. You didn't pay anything. How they ever managed I will never know. But we went there one day, and we were on leave this weekend and I was going to Australia House. And the fog was so thick that the bus conductor was walking in

11:00 front of the bus with his hand up, like this…I don't even know why the buses were even running, but they had to take people where they wanted to go. A very slow trip. But that was only for the one day that I saw it. But Australia House was marvellous.

What was so wonderful about it?

Well, they had the Boomerang Club, and you could go in there and have a meal. They looked after all the Air force blokes, or any Australians that were there, in fact.

11:32 When I went back in November of last year, I spoke about it. But most of our fellows knew about it anyway.

So that was where RAF and RAAF…

No, only RAAF. Only Australians at Australia House. It was really wonderful.

Did they have any army or any of the other services?

Oh, yes. Any Australians. There were no army there when we were

12:00 there because they had all been sent out, come home mostly. The 9th Divvy [Division] were in the Middle East at that time, and I think the 6th Div had already been evacuated from Greece and Crete. I don't know whether they came home or went to Singapore. But the 9th Div had left, and they were in the Middle East when we got there.

So what sort of entertainment was at Australia House?

Well, there was a beautiful grand piano, and the New Zealand girl,

12:30 she was a lovely girl. I used to talk to her when she was playing. I used to sit on the side of the platform and talk to her while she was playing the piano. And they had concert parties and all sorts of things. I didn't see her, but I was told that Gracie Fields was there the night before we got there. And there was another very famous English lady, what was her name? Sister Cortridge, she was there as well.

13:13 (BREAK) Vera Lynn, she was there as well. I did see Vera Lynn but I didn't see the others. But they had lovely concert parties. Mind you, the English were pretty musical people, more so than the Australians. Like any of the Poms could stand up and sing a song

13:30 for you. But the Australians? No way in the world would you get a group of Australians to stand up and sing a song in tune. No way.

You should have been in pretty good company with the musical folk?

Oh, well, I used to play a little bit with the boys. I've still got my trombone. I wouldn't sell it, I couldn't sell it.

14:04 I used to follow the Foedens Motor Works Band around in England. Oh, they were a beautiful band. They were the best brass band in the world. In fact, the Grenadier Guards played for us at the dedication of the memorial. I got all goose-bumpy.

14:38 **You were mentioning that there were so many crash landings. Did you get some idea that there was going to be a plane coming in…**

Oh yes, we would always know. We would always know.

So how would you be alerted to this?

They'd send radio, they had radio operators. Unless the radio was out of operation, which was very rare. They would always Morse Code that they were coming back.

15:05 They would give you an OTU [Operational Training Unit] and they would give you an estimated time of arrival. You would hope for the best.

So you would have to hot-foot down to the area then?

We were already there, but you never knew…We were always at the end of the runway. There were blokes at either end of the runway, because you didn't know which end they were going to come in from.

15:32 They didn't always land on the runway.

What were the medical facilities there like?

We had four ambulances and they were always running. There was always one that was always heated up, ready to go. The same with two fire engines. There was always two fire engines, on the side of the track, in case they caught fire.

16:00 And they were good, really good.

Did they regularly catch fire?

I only saw one, all the time I was in England, and that was a bit over twelve months. We were home on Spalding Moor and then we went to the Middle East. Our fellows got into trouble at Spalding Moor. They used to go down to the pub and carry on and break windows and all that sort of thing. It was unnecessary the things they did.

16:32 I used to go down there. I used to bring a couple of blokes home every night. They wouldn't get home otherwise. I don't know how many times I brought Cagley and Rodwell home. They used to call it a goat's head, but it wasn't. It was like a little deer and it had these beautiful long horns on it. And when we went to England, this darn thing was on the ship.

17:00 They had stole it from the pub. In fact it was in my tent for a couple of days.

Do you think that kind of carry on was kind of a reaction to…

Well, it got the stage where we had to have an identity line-up one day, at the squadron, and we knew the blokes who had done it. They pulled half the fence down and pushed it through the window of the pub, in their drunken stupor. And the

17:30 publican and his wife objected, and they wanted to know who did it. The CO said he would have an identification line up and the publican and his wife came along, and as they went along the front row, they were just about to turn to come along the second row, and the two blokes who did it went into the front row, you see. They didn't see them move. We knew they were going to do it because we made places for them to get in.

18:02 They didn't identify them, but we knew who did it. They were trouble makers all the way through the squadron.

What were their jobs in the squadron?

They were fitters of some description. They used to do responsible work, but as soon as they got to the pub, they were stupid. And unfortunately they were West Australians.

18:30 I don't think all the Victorians weren't all gilded but they didn't do anything as stupid as that.

Was the rest of the squadron looking down on that sort of behaviour?

Oh yes. Most of the squadron played by the book. Otherwise we would have been in trouble. You couldn't all do that sort of thing. In fact, one of the fellows who did this sort of trouble, he did

19:00 time in Fremantle for killing his wife when he got home.

Really? So he was a bit of a bad egg?

He was a bad egg, yes. He was a bad influence in the squadron. He was only a little bloke. He would pick a fight and then ask this other fellow from Wiluna to fight for him. They were good mates and they were drinkers together. Curly Curly used to always fight for Skeeter. I can only tell you nicknames. We all had nicknames.

19:31 **It's interesting that even though you looked down on this behaviour, that you still decided to protect them. Why is that?**

I suppose, they were part of the squadron and we were all mates. Australians are pretty notorious for being good mates. They weren't mates of mine, but I wouldn’t dob them in.

You mentioned that you all had nicknames, so that was a pretty normal thing?

20:01 Oh yes. They always called me Mick, because my Dad called me Mick. I got the Squadron…When I left Spencer Street to go to Sydney to go overseas, my Mum and Dad saw me off. And when it was time to get into the train to go, Dad said "Well, do a good job, Mick." Of course the blokes heard it and they all called me Mick.

20:30 And from that day to the day that I went to England, only two blokes on the Squadron knew my name. I've had letters addressed to me, 'Mr Michael Singe' from the Squadron. So I'm going to cop it next time when I meet them at the last reunion. One fellow to said to someone else,

21:00 he said "Has Mick Singe got a brother? Because he's going overseas. He's going to England. He said "No, that's his proper name." So he didn't think it was me at all. After all those years he didn't know my name. And 98% of the Squadron were like that, right until I went overseas, until the dedication ceremony.

It's funny how Aussies can be with nicknames, isn't it?

Well, my mate Mick Hunter,

21:30 he's the fellow who said "Singey knows a bit about music." Right back at Laverton. Well, I was best man at Mick's wedding, right after the war. And his name was Finley Percival, and they called him Mick. Clarence isn't a very bright name. But my Mum's brother, because Mum was English

22:00 and so was her brother, he was named after the Duke of Clarence. And of course, when I came along I had to be named after him. I don't know why.

So you still managed to get yourself called Des?

Yes.

Because Clarence is very formal really, isn't it?

Yeah, I don't like it. I had to grow big to fight for myself at school.

Just going back to Driffield. Most of the aeroplanes you were working on, were they Wellingtons?

22:34 Yes, we had Wellingtons all the way.

What did you think of the Wellington as a plane?

They were the backbone of the air force. Because the Wellington was first made in 1933 or '34, and because of the construction of the Wellington, they could fly home if half of them were shot away. See they were covered in fabric, they weren't a metal plane.

23:01 The main construction of the plane was geodetic, like that, and it was covered in fabric and then painted, and then the fabric would tighten, you see. Even if it was shot through and through and through, it will still come home. In fact, one of our planes caught fire from halfway down, and it burnt right back to the tail,

23:30 and it still got home. And that was because of the construction of the aircraft. And that was designed by Barnes Wallis. He was the fellow who made the skip bomb, that they busted the dams with. He was a very clever man, the things he did. I've got some photographs there of the aircraft that actually got dragged out of Loch Ness, about ten years ago.

24:00 I didn't see it when I was over there, but it went to Silverstone. And the other one is at Handon. There's only two left of the eleven thousand, three hundred and thirty-five that were made….There's only two Wellingtons left, and they were both in England. I don't know why, but when we were on the way home we had an aircraft carrier with us halfway home, and we wondered why, because the war

24:30 had finished. But when we got…We'd left the Suez Canal and we came right down through the Red Sea and we were halfway across to Australia and this aircraft carrier pulled up. On the lifts they brought up about twelve new Spitfires, never flown and they pushed them over the side. Now why would they do that? And now they're looking for them.

25:01 Never flown. They had too many of them in the finish. A Spitfire, mind you. It's enough to make you cry.

I find it interesting that the Wellingtons were constructed largely of fabric. For me, in the era that I'm living in, I'm not feeling confident about being in an aircraft that's largely fabric…

Well, you wouldn't know it's fabric. Once the fabric is put on, and they put on what they call a dope paint'

25:31 and that shrinks the fabric, and it tightens…As tight as a skin of metal…(BREAK)

26:03 **Is there anything else from Driffield that you would like to share with us?**

Well, the only the thing with Spalding Moor, the two miles that we had to walk to get breakfast….We found out that the flight sergeants used to be issued with a bicycle, so they could ride in. And we used to get up early in the morning and pinch the bikes,

26:31 and ride up the cookhouse…Leave the bike beside the cookhouse until the flight sergeants woke up to what we were doing. And we did that for about a fortnight or something. We didn't walk for about a fortnight. We had to walk home, though.

27:02 **What happened to you after England? How did you get over to…**

Well, we went to England on a ship called the Mataroa. And it was terrible, really terrible. There was a

full squadron on the boat and we could hardly move. There were no toilet facilities…In fact, I shouldn't describe it to you, but I will.

27:31 It was like a large trough, with about ten holes cut in the seat, and all it was was water swishing about. They had two of these on the ship for about eight hundred. It was really terrible.

How long were you on the ship for?

I'm not quite sure, but I think it was about five weeks. But we weren't on that ship for that long, five weeks.

28:01 We went from Liverpool, we went via West Africa…I remember we pulled at Freetown, and we stopped off shore at Freetown…Our blokes wanted to go in swimming and the CO said "No. There is a slaughter yard there, and all the blood drains into the sea, and there is a about half an acre of sharks." So he wouldn't let them swim, and they wouldn't have anyway.

28:33 Then we went on to Durban. We de-shipped at Durban for two weeks and we went to the Clairwood Racecourse, to a camp they had already made for us. And we were in Durban for about two weeks.

So what were the conditions like there, after…

They were pretty good at Durban.

It sounds like anything after that ship would be a bit of a luxury.

Well, that was a terrible ship.

29:00 It was a New Zealand frozen beef ship, and most of the bunks were in the freezers, and the freezers were still working. Just as well they didn't switch them on. But I never went below, I stayed on the top deck. I mentioned about Charley McCarthy, the fellow that taught the piano that we…Well, he was an ex-seaman, and he knew some of the seaman on the ship. So he got me and himself a job in the bake house, working all night.

29:31 And we'd make bread. I learnt to make bread. And we'd have a nice meal and we'd have a shower and everything. We never told anybody, because Unc took a liking to me for some reason. We worked until we got to Durban. Terrible conditions. Incidentally, when we got nearly to Freetown, there was no way to wash yourself.

30:02 And we had an enormous storm, a tropical storm, and the fellows all got out, and they got their soap on. Seven or eight hundred blokes with nothing on, soap all over them, and the rain stopped. That was terrible. I was included of course. I didn't have a towel, I just wiped myself down with whatever I could find, I think. But I was covered in soap when

30:30 the rain stopped, I know that. But most of them were. It was quite funny. But when we got to Durban, we went to Clairwood Racecourse. And we were in these beautiful great big circular tents. About ten blokes in the tent, sleeping with our feet to the centre. And this night, I don’t know what happened, I went out and I saw all these fires. So I went over and I said to the fellow in the morning, "What's are all the little fires that

31:00 you light at night?" He said "That's to keep the monkeys off the tomatoes." They grew tomatoes there and the monkeys used to come out of the bush and pick the tomatoes. He said "I wouldn't mind if they took a tomato and went away and ate it. But they'd eat this one, and bite the next one. Like the birds do on cherry trees. They spoilt the whole lot. You've seen a praying mantis, I guess? Well, I've never seen such a large

31:30 praying mantis in my life. It was over twelve inches long and it was brown. And the Poms were scared of it. So I let it crawl up my arm. And they said "Oh! It will kill you!" I said "God, it's only a mantis, you know. It won't kill you." It walked all over me then I let it go. They wanted to kill it. I said "No, don't kill it. It kills the insects." And we went into Durban, of course…

What was there?

Well, the 9th Div were there. Some of the 9th Div were there on

32:00 the way home. And oh gee, they were tough men. They had just come from Tobruk and they went through it there. And of course there was the odd scuffle and a bit of a punch-up.

What would set things off?

Oh, they'd order a beer and they wouldn't pay for it. One of our blokes was with one of the 9th Divvy blokes, and they still had rickshaws there in those days.

32:30 And they got in this rickshaw and they saw all around the place, then they wouldn't pay him. But rickshaw pullers are great big fellows, you know. Zulus. And they got going down the hill, and they used to balance the thing. They would take their feet off the road and just freewheel all the way down. And he just let the thing go. He just stood aside and let it go. If they wouldn't pay, he would let them crash. They couldn't get out of it. They all got badly injured. One bloke had a broken collarbone,

33:00 I know that. That taught them to pay their fair in the future.

Did you chat to any of these Tobruk blokes?

Yes, I did. I spoke to a few of them, actually. They didn't talk much about it. They would tell you that is was pretty awful. We found out later how awful it was, because we were there at the battle of Alamein. They had been rushed up and down between Tobruk and Benghazi by the Germans and the Italians.

33:30 It was pretty rotten.

Did you start to suspect that you might not be completely prepared for...

Oh, we weren't prepared. We were used to bombing runs. That part of the war was pretty dreadful. When we left Durban, we went on a ship called the Mendoza, a French ship.

34:01 And it was worse than the Mataroa. You couldn't believe it. It was run over with rats. It was terrible. You know, I can't believe that animals would come out in the daylight and run over you, if you were on the deck. We were playing cards and these damn rats were running in between us. There must have a lot of them on the ship. But that was war; we had to put up with it.

34:30 We had no choice. But we stopped at Mombasa, East Africa, on the way up, and we stayed there for two nights, I think, while the ship re-fuelled. Some of our blokes got into a bit of bother. In fact, one fellow stole a motorbike and sidecar and he took his mate into where they shouldn't go, into one of the Ladies Of The Night, I think.

35:00 He got himself into trouble, and he had a great big gash through his forehead, like that. And I didn't ask him, but some of them told me, he went into this place where he shouldn't be and someone speared him through the head. He was on with this bloke's wife apparently.

Mombasa would have been a bit of a cultural revelation.

One bloke came back and he

35:30 had a bunch of bananas about that big on his shoulder, and he stole them. He didn't pay for them. He just picked them up and walked off with them. Australians, they do things like that.

What did you think of Mombasa?

I didn't go into the town. I just stayed where the ship was. I didn't see any point going into Mombassa. I was probably a bit different

36:00 to most of the blokes, I didn't like going to those places.

What were you told about places of ill-repute...

We were told that if ever any of us got caught, we would lose our pay and be sent home immediately. Dishonourable discharge. Blokes would be silly not to take notice of what they were told. And yet, they still did it.

Were they sent home?

Well, I didn't know anybody that got

36:30 a disease, you see.

Oh, so it would only be if you actually managed to catch it?

Yes. Then we left there and we went up to the Middle East. We got into the Red Sea, and we stopped at Aden for a night. I don't know if that's part of the Chosen Land. They didn't have a lot to choose from as far as I could see. My God, it was the end of the world, Aden. Absolute end of the world. And we were

37:00 allowed to go ashore, and I just went ashore for curiosity. But they took us ashore on a great big flat raft thing. And they used it to carry the cattle from the boats, to the shore. And it was a filthy mess, and the smell was unbelievable. We dared go ashore, just to see Aden.

37:30 Well, I'd as sooner not gone, I'm sure. They called it lemonade, but it was like sweet water. We were warned not to drink it. But some of our fellows did. Couldn't get beer, no such thing as beer there, I don't think. It was a terrible place. And they used to sell little…carved camels. A set of three or four camels.

38:00 That was all you could get there. That was their trade, I suppose. I don't know who they sold them to. I don't know how they lived even. It was terribly hot and….all sand. There was nothing flat. I wouldn't begin to believe how they could make a living there. They wouldn't

38:30 have all surely lived on sweet water. But they used to do cattle trading, of course. And then of course we went on up to Port Tewfik, which is where you land when you land in Suez. Port Tewfik was the name of the port. But Suez is just a little bit further inland, a mile, or a mile an a half. Oh, you can tell anything you

39:00 like about Egypt, but you can't tell them about the smell. Terrible. And when we were all off the ship, there was a little front-end loader thing, taking all our baggage onto the truck. And this front-end loader ran over one of the Egyptian wogs that was on the deck, and cut half the heel off the back of his foot.

39:30 And our medical bloke went to treat them, but the doctor stopped him. He said "You can't touch Arabs. Just let him go." Wouldn't let him touch him. Didn't bind it or anything, just sent him off. I don't know what happened…And then of course we went to a place called Fayid, which was a big air force base in Egypt. And that was inland about a mile from the Suez Canal, and that was our first taste of Egypt.

40:00 **So this is like a day's travel almost…**

Port Tewfik to Fayid was about…It might have been about thirty ks, but it was right alongside the Suez Canal. We were there for perhaps a fortnight, then we were moved a bit further along to a place called Shallufah.

40:30 That was where we were supposed to form our squadron.

How long has it taken you to get to Port Tewfik from the time that you left England?

About five weeks. It's a long way. And the trip wasn't all that good. It was a pretty rotten trip on the troop ships.

We'll just change tapes.

Tape 4

00:41 **Des, when you went to North Africa, was the ground staff in your squadron separated for a while?**

Yeah.

Why was that?

Well, the Wellingtons that were supposed to come to our squadron, so as we could get working, were

01:00 landing in Malta. Before they came to us they had to land in Malta and refuel. And things were so bad in Malta that they needed the aircraft. So many aircraft were shot down and lost that they were taking the aircraft that were on the way out to us. It was about three or four months before we got out own aircraft. They were all needed in Malta, and of course we couldn't object to that.

01:31 So half of the squadron worked for an American outfit, and the other half worked for an English outfit.

So which direction did you go?

I went with the English outfit, which was 104 Squadron, which was at Driffield when I first got there. And they were now flying Yankee Liberators. I worked on those in Egypt. The rest of the squad went up to

02:00 Palestine, and they worked at a place called Lither, in Palestine. They had a couple of very nasty accidents up there. But when the German gentlemen started coming down to Alamein, they were only fifteen ks from us. And the flight sergeant said to me one day "What do you think?" I said "Why do you ask me? What's wrong with the rest of them?" He said, "Well,

02:32 I'm getting an opinion from all of them. What should we do? We're going to be taken POW [Prisoner of War] in the next two days if we don't do something." I said "What's wrong with putting a drum of petrol on the truck and we'll go up to Palestine?" "Yes," he said, "I've thought of that." I said "Don't think anymore. As far as I'm concerned, I'll be in it." There were fourteen of us left behind you see, to look after any aircraft that came in. None came in. We didn't even have tents. We just

03:00 used to sleep on the ground. We thought we were goners, actually. Anyway, we got to Palestine after the three days that it took us to get up there, and the CO came out, Wing Commander Johnson, he's a nice bloke, too. He said "What are you doing up here, Percy?" Percy was the flight sergeant. He said "Well, the Germans were down as far as Alamein, and we were only fifteen ks away. We thought we might

03:31 not be members of the squadron for much longer." He said "Well, just get in your truck and go back again, thank you very much." The fourteen of us. So we got in the truck and went back again. And when we got back the squadron was there. Johnno didn't tell us that the squadron was going back to LG91, which was fifteen ks from Alamein. And of course, the big surprise when we got back…We were the last ones to get back. They all flew back and he didn't tell us.

04:00 We operated from there, and then about another two weeks after that, the Battle of Alamein started. We were back-up for the squadron bombing. Hence the clasp on the African Star.

What was at the landing ground?

Nothing, just us. It was all desert

04:31 and were 90 ks from Alexandria. That's the Mediterranean end of the Suez Canal. We had to go into Alexandria if we wanted any provisions or anything, which I presume they did. But that wasn't part of our job. We just had to eat what we got, which was pretty awful.

What were you eating?

Well, incidentally, when we first got to

05:00 the Middle East, we were living on tinned bully beef from the First World War, that had been kept in frozen storage for twenty odd years. I don't know why it was kept in frozen storage. I don't know whether the wogs wanted it. We got it anyway for the first couple of months we were in Egypt, and that wasn't very good. Then had a water problem. We couldn't get water, because

05:30 when the big battles started and they started to retreat, the old Desert Fox wasn't as good as he thought when Montgomery came onto the scene. They put cyanide through the water lines as they retreated. A couple of the blokes got pretty sick and nearly died. Our water tanker used to back

06:00 to Alexandria, and as we went further along, and we had further to go, you'd get a water bottle which was just over a pint in those days. You'd get a water bottle per man, per day, perhaps. If you were on duty, you didn't get any water. We never washed, we couldn't wash. We had to scrounge for water to drink to keep you going, which was very necessary.

06:33 Some of the blokes were lousy, lice all over them. But I used to go out the back of the tent at night, and I didn't tell anyone that I'd go out, and I would make a nice heap of fine sand, and I would wash under my arms with the fine sand. And I did that because I remembered when I was home, the birds used to flutter around in the dust and I thought 'If it's good enough for the birds, it's good enough for me.'

Is that why you didn't tell anyone?

07:00 There were no birds in the desert anyway. Not that I know of. That's how I kept myself going until our water line was fixed. Nineteen days, I think it was, without water. And that wasn't very good.

Des, you mentioned that at Landing Ground 91 there was nothing there…

Only our aircraft. It was just a flat…It used to be a lake, I think.

07:31 It must have been a lake a long time ago because it was beautiful and flat, and that was our airfield. There were no sandbag invetments [revetments]…We never had a bombing raid there, because everything was concentrating on the retreat at Alamein.

And yet you were only fifteen kilometres away?

When it started we were fifteen kilometres away. But, because they retreated at such a rate,

08:01 we got to the stage when the Germans were well past Benghazi, we started to move the Squadron then to follow up. They were already pushed off Cape Blonde, and they were already over at Sardinia when we got to Algiers. So we didn't have a lot of trouble with them at all. But we had a lot of motorbikes and motorcars and all their transport was left behind.

08:30 Our squadron was blessed with all the transport. We could have had anything we wanted. We all had motorbikes and motorcars. One day the CO said to us, "Where do you think the bloody petrol is coming from for all these vehicles you're using? I will restrict you to one motorbike and one car per tent." And that's what he did. Because everyone had motorbikes galore.

09:00 **Prior to Rommel's retreat, how many vehicles did you have in your squadron?**

I think we had thirty four trucks, which included the cookhouse wagon, and the sanitary wagon. I think we had thirty four trucks altogether.

The sanitary wagon? Was that like a mobile latrine?

No, it used to go

09:30 around and collect it all, then dump it out in the desert. We had what we called Desert Lilies. Our famous squadron boys, when we got home and had our reunions, we'd say to the ladies "Well, if you haven't circled a desert lily before you get to tent, then you'd never been in the Middle East. It was actually a kerosene tin that was sunk in the ground, and there was another one put on an angle, and that was the

10:00 latrine, and you had to go there every time because the flies…There was so much dysentery and everything prevalent…That was what the desert Lilly was, and we had about six of these around the place, and that was where you had to go.

So the funnel was to try and control the flies?

Yes, and the diseases and everything. Health wise.

I'm just wondering, Des, what kind of machines you had to be working on the aircraft?

10:35 We had no machines. All we had was sets of spanners and an oil bower and a petrol bower. We didn't have any machinery, no lathes or anything. It was pretty hard yakka.

So did you have a tool truck or van?

No. We never had a maintenance van. We had one later on.…

11:00 We had one because the Germans left it behind. That's the only reason we had one. But we didn't have anything until we got up to Algiers.

Why not?

I don't know. I suppose there weren't any. We didn't have one anyway.

What were the conditions like working on the aircraft in the desert?

It was pretty hot, of course. We didn't work after ten a.m. We used to work from five till ten.

11:33 Then we didn't start again until five in the night. Five to seven, five to eight or whatever. If the aircraft had to be prepared to go on a mission, and we had to work on it, well it was ready. We used to work around the clock. It didn't make any difference. There was no one there, we couldn't go anywhere, we were miles from everywhere. You didn't have leave. There wasn't anything such as leave. We didn't have leave for three years or something.

12:00 **So what would you do during the day?**

Well, you laid down in the shade of your tent, or under the shade of a wing. But you couldn't do anything, really.

What were the temperatures?

Well, it used to get up to one hundred and twelve, a hundred and thirteen. It's very cold at night in the desert. I remember one day I ran across from the mess tent from my tent, which was about a hundred yards and I had fog in my eyebrows.

12:30 Quite wet it was, and yet by ten o' clock it's a hundred degree. Pretty hard yakka in the desert.

I can imagine doing any kind of work of a mechanical nature in the desert would….

It was so hot. You couldn't touch the aircraft they would get so hot. And yet we had to guard the aircraft at night, and everyone had to sleep in an aircraft at night, after eight o' clock but it was still very hot. We used to put covers… They

13:00 had canvas covers to go over the engines to protect them from heat, but it didn't do very much good. It was pretty hard working on them, pretty hot…

What about the sand?

Well, that was unbelievable. I've got a photo of me wearing desert boots. They stop the sand from sandblasting your legs. All that any of us had for two years was

13:33 a pair of boots, a pair of shorts and a hat. No shirt. I was as black as that stand, in Egypt. In fact they used to say "Keep your hat on Stingey, we'll know you from the wogs." But a lot of our blokes were so black. They weren't brown, they were black. You would have thought some of them were Aborigine, they were so black. We all used

14:00 to work in the sun without any…There was no such thing as thoughts of cancer in those days. I don't know what it's all about these days. It might mean because of the whole in the atmosphere.

Just as regards to sand, how did you keep the sand out of moving parts?

You couldn't, you couldn't. You couldn't wear a watch or anything. Your watch would be done in no time there.

14:30 So fine was the sand. And the winds would come in like a Fremantle Doctor. And they used to roar over the sand hills. You would get sand in your face and sand in your food, sand in your tent. It was pretty rotten conditions and we had that for over two years.

I'm surprised that you could keep the

15:00 **aeroplanes flying…**

Well, we had lots of trouble, of course. The engines had most trouble. I wasn't working on engines, I was working on air frames. But all the moving parts, the undercarriage especially, had to be regularly washed, with petrol. We had nothing else. We used to take the tail plane and the rudders off, and the ailerons and everything, and washed them regularly with petrol. Never put any oil on them.

15:31 If you put oil on them, they would just get worn with sand. It was pretty hard going for a while.

It sounds like you were carrying more fuel and oil than you were water?

Oh, yeah. We rarely had water. The only people who had water were the cookhouse. And they got first cut of whatever water they wanted. Well, they had to, otherwise we wouldn't have had anything to eat. But they did very well when we only

16:00 had bully beef. But oh God, we had bully beef every way you could think. Then we got powdered egg. I don't know what they called it, but I know what I called it…

What did you call it?

I won't tell you. It was pretty dreadful. They used to get these big tins of powdered egg and they would pour it into a copper and they would stir it up and it would come out like an omelette.

16:31 But oh jeez, it tasted dreadful. Apparently it was good in whatever we needed to keep us going. We had what we called Sawdust Sausages. I don't know what was in them, but God they tasted dreadful. They were synthetic things. I think they were experimental.

17:02 Synthetic food wasn't heard of until the war. And we used to get two or three of these sausages and a great spoonful of this egg stuff, and that was what you lived on. We didn't have vegetables…Someone we would have plums. Sometimes we would get rice. But oh Jeez, you wouldn't

17:30 want to eat it. We never really and truly had any fresh vegetables until we got to Gibraltar and the war was finished.

I'm curious to ask you for some more details about the Battle of Alamein, and you following Rommel as he retreated across the desert?

It was just everyone shooting at one another. We were bombing and then we had a certain amount of our aircraft were torpedoes

18:00 and depth charges, to do the shipping. Some of them would do bombing and some of them would do shipping.

What was your daily routine like when…

There was no daily routine. We would work twenty four hours a day if we had to. We didn't know what time it was, sometimes.

What sort of preparations were there before the Battle of Alamein?

Well, our aircraft were always prepared the same way.

18:30 We always worked on the aircraft until they were airworthy. And it didn't matter how long you worked, you got your aircraft. The flight officer would say "How many aircraft have you got? How long do we have to wait? How many are you working on?" And we'd be able to tell them what the conditions of the aircraft were that were in maintenance. They would then program their flying operations to whatever we could tell them.

19:01 But that's how we got to be such a good squadron. We all worked together like that. We were all together for four and a half years. It was just a big family. That's why we have squadron reunions now. We've had squadron reunions since the war, fifty-five years or more.

With the leadup to the Battle of Alamein, what were you expecting or told about that conflict?

Nothing. We were just told what we had to do. You weren't told

19:30 of the progress or anything. We didn't get any news bulletins or anything like that. We used to get it on what they called peddle radio. One bloke would tell the next bloke and the next bloke would tell the next and so on. But the aircrew used to tell us. When they came back they would tell us how good it was or how bad it was. But we were always working on aircraft, regardless. We were always working on aircraft.

What kind of things would the

20:00 **aircrew tell you, apart from good or bad…**

They would say the Germans are on the run or that we've lots one aircraft. We'd lost so and so. We had one fellow, a West Australian by the name of Alec Barris, I don't know whether you know the name. Apparently he was a very good cricket player. He played Shield cricket here. He was in our squadron. Ginger-headed feather, and he got shot down, two hundred miles behind the lines. He and his

20:30 crew walked back. They used to walk at night and sleep in the daytime. But they very nearly lost their lives because they couldn't get water. They were drinking water out of truck radiators and wherever they could get it. And they were in a hell of a mess when they got back. And they got what they called the Order of the Flying Boot. They walked back.

21:00 But they were the only two that ever got shot down behind the lines that got back to the squadron. Anyone else that was shot down was taken as POWs [prisoners of war]...

How many planes did you lose during the Battle of Alamein?

It wasn't a lot. We might have lost three, I think. But we were so close, following them, that they would

21:30 get in front and they would bomb the people that were retreating. It was pretty hard for their Infantry to shoot at our aircraft. They didn't have what they call anti-aircraft guns set up, because they were retreating that fast. So it was an advantage for the aircraft. If the aircraft were lost, it was because of a fault in the aircraft, not because they were shot down.

How important do you think it

22:00 **was to have had the air force there?**

It was mainly important, because if they knew there were aircraft bombing them, they would run all the harder. And our fellows were able to be relieved by the fact that the aircraft were there. And mind you, we weren't the only squadron. There were lots of other squadrons. 450 Squadron that flew Hurricanes, and later aircraft, I can't tell you what they were. I think they were

22:30 American aircraft. I can't think of the name of them. Isn't that strange. They were updated from Hurricanes...

Were they the Mustangs?

Yeah, they went to Mustangs and they went to something else after that. And there were not many Spitfires. They had Kittyhawks. And 450 Squadron and 3 Squadron,

23:02 which was a good squadron, operated from Australia. They weren't on loan to the RAF. They used to have what they called 'Can Openers.' They used to fly very low across the desert, perhaps less than a hundred feet, and they would split open a tank. They used to call them Can Openers. They were good, too.

So you were sharing the landing grounds with other squadrons...

23:31 No, bomber squadrons on their own, and fighter squadrons were further afield than us. They were better than us because they were quicker.

Did they have a longer range, too?

They didn't have a longer range. A fighter would never have a longer range than a bomber. But they were further away from us, at this particular point, because it was in their range, you see.

24:00 **So do you think if there had not been your squadron and other air force squadrons there, the Battle of Alamein would have turned out differently?**

No, I don't think so. I think Rommel was beaten from the word "Go". I think Montgomery was an absolute marvel. We helped, but we don't know how much, but we helped. And the fighter planes were pretty good. The Germans, at this time,

24:30 were pretty well defunct for aircraft in the desert. Our fighter planes shot a lot of German planes down.

So are you suggesting then that the Allies owned the skies?

They did from Alamein on.

It sounds like a fierce battle. I'm trying to imagine how fierce that would have been had the Germans had a lot of aircraft in the sky?

25:00 "If" is the operative word there. If. They didn't. And that was it. They retreated to Sardinia, and we went from there onto Malta. And they had enough aircraft in Sardinia and Italy to give Malta a real good pounding. The siege of Malta was a terrible thing. It was mainly the people of Malta that suffered because

25:30 they didn't have any food supplies for eight months. That is an awful long time for an island to go without food. We used to give them some of our Red Cross parcels. The Germans really hammered Malta. I don't know how they ever lost Malta.

While we're on Rommel's retreat across the desert, can you step me through that retreat with some of your further experiences?

26:01 We were on the go all the time. We got nearly up to Benghazi. They were going so well the 9th Division pulled out. And that's when the 9th Division came home to go up to the islands. And we knew then that when the 9th Division pulled out that we were going pretty well. When the 9th Divvy left to come home, the one squadron that was nearest

26:30 to them was 458 Squadron, and we got all their beer supplies. Our fellows thought it was great.

Where did you move to then from Landing Ground 91?

We moved to Protville first, which is in the….What's before Algiers? I'd have to look at a map.

27:00 (BREAK) And we didn't do any bombing after we left Alamein. After they got on the move and they were really retreating, we didn't do any bombing until we

27:30 got up to Algiers. We reformed the squadron at a place called Protville. We weren't at Protville for very long, then we went to Bône. And we had that white aircraft, that was photographed at Bône. That was when we first got our white aircraft, and we transferred….We didn't do any bombing after we got to Bône. We did all torpedo and depth charge work from there on. Even when we went

28:00 into Malta and Italy, we were doing depth charges and torpedoes.

During Rommel's retreat, were you using Liberators or Wellingtons?

We only had Wellingtons the whole time. All the different makes of Wellingtons we had.

I had information that you worked on Liberators…

We worked on Liberators when we first got to Egypt, because our aircraft were taken to Malta. And then after our aircraft came through, we had nothing but Wellingtons from there on. We only worked on Liberators for three months.

28:32 Half the Squadron went to the Americans with the Liberators, and we worked with the English with Liberators.

Did you get very attached to the Liberators?

Yeah. Very much so.

How did they compare to Wellingtons?

Oh, they were a lot bigger. They were a four engine aircraft. They flew a lot higher. They flew at thirty thousand feet, and they had oxygen. But our aircrew didn't fly with them. Our aircrew

29:00 pilots were going back to England to fly more aircraft down. And that's how we got our aircraft, because our pilots were transferred back to England to bring more aircraft down. I don't know what the rest of the aircrew did. No idea. But when we got to the stage where we got our aircraft back, our aircrew were there. Navigators and wireless operators and gunners, and what have you. So some of them worked pretty hard. You see, we were

29:30 told nothing. We just knew that we had to work on aircraft, and that's what we did. Didn't matter what sort of aircraft we worked on…

It sounds like there was a lot of waiting, too?

Oh, yeah. We had a lot of waiting. But we weren't idle. We were never idle. We worked on aircraft.

When you arrived at Bône, you received white Wellingtons. Why do you think they were white?

Well, they had a searchlight in them.

30:09 You go in and you lower your searchlight and that's when you've got a positive fixing on either a submarine or a ship, you lower your search light and you fly down to a hundred and fifty feet above the water, and from a thousand yards you approach your target,

30:30 and then you switched your lee-light on. And that's when whoever your approaching shoots straight up the light. And they were dangerous things to fly in, because once you turned your light on, they knew where you were. If you didn't let your torpedoes and depth charges go pretty smartly and pull your lee-light up, you were in trouble. Once the two torpedoes went, your aircraft would go straight up in the air about five hundred feet.

31:00 Straight up like that. You then turned either right or left, depending on what the strike was like, to avoid the explosion yourself, because you were so low. It was dangerous work.

So from North Africa you began bombing sea targets?

From Bône onwards…

What was at Bône?

There was an American squadron there.

31:30 And there was a French squadron, and the French squadron was a very famous French squadron. I can't remember the name of it.

Did you begin to interact much with the other squadrons?

No, we didn't have anything to do with them. We were always separate. We did our own work, our own

maintenance. It was very wet at Bone. We had to have a metal strip put down, like they used to in the islands. They had these big metal strips with holes in them.

32:02 They always had something solid to take off from. Otherwise they never would have got off the ground.

Was it like a mesh?

Yeah, a mesh.

What else was at Bône? Can you describe the location?

The location was inland. It was only three miles from the coast. It might have been less. I'm not sure.

32:31 Just north of us was the Atlas Mountains. Our fellows didn't like flying over the mountains, because the air currents were different. As soon as they took off, they'd either go completely starboard, or go right back this way and around that way, to where their target was in the Med. We thought we lost our CO one night. He was a South African. His name was Colonel Mackenzie.

33:01 And he was a great fellow. He was the best CO we ever had. In fact, he was so good we named our air force "Mackenzie's Air Force." We even put a notice up on the side of the road, Mackenzie's Air Force.

Why did he have so much respect?

Well, he thought the ground crew was the best ground crew he had ever worked with. And he said they were one hundred per cent

33:31 perfect. He said "They knew all about what they had to do. And if it wasn't for the ground crew, they wouldn't have flown." He used to curse the aircrew, he didn't like aircrew, even though he was a flyer himself. He said the only people on the squadron were the ground staff. He never called for the ground staff to be paraded. He wouldn't let anyone

34:00 of the ground crew salute. No one was to be saluted by the ground staff. He also said that the ground staff had to call everyone by their Christian names, no matter what rank they were, except for him. He was a colonel and he said "You can call me Sir, provided you spell it C U R." That was the sort of bloke he was. He was a great bloke." We named our squadron "Mackenzie's Air Force."

34:34 **What did the aircrew think of him?**

I think they liked him. He'd tell them straight out what he thought of them and what he expected of him. He was a bloke that was straight down the line. If he said something, that was it. He wouldn't vary and if it was done, that was all the better. You couldn't jack up against him in any way. He was such a good bloke.

35:02 He was a very competent flyer, and he went out one night and as soon as he took off he cut one motor out. And he flew all the way, and we thought after seven hours our bloke would be gone. He flew eight and a half hours, and we thought we had lost our CO. After about eight and three quarter hours, in he came, with one motor. Flew all the way and back on one motor.

35:30 What he did, he cut out one motor…He'd start one motor, then cut this one out, you see. He was a very smart bloke.

He sounds like a bit of a maverick.

Oh yeah, he was. Unfortunately, he lost his life, after the war. He was minister for agriculture for Kenya. Was it Kenyatta in charge of Kenya? And he was the

36:00 Minister of Agriculture and he flew over to…Have you heard of Idi Amin? Well, he flew to see Idi Amin, to work out something between Kenya and Idi Amin's lot. And they thought he was such a good bloke that they presented him with this lion's head. And he put it in his aircraft and he got halfway home and it exploded and killed the lot of them. Tragic.

36:30 That was the end of our Mackenzie. He was a great bloke. He came to Australia, to a reunion. And when we got to England in 1982 for a reunion, his wife had us down to their farm in Surrey for lunch and a game of cricket and a good reunion.

How long were you flying from Bone over the Med?

37:01 That's a good question.…Well, we weren't in any one place any longer than six months. And we weren't that long in Bône, I don't think. We went from Bône to Malta. But we didn't all go to Malta, some stayed at Bône. The reason being that they'd send six aircraft from 458 Squadron and six from 459 Squadron and six from other squadrons, and they'd form

37:30 a sort of a bastard squadron, so as you wouldn't lose a squadron. If we lost any aircraft, it would only be a part of our squadron or a part of their squadron or whatever. That was a very clever move. But they didn't do that with fighter squadrons.

Why had the situation become that desperate that you were splitting your eggs up into different baskets?

Well, they didn't know the situation I don't think, at the time.

38:00 When we first got to Egypt, we had a detachment to Malta early in the piece. We only sent three aircraft. But we didn't learn to later that's the reason they did it. They didn't want to lose a full squadron. I was in Malta for a while. That's why I got the Malta George Cross. That was during the siege of Malta.

What were you told prior to going to Malta?

Nothing. Nothing.

So how many ground crew and planes...

38:30 Well, we lost two ground staff on Malta. We lost four ground staff on Malta. But we lost a lot of aircrew.

How many did you take there?

Ground staff? Well, enough to look after four to six aircraft. Oh, perhaps twenty,

39:00 twenty ground staff.

So nearly a quarter of the ground staff that went to Malta were lost?

Hmm.

What strip were you using at Malta?

We all used the one strip at Luqa. At the end of the airstrip was a great big area where they used to take all the metal out.

39:31 A quarry, it was a quarry. It was a short runway, and if you hadn't made your take off at the end of the quarry, you were curtains. So a few of us got together and decided we would make a ramp, the full width of the airstrip, and we made a ramp that went up like that. We didn't put a great lot of down on it,

40:00 because we thought when the loaded aircraft would take off and hit this ramp, it would help them into the air. And it worked very well.

That would have had to have been fairly carefully engineered, wouldn't it?

Yeah, we worked it out. Very gradual strip. Because when an aircraft hits it at a hundred and ten miles an hour, it makes a lot of different. But the pilots liked it, they thought it was good.

So what did you make the ramp out of?

Whatever we could find. It was mainly earth. It was mainly

40:30 blue metal, but it wasn't blue metal like we get in Australia. But it was a good ramp, and we used to tamp it with water, because there was a lot of water. Strange to say, on Malta, there was a lot of water. Sea water, though. And we used to hose it, compact it, and it finished up very good.

How did you compact it?

41:00 We had like a hoe, so we would just compact it, press it down. We didn't have a heavy roller or anything. Had we had a heavy roller it would have been good. The engineering officer worked out the size of the grading. But I think anyone could have worked it out. It was a matter of trail and error. It was quite a long one. There was tons of earth in it.

41:31 Mixed with stone. There was a lot of stone on Malta, mainly rock. And we were able to get underground. As soon as they started bombing we would go underground.

What sort of structures or facilities were there at the airstrip?

They had a couple of hangars. But they were bombed so much, it was mainly out in the open.…

Tape 5

00:33 **Malta. So you went and trekked across in a truck...**

Up to Algiers?

Yes. What actually happened from that point?

We were just posted to Malta. We weren't there all that long. About

01:00 three months or something. We were on the move all the time. Then we went from Malta to Sardinia.

What did you see was going on at Malta at the time?

A lot of bombing. We were just doing normal operations. The crew were flying, and we were just repairing aircraft all the time. We lost a few crews at Malta actually?

What did you see in the sky?

Only the aircraft. Fighters.

01:30 German fighters. JU 88s and Me 109s, Stukas, they were dive bombers. You'd think the Stukas were gone, they'd fly right over and you'd think they're gone, and they'd flip right over on their back and down they'd come. They had a screamer on them, you could hear them screaming on the way down. And the Stuka was such a good aircraft that if the pilot blacked out, it would pull itself out of the dive. Very often they would get,

02:00 perhaps, three, four or five Gs. That's pretty hard going. They'd black out. They couldn't help but black out at that pace. And the aircraft was such a good one that it used to pull out of the dive itself, and they'd be on their way home when they woke up. Amazing. It was different to an automatic pilot. We had automatic pilot, called George. You know that didn't you? All automatic pilots were called George. Flying on George.

02:30 We always called the automatic pilot George.

How did that come about?

I don't know. I knew that it was George. I wasn't doing the instrument section at all. We used to have trouble with George. It was quite a good thing on long flights. It was like cruise control on cars.

Was that a new development?

Oh, no. That was early in the piece. In 1942, '43,

03:00 we had George. But they used to give a bit of trouble. You'd hear the pilots come in. "Bloody George is not working." The poor old instrument bashers, they'd get into trouble for it. It wasn't their fault. They used to do the best they could. In the desert, especially, the sand used to affect everything. The instruments particularly. It was pretty rotten.

Do you think the instrument fixers had a harder time of it than yourself?

No, I don't think so.

03:30 We were all about the same. I think the engine fitters had more trouble than any of us, with sand in the engine and in the oil. They used to stop the tappets in the aircraft, it would stall. It was pretty rotten.

That's going to be hard, to keep the sand out of the engine?

That's right.

So they'd have to just constantly clean it out?

Oh yes, they were working all the time.

04:02 **So when you were in Malta...How many of you were transferred to Malta?**

The full Squadron was there at one time, when we moved from there to Malta and onto Sardinia. But the first detachment was only about twelve or fourteen of us.

Was Malta a different sort of pressure to what you experienced before?

Yes. Very high pressure.

04:31 **How was it different?**

There were more air raids to start with. The Germans were in Sardinia, and Sicily, and they were so close to us we could hear the engines running up when they were taking off. We knew when we were going to get raided because you could hear them taking off. That's how close they were to Malta. As a matter of fact, I think there were three fighters landed at Malta one night,

05:00 and the duty officer was able to speak German, and helped them right in They landed on our airstrip and the officer made the mistake of saying "I've got them." And they heard it on their radio, and they all took off again. He talked German all the way and when they landed he said "I've got them." and he didn't have them at all. They knew they had landed on the wrong airstrip. Which wasn't hard to do.

05:33 In England we used to land on the wrong airstrips.

So how does that actually happen?

Well, they were so close together.

So navigation wasn't so precise?

Well, fighter pilots didn't have navigators, they had to do their own navigating. I can understand that.

Although I never heard of any of our fighter pilots, not that I know of any, but they probably did anyway.

06:01 Landed in the wrong place. Well, in England the average distance between airfields was only three miles, for the whole of England. I suppose 98% of them aren't airfields anymore. In fact, where we at Spalding Moor, it's a housing place now. All houses built there.

06:30 So that's not an airfield anymore. Although our 458 plaque and our squadron tree is still there, it's a housing estate.

What were the living conditions like on Malta?

Oh, pretty crook. Like the rest of it was. We used to get milk. The kids would drive the goats down through the area, and they would milk the goats straight into your Dixie.

07:00 Because we used to give them raisins and butter and that sort of thing, that they didn't have when the Siege of Malta was on. That was very sad, that was terribly bad. People were eating grass, that's how bad it was. And the fellow who took the submarine with the food on it, after eight months, was on the trip to England with us, in November.

Did you actually see

07:30 **that Malta was quite impoverished, because they...**

Yes, yes, it was impoverished. Not the troops, not the forces, just the people of Malta. Because it's a very small island. It's only ten miles by five miles, and that's not very big. It's big enough to bomb, of course. It was not bad as far as we were concerned, as far as the bombing raids were concerned, because we would all go underground,

08:00 if we were able to, if we weren't at the aircraft. We were able to duck underneath in plenty of time. There were plenty of times that we didn't, of course.

Now what sort of constructions did they have underground?

Just sort of like holes in the ground. There was a road into the hospital, that was a beautiful construction. It had been there a long time of course, it was there before the war. And it was quite good.

So you'd just dive into the nearest hole?

08:30 You would get underground wherever you could.

Weren't you ever concerned it was going to collapse on top of you?

Oh no, not solid rock. It's all white limestone. In fact the Valetta Harbour is one of the prettiest harbours I've ever seen. That's the main naval harbour. But that was a bit away from where we were. We were north of that, at Luqa.

What were the showering facilities and mess like there?

Showers?

09:01 What showers? No, we didn't have showers, not at Malta. In fact, we didn’t have a shower until we got to Italy.

So were you still doing the sand-birdy bath in Malta?

No, we had no sand in Malta. We didn't have any sand in North Africa,

09:30 but we had water in North Africa. Algiers. And Protville, we had sand there. It was funny there in Protville, in Tunisia. One of the English cooks found an old piano in one of the farmhouses and he got a truck and brought it back to the Squadron,

10:00 and they sorted me out to see if I could tune. And I did. It took me two days with a pair of pliers to tune it. I just tuned it as I could. And the three padres arrived, the Australian padres. Bob Davies was Church of England and McNamara was Roman Catholic, and Fred McKay was Presbyterian or from the

10:30 Flying Doctor Service. And he was a great bloke. He died a couple of years ago, I went to his service. But they got this piano, and Harry Jenkins, my mate the medical orderly, told Bob Davies that I could play the piano. And he said "We want you to play for the church service." I said "I can't play a church service, I only fiddled about on the piano." He said "I know you can." I said "No, I can't." Anyway, I had

11:00 a look at it and I played for the church service.

What do you think was the hardest part about being in Malta? Was it the constant bombings that you experienced?

Yeah, there was quite a lot of bombing in Malta.

And you were there for about six weeks?

11:30 Yeah, about that.

And how did you get orders that you were moving on from there?

Well, the CO gets his movements from headquarters…We got moved by group headquarters.

It seems like you were doing an awful lot of moving around?

12:01 We moved more than any squadron. They used to call us the Cooks Tilla Squadron [?].

That must have made it very difficult to get mail?

Well, I must tell you, I only got one letter for the whole of the war. When I was in Driffield, and we had only been there…We had been in England for four weeks, my Mum died. And I had a kid sister

12:30 who was only five years old, when I went to the war. Because my Dad wanted someone to look after Wendy. And my stepmother, or whatever I called her, called her a lot of rotten names after that, she had two sons that didn't go to the war, and I told her that they should have gone to the war and she didn't like me. I didn't get any mail at all,

13:00 after Mum died. The other fellows got plenty of mail. I never even got a cake or a parcel or anything during the whole war. It was shattering.

How did some of the other blokes react to you not getting any mail?

Well, they said to me that

13:30 I should apply to go home, which I did, but they knocked me back. They said it didn't warrant me going home. I don't know whether Dad told them that he didn't want me to go home, or whether they found out that he had remarried…So that was

14:00 a pretty bad state of affairs, and when I got home I had nowhere to go to. I wrote home and I said to my Dad…he was pretty weak in some ways. He was a good bloke, but I said to him, "If you want any of my deferred pay, if you need any money, please use it." And I thought I'd have at least eighty or a hundred quid when I got home, but I never had a zac. He spent the lot. And she wouldn't let me

14:30 live in the house when I got home. I said to her, "If Dad wants me to leave, he'll tell me." And I said to him, straight out, "Do you want me to go?" And he said "No." I had to sleep in the sleep-out, in a ten room house.

So do you think this was all basically due to the…

Well, I didn't get on with her.

15:01 I had a bit of a hard time after the war, but I managed.

Did you not get Red Cross parcels?

Yeah, we used to get a Red Cross parcel. But what I got I gave to the people in Malta.

Because they were starving?

Oh yeah, they were starving blind. You couldn't see little kids go without

15:30 food, could you? I couldn't.

Was there a lot of begging?

Yes. The poor devils, they had nothing. Literally nothing.

Was it also because their crops were wiped out?

They didn't have any crops. I don't know where they got their food from, initially. They didn't grow crops in Malta, it was mainly stone. There was a lot of land that wasn't fertile enough. And there wasn't

16:00 enough earth to grow a lot of crops. That was one of the saddest parts of the war for me, Malta.

Did you manage to talk to any of the locals? Did you get friendly with any of them?

No, you couldn't get close to them. They weren't allowed to talk to us anyway, because we didn't know if there was German infiltration or traitors or whatever. The Germans never got onto Malta but they had a lot of

16:30 time over the place, and you didn't know who was what. The walls have ears, don't talk.

Was that constantly reinforced?

Yes.

What about propaganda? Did you hear much of that going on the airwaves?

Yes.

What sort of things were you seeing and hearing?

It was mainly…The Germans used to drop leaflets with messages on it. You know,

17:00 "The Yanks are in your country. They're taking your women out. And what are you doing? Why are you here? Why don't you get home?" All this sort of thing. It was pretty scary at times…

So you actually took it seriously?

Oh, I didn't take it too seriously, because I didn't care whether I went or not. I had been there long enough to know….When my Mum died, I was shattered. I couldn't care what I did. I'd volunteer for everything there was going.

17:32 I think she must have looked after me, because I came home.

Was it unexpected that she'd pass away?

Well, I didn't know that she had throat cancer when I left. She didn't say anything. And yet she saw me off on the station. Her brother was head of AWA Radio in Melbourne, and he sent a signal direct to Driffield. I don't know how he knew I was at Driffield.

18:00 He must have contacted RAAF headquarters in Cairo. But wherever they were, I think there was another RAAF headquarters at….It's in London, somewhere. I think he might have contacted, because he had quite a lot of authority in the airwaves in those days. He sent a direct message to me, one week, to say that my Mum

18:30 was very ill. And I've got a bright idea that perhaps she had died then. Because he sent another message a week later to say that she had died. I was a bit upset at that.

Did it help having all your mates around you?

Not really. They didn't say very much. I know they were sympathetic towards me, but

19:00 they couldn't do anything really. We had one fellow who was older than all of us. And Bob said to me "Why don't you apply to go home, and see what happens." So I did apply and they knocked it back.

So what was next after Malta?

We went to Sardinia, to Alghero. We didn't land at Alghero.

19:31 We went by ship to Alghero….

Were the conditions on the ships getting any better?

Oh, no. In fact when we got on that ship, they were filling with oil for the burners,

20:00 the engines, and the Italian that was looking after the ship went walkabout, to have a smoke or something, and it flooded the deck. The tank overflowed and there was three inches of this oil all over the deck. All in our kitbags and everything. You've never seen such a mess in all your life. And the smell of that oil, terrible. And they got the fire hoses out and hosed it all over the side, but it was too late then. And we were up to our ankles in oil.

20:30 **Your ship stories just keep getting worse….**

Well, they weren't any good anyway. We though it would be nice going there, but it wasn't all that good.

Did it take very long to get over there?

No, a couple of hours, perhaps.

So what's the first thing you when you arrive in Sardinia?

When we arrived in Sardinia, we were supposed to catch a train from Cagliari, that's the name of the place.

21:00 Cagliari to Alghero. And it's such a small island that they didn't have a big train service. They had this little narrow gauge thing. The carriages held ten people, three little box windows. And when we all got on the train couldn't pull us. We all had to get out and push it to start. That's true.

21:32 **Planes are working for you, but trains and boats, not…**

That's right. We all had to get out and push…It was only like this little puffing billy thing. A little narrow gauge railway. It used to run between Cagliari and Alghero. That was the only train in Sardinia, I think. It was quite a long way. We waited for two days for the train. We had no tents, we had nothing.

22:00 We just sat down at the railway station and just slept on this little platform thing. I can sleep anywhere. I can sleep in a tree right now.

The train station is probably quite comfortable...

It wasn't a big station at all. We couldn't all fit on the platform.

22:30 They were just lying all over the place. Some of the fellows had their ground sheets out, not to put on the ground, but to put over them.…That was another thing I forgot to tell you about the desert, about the scorpions and the centipedes. Benghazi was the worst place for the scorpions. They were about that long and they were black. And there was what they called the Desert Spider. It was like a tarantula, but they were bigger than the tarantula.

23:00 And we used to make a circle, about three feet in diameter, then pour petrol around the circle then set light to it, and then put a scorpion and a spider in the centre, and we used to bet on which one would kill the other. The spider used to invariably win. The scorpion had this sting over his back, but the spider was so quick. It was about

23:30 as big as your hand. An eight-inch scorpion and this spider. We used to bet on who would win. That was our sport.

That's unbelievable. So they're both poisonous, then?

Oh yes. They had snakes in Egypt, but they used to travel under the surface. You used to see this little raised…where they went under the sand. And we never knew what it was. We used to see them.…

24:00 Very often we'd see them on the sand dunes. And blow me, they were snakes. They used to go under the sand, it was so hot. But that was nature. Then they had dung beetles. The camels would do their dropping, and these dung beetles would push them along. We used to put all these camel droppings along, and we'd get

24:30 get half a dozen dung beetles and we used to bet on which one would get to the top of the hill first. Oh God, isn't it terrible the way we used to carry on? But we had nothing to do. But we were miles, hundreds of miles from everywhere. When you were working on the aircraft, if your shirt got dirty you would just take them off, dip them in a can of petrol and hang them on the line, keep working, and in ten minutes your pants would be dry again and you'd just put them on. Simple as that. We were out in the wilderness.

25:00 It was nothing to see perhaps ten, fifteen, twenty blokes with nothing on. Just their boots and their hats. I should have got some photos, but I didn't.

So you still had your camera at this stage.

Hmm.

Did you actually miss the company of women, because you were in the desert?

Oh, you always do that, but what could you do?

Did you talk about girls?

No. One day one fellow got,

25:30 he got a bundle of Pix. Have you hard of Pix? Pix was a magazine and it used to have all the films stars and things in it. And this fellow put them all around the camp, and of course we all used to sit there and ogle and gurgle over the.…Shirley Temple was one, and who was the other girl? Oh, she could sing, too. American girl.

26:03 Deanna Durbin, it was. She used to make me cry. She used to sing "I can see the lights of home…" I thought, 'Oh God, see the lights of home?' We used to listen to it and it was very nice.

26:30 Some of our blokes had radios, of course. Radio technicians always had radios, and we'd always have news. We always knew what was going on. I didn't mention Lord Haw Haw in the desert, did I? His name was Joyce? He was an Englishman, and he went to the Germans, of course, and he would come on the radio. He'd play Little Ima Lane before he started…

27:00 And he'd say "You bloody Australians! You'll be raided tonight at seven twenty, or seven thirty." And sure enough…We sometimes wondered whether he was on our side or not, because he used to tell us when the air-raids were coming, and they did. We didn't know whether he was with us or against us. He was against us. He got hung up by the neck after the war. Lord Haw Haw, they called him.

27:30 **Did you take him seriously?**

You had to. But he used to abuse us and call us everything. Terrible names, I won't say that. It's not gentlemanly to talk like that. But they were very bad names, and he never pulled any punches. And

28:00 he used all the adjectives he could think of, and that was Lord Haw Haw. Something [William] Joyce. He was a very well spoken Englishman.

Did it make you angry?

Yeah.

Is that how most of the men felt?

Yes. You could hear the boys calling out "Haw Haw's on the radio again!

28:30 We're getting another raid at half past seven tonight." But he was always true on his air-raids. He always started off with "You bloody Australians!"

It's interesting that you've got this incredible love-hate relationship that seems to have bonded...

Oh yes. We were just like a big family because we were there together that long. No one dared touch any of our squadron, or they would have been in a lot of trouble.

Why do you think your squadron ended up bonding

29:00 **so closely, because a lot of other squadrons didn't have that...**

Yeah, but we went away together, and we were together for four and a half years. And we got to know each bloke very well. And they knew who they could rely on, and who was the bad egg in the company and so forth. We didn't have too many bad eggs. We had one bloke, we called him Hydraulic Jack, because he would lift anything. He would thieve anything. And we got rid of him out of the Squadron.

29:30 He was a Queenslander. One of my mates from South Australia…When we were at Protville, we had a little square, like a country dunny, and it had these little wooden things around the side, and he left his watch there. And he went down ten minutes later to get it, and it was gone. And the next day, this fellow from Queensland tried to sell it to him.

30:01 He didn't know it was his watch, he showed it to him. That was the end of session. He tried to sell it to him, his own watch. That was the sort of bloke he was.

He sounds stupid more than anything.

Well, that's right. He has about as many brains as a squashed ant, I'd say. He was in a lot of trouble. We got to the CO and told him what had happened, and got him posted away.

That would have made the rest of the men furious?

Oh yeah.

30:31 **So basically, he might have even been transferred away for his own good?**

Yeah, yeah. But he came home on the same boat as us. I don't know what squadron he went to, but he was in the Middle East somewhere. When we left England to come home, our first port of call was Port Said, at the Suez Canal, and all the boys from our squadron who had been posted,

31:00 at the end of the war, to other squadrons, got onto the ship. And there was Mr Hydraulic Jack. So none of us spoke to him, of course. He stayed with the fellows he was posted to. We didn't even enquire where he went. But he was a bad bloke.

So going back to Sardinia, and you were on the railway station...

31:34 At Alghero? Well, when we got to Alghero, we had a beautiful camp there. We were right by the beach. And it was magnificent. We were able to swim and do everything there. We used to go down with the Italian fishermen, and they'd take their net right out and bring it right in and all this fish…We had lots of fish at Alghero.

32:04 We had a couple of accidents at Alghero. One of our squadron's pilots was coming into land one night, and he was out of petrol. He had just enough to land and that was all. And they wouldn't give him permission to land because there was another aircraft taking off. So he came right around the side and he landed in the water right alongside the camp, about a hundred yards off the shore. So we all swam out,

32:30 did what we could to help them, got them out of the aircraft.

So the aircraft would have been a write-off?

Oh yeah. You could just see the top of the aircraft in the water. He did a mighty job to land it in the water like that. The crew all got out, it was all right. I nearly drowned in that, because I swam out the next day to see if I could get a parachute,

33:00 to get the silk out of parachute, because it wouldn't be any good as a parachute anymore. And I managed to get in through the astro hatch, but I couldn't find my way out. I could swim anywhere in those days. I can't swim now. I haven't been in the water for years. We've got a pool out there. I dived in, I thought I would be all right, and would you believe I had no buoyancy at all.

33:31 Like a lead balloon. I was in the shallow end, I wasn't silly.

So you actually tried to get into this plane and you couldn't get out?

I got in. The parachute was too far away from me to get to it, and I was running out of breath. I was underwater all the time. I was in there for about three minutes, then I came out through the astro hatch.

34:00 **From what I can understand, these planes are actually quite slim?**

The Wellie was pretty good, actually. The Lancaster was the worst one. The Whitley was worse than the Lancaster. But the Lancaster was a beautiful aircraft. I can't say the same about the Whitley. It was long and square box and very narrow. You had to crawl down it. Incidentally, I must tell you about the Whitley, when we were at Bône, in North Africa,

34:30 three of us went on a day's leave, on the Saturday morning. We went in Bône, which is about seven miles from where we were camped. And the truck used to take us in and bring us back at four o' clock in the afternoon. And this fellow I was with, was the flight sergeant of the armoury, and he met a friend of his who was a pilot. And he said to Cal, "Do you want to come flying with me?"

35:01 Cal said "Oh yeah, I'll come with you." He said to Siliver "Do you want to go?" Silver said "I can fly any time." I said the same "I don't want to go flying with you. I can fly whenever I want to." Cal said "Come on, we'll just go for a bit of a flip. We've never been in a Whitley." And I said "No, and I don't want to go in a Whitley either…" What I heard of them. They were built before the Wimpy and they were pretty old. Anyway, I said "Yes, all right,

35:31 we'll go for a fly with you." I said "It's got to be only half an hour, no more." And the pilot never said a thing you know. And when we got airborne, he was headed out over the sea, and I noticed that he was going north west. And I said to Cal "Where's this bloke going? He's going north west and he's not turning or anything." And you know what he said? "The pilot's going to Sicily."

36:00 He said "And I'm not coming back. I'm a ferry pilot, I'm taking this aircraft to Sicily." He though it was a great joke to have three of us airborne. And this was the day after the big landing in Italy. Fierce fighting, too. We landed in Sicily

36:31 and Australia 3 Squadron 450 Squadron were there. And I went up to 3 Squadron and I said to the blokes "We're in a bit of trouble. This idiot brought us over here, telling us we were going to go for a flip with him. He told us we were going to Sicily and not coming back. So what do we do now?" He said "Well, you're in big trouble. We've just had the big landing in the south of Italy…" What was the name of the landing, I can't remember the name for the life of me.

37:01 There were thousands of Yanks in this landing..

So the problem is that they think you've maybe gone AWL?

He said "Well, we're a fighter squadron, we can't take you back." I said "I know that." 450 Squadron was a fighter squadron too, and they were the only two Australian squadrons on Sicily. So I said "Go and see the Yanks next door." So we walked about a mile down to the Yankee place, and the staff sergeant in the tent looked at me and said

37:32 "What's the matter." I said "There's nothing the matter, we just want to get back to North Africa." "Goddammit man!" he said. "There's a war on around the corner. VIPs [Very Important Persons] only." I said "We're VIPs." "No way," he said. So I thought 'Gee, what are we going to do now?' Because the Yanks were the only ones that had any aircraft going back to North Africa. So I waited for about half an hour and we walked down a little bit and there was a fellow

38:00 in a tent on the radio. He had his headphones on and he was talking to someone, and I sot of caught his eye, and he said "Wait," to whoever he was talking to, and I said to him "Look, there are three of us and we've got a bit of a strife," and I told him what had happened. He said "Well, I'm just talking to that plane on the other side of the aerodrome, Can you see it over there?"

38:30 It looked about that big, and it was an old DC-3 and they were bringing two engines back to North Africa. I said to him "Is there any chance we can get on it?" He said "Yes, I'll talk to them." And he talked to the bloke straightaway. He said "There's three Australians coming over, don't take off until they get there." And he landed us about one hundred and twenty ks to Protville. We got back about half past six at night, and getting dark.

39:00 I tried to thumb a ride, but the truck drivers that used to go up and down were all American coons, and they wouldn't pick you up at night. And I don't blame them. They might have been in trouble anyway. So it got really dark, and I said to Harold "I think we better get off the road and sleep beside the road until morning." And that's what we did. And in the morning, early, it must have been before five o' clock,

39:31 I was out thumbing a ride and this fellow picked us up and he took us right to within three ks of where we want to go. When we got back to the camp the gesit [?] warrant officer, who was there when we left, was an Englishman. He was a flight sergeant, acting warrant officer, and his name was Sharp. Flight Sergeant Sharp, and he was sharp. But he had been posted back to England the day we got back.

40:00 Then an Australian by the name of Vern Lemming was the warrant officer. And he joined the squadron

the day we got back, and they didn't know we had been away. But somehow he looked at the list of guard duties and he found out that Norm Cagley had done my guard duty. Callum was all right, because he was a flight sergeant of the armoury. And the other bloke was an instrument maker, I don't know how he got on. Anyway, he called me to his officer the next day and he said "Where have you been?"

40:30 And I said "I've been around. I've been a bit crook." He said "No, that's not right. Cagley's done the last two duties for you." We were away for several days. I thought 'Now this is not very good. I can't tell lies because you have to have a good memory when you're a liar.' So I told him the exact truth of what had happened. He said "Well, I commend your honesty,

41:00 go back to your tent. So I went back to my tent, and I told Cagley what had happened. He called me back to his tent the next day, and he said "You know, you're the only honest man in the squadron." I said "No, I wouldn't believe that." He said "Go on, off you go." And he let me go. And we were mates from that day on. I even went to his funeral in Melbourne.

We have to change tapes now.

Tape 6

00:31 We operated from Sardinia for, it might have been four months. You weren't in any one place for very long. We went from Sardinia to Italy, to a place call Foggia, which is south-east of Naples. And it was winter time and there was six feet of snow and slush

01:00 and muck and God knows what. I'd of sooner been in the desert, I think. It gets pretty cold in a tent when there is six foot of snow about. But this time, we had fellows who could make heaters and things like that. There was a lot of old aircraft about, and you'd go in and get all this copper piping out of the pranged aircraft. And we'd have a four gallon drum, and mix 90%

01:31 oil and ten percent petrol, with a little tap at the bottom. And you turn the tap on and it drips onto a hot plate, and that heats your tent. We even had a shower. One of the blokes made a fool coil, and he put it inside one of these four gallon drums, fill it with water, and the coil was filled with petrol, which we set alight, and it heated the water, you see, and we had a hot shower.

02:00 The first one we had since we got to Egypt, three years ago. But one of the things went wrong and burnt the tent down.

Anyone injured?

No, no one injured. Just a lot of hilarity and laughing and "Jeez, look what you've done now, you bloody fool." Burnt all our personal gear, the lot.

How were you expected to cope if it wasn't for your own ingenuity?

Well, you didn't, you just took it as it comes.

02:35 We used to try all sorts of things. And when we were in North Africa, a couple of blokes and myself built an extension on our tent, so we would have a bit more room. We'd set out the size of the tent, we knew the size of the tent and I'd set it out in a square for them, and we'd dig down about two feet, and we had that much headroom. We'd fold the fly

03:00 of the tent under, and put all the dirt so as the wind wouldn't come in. And we had two or three little steps down to it. We had a lot of headroom.

So you had sand floors?

No, dirt floors. We never had any fancy floors. Afterwards. We never had beds after a while. You'd just put your ground on the ground and dig a hole for your hip to go in, otherwise you would get a sore hip. But after a while, we managed to acquire a few beds. The Germans

03:30 had left a few behind. Good scroungers, we were.

It seems you had to be.

Oh yeah, you had to be. And that's why the people from Europe and Malta, particularly, are always after something. They had to learn to live, and they were always so poor that they were scroungers. They would lift the hat off your head if they had the chance. But you couldn't blame them because, that was they way they were.

04:02 **How long were you in Foggia for?**

I can't tell you exactly from memory.

What kind of operations were you doing?

We were doing torpedo and the depth charge, all from Foggia. We moved up to Ancona, which is

halfway between

04:30 Naples and Milan, on the Aegean Sea side. We operated from there for a while, too. Then we came back to Foggia and all our tents had been lost somewhere, so they moved us into what they called the old paper mill. And that was good because it was better than living in a tent. It was a building, but it had no windows. It was still a lot better than being in a tent. We had three floors

05:00 in the old paper mill. We all lived in there until we moved on…We went from there to Gibraltar, and that was about the finish of the war.

Were you given any other kinds of personal equipment to…

No. You just had to scrounge what you got. We were good scroungers.

What about clothing?

We pinched some of that from the Yanks. I sold a shirt to the Yanks, this dirty old cotton shirt.

05:30 And you know what sort of clothing the Yanks had, it was beautiful material. And they thought it was inferior to ours, and they'd give ten dollars for your shirt and give you a shirt for nothing. So I had a couple of Yankee shirts, which were lovely material. In fact I brought one home with me I think.

Why was it so easy to persuade them that…

The Yanks are gullible, they're stupid. You know why there were so many Yanks lost in the war? Because they couldn't fight.

06:00 We had a squadron land, somewhere in Egypt, a squadron of thirty-two Mitchell bombers. Anyway, when we went out to meet them, they got out of their aircraft with sawn-off shotguns. They said "Don't come near us." I said "Look, we've been here for two and a half years. Do you want us to help you or not?"

06:30 "No," they said. "We don't want you to help us." So we said "Okay" and we got in our truck and drove away. We just wanted to help them, to get sorted out. They had beautiful equipment. They had what they called a Norden bombsight, it was beautiful bombsight, too. But it wouldn't do what they said it would do it. They reckoned they could drop a bomb down the funnel of a ship from thirty thousand feet.

07:00 I said "Oh yeah? And what moon are you on?" That was pretty well impossible. But because of this Norden bombsight, they wouldn't let us come near them. And they were supposed to do two months of navigation training in the desert, because it's pretty hard to navigate in the desert. You can just look at it like that and you can't tell if it's mountains or where you are. And they thought that two weeks was long enough for them. And they all took off. Thirty-two aircraft took off.

07:32 One landed in Turkey, and they never heard of the other thirty. I don't know where they got. We never heard of them anymore. We know that one landed in Turkey, and that's what happened to that squadron. We don't know what happened and they were in the same 'drome as us. They wouldn't listen to what we told them.

08:01 They just got lost somewhere because they couldn't navigate. They'd flown straight from America there, and they thought because they could navigate from America to Africa, they could navigate all around the desert and they couldn't. And we don't know what happened to them. We know one landed in Turkey, and that was a long way from where they wanted to go. How the hell he got to Turkey I will never know.

08:33 We never heard of the other thirty aircraft. Now what a waste of men, and aircraft as well. Now what would that have cost? The aircraft were worth about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars each at that time.

Des, I'm wondering what the major differences were between working in the desert conditions that you described to the

09:00 **minus zero degrees with all the snow and slush?**

There was a hell of a lot of difference. First of all it was very cold. The aircraft worked better in the cold. There wasn't as much trouble with the motors. The airframes weren't affected. The hydraulics were a little bit different. The oil tended to freeze a bit in the hydraulic systems. It was a lot better working in the cold, than it was working in the desert.

09:31 The desert was a hell of a place, believe me.

What was the main maintenance that you had to perform on the Wellington?

We had to change undercarriages and all that sort of thing. Sometimes taking a wing or a main plane. Change a wing if it has been shot up. Change ailerons and rudders and elevators.

10:03 We had to change all the hydraulic system. There was rows and rows of pipes, about half an inch diameter, right along the side of the aircraft, which operated everything. And in the port motor was a compressor and if the compressor wasn't working, you had to re-bleed all the hydraulics system. It

meant that if you didn't do that,

10:30 that when they took off they couldn't lift their undercarriage up. Sometimes they couldn't get it down, and it was pretty hard going for them. It was hard going for us, too. But we had aircraft jacks which were triangular. And it had a great big cap on the top and it had a lifting point on the aircraft, underneath the wing, and we used to jack the aircraft up so the wheels were off the ground, take the wheels off and dismantle all the undercarriage,

11:00 all the aileron legs, and pull them all to pieces and refurbish them with new felts. It was a long time job. It was a week job to change an undercarriage.

How many hours would you usually change an undercarriage after?

Well, if we hadn't finished it by the time we had worked sixteen hours, someone else would come in and take it over, so I can't tell you the full length of time. It was quite a long time.

11:30 **How many hours of flying would an aircraft complete before you changed...**

Well, we used to do a forty hour inspection. Forty hours is quite a long while to fly. And that was a short inspection. Then we'd do a hundred hour inspection. Then after a hundred and fifty hours, the aircraft would go into maintenance and we'd pull the lot to pieces. We didn't always have an aircraft to pull to pieces because a lot of them were gone before we could get to a hundred and fifty hours. But we did quite a lot of special maintenance, actually. There was A Flight and B Flight,

12:00 which each had sixteen aircraft, and there was always two in maintenance. And the maintenance team worked long, long hours. We did, too, but they used to work long hours, getting aircraft changed, and changing engines, all that sort of thing.

How much does a Wellington weigh, do you know?

I couldn't tell you offhand.

12:47 **What was the cruising speed?**

The cruising speed was...At fifteen thousand feet, it was a hundred and eight miles per hour.

13:00 That was pretty fast, wasn't it? What do they cruise at these days? Seven hundred miles an hour or something? We were flapping along.

What kind of range did they have?

I can't tell in miles, but I can tell you in hours. Roughly seven and a half to eight hours.

You mentioned the Liberators before

13:30 **and you did some time working on those. How was it to maintain the Liberators compared to the Wellingtons?**

Oh, Liberators were a dream to work on. The Americans had all the toolkits, they had everything that you wanted. They had steam cleaning...We didn't have anything like that. If we wanted to wash an aircraft down, we'd get a bucket of petrol and wash it with a brush. Steamers. I'd only been on the 'drome for ten minutes and their steamers were working.

14:01 They had some marvellous equipment, but they were lousy flyers. Good pilots, but they couldn't navigate. I don't know about the rest of the crew. The gunners don't have to do very much except dodge out of the road or shoot whatever's coming at them. I've got a photo there of a Flying Fortress being shot down, actually.

Whereabouts?

14:30 That was over Monte Cassino. Monte Cassino had one road, going right up a hill. The hill was nearly a thousand feet, and there was only road going up, and the rest was all scrub and bush and everything.

15:00 And the Germans were operating out of the monastery that was at the top of the hill. And if anyone was going up the road, they were a sitting duck. They would just blow them off the road. And General Eisenhower had to get permission to bomb the monastery. And one condition, I understand, was that if they bombed the monastery they would have to rebuild it after the war, and they did that. They blasted the Germans out of the monastery, but they did a lot of damage before they got to that stage.

15:30 It took a while to negotiate whether they could bomb it or not. It had to go to Vatican City. We only learned this after the war, of course. I've got some photos of Monte Cassino there, and you've never seen a place so knocked about in all your life. It was quite a big place...

So they were photos that you took?

16:01 We were at Monte Cassino. We were at Foggia not far away. And I was test flying one day and we went over Monte Cassino. And I always had my little camera tucked under my arm. You weren't supposed to carry a camera.

What would have happened if you had been detected...

Oh, probably put in the jug and dishonourably discharged or something. You took risks.

16:30 If you didn't take risks, you didn't get anywhere.

Did you keep a diary?

No. I should have.

I believe you couldn't keep a diary, either?

I should have kept one, I could have. I knew one fellow that did. He had a beautiful diary. I went to his funeral about three months ago, here. I went to the Veterans' Hospital down the road here. Hollywood Hospital.

17:00 I went to Hollywood to see him. I paid him a visit every day for about a fortnight, and he died just before I saw him the next time. But he had a good diary.

What was he doing in 458 Squadron?

He was an instrument maker. And when he joined the Air force, he told them he was an instrument maker, but he didn't say he was a musical instrument maker. And there's a lot of difference between aircraft instruments and musical instruments.

17:30 As you'd well imagine. But he was a good instrument maker, anyway.

He must have been a fast learner?

Yes. He had to do a course, of course, the same as everyone. When you joined the Air force, you had to do a course of whatever you were in, unless you go in as an AGH, which is an Aircraft General Hand, and that's virtually a labourer. That's Group Five, I think. They don't get any promotion. They just stay where they are all the time.

18:00 **When did you move down to Gibraltar?**

I think it was...1945, might have been January '45, and I actually flew an aircraft when we took off. My favourite pilot was one of our blokes, and I used to get on very well with him. And most of the ground crew

18:30 went by aircraft to North Africa, then they caught a ship to Gibraltar. But my good mate requested that I fly in the aircraft with them to Gibraltar. And when we got airborne, he said "Come on, up in the seat." And he let me fly the old Wimpy, nearly all the way to Gibraltar. But they're easy to fly. They fly themselves once they're airborne.

19:00 The hardest part is landing.

I don't suppose he allowed you to try and land?

Oh, no. When you look down at the 'drome when you're about fifteen thousand feet and the aerodrome looks about that long, you think 'Jeez, I don't know how they're going to get this down.' But that was their job and they did it. Very short runways at Gibraltar. As a matter of fact, they had a concrete ramp that went right down into the ocean, on the Atlantic side. So, if they

19:30 missed their landing spot, they would go down the ramp and go into the ocean. We used to take the tractor and a big towbar, about sixty feet long, and we'd hook it onto the tail of the aircraft and drag it back out of the water.

Did the salt water do much damage?

Well, it used to affect the undercarriages. But once they got into the water, the water would stop them very quickly. They're not going very fast anyway. They'd just get to the end of their run and

20:00 they just go down this ramp and the wings are still above the water. So the undercarriage used to cop it. We didn't have many cases like that. We had about three or four in the time we were there. But it was getting towards the end of the war when we were there. And we played up a bit there, because we hadn't had any fruit for four years or something. I was so sick. I ate a full pineapple and about four pound of cherries. I was sick, my God I was sick.

20:31 I vomited all over the place. But I wasn't the only one. We hadn't had any real food for four years. It was quite a long time when you think about it.

So for those four years, what kind of food had you lived on?

We'd lived on bully beef and these sawdust sausages and these powdered egg stuff.

No biscuits?

Well, you couldn't eat the dog biscuits. In fact, I think our squadron invented the Frisbee.

21:00 We used to get dog biscuits, they were about nine inches square and they were three quarters of an inch thick. And you couldn't bite them, it was like biting a bit of wood. They were supposed to be soaked in water for twenty four hours. Well, you know how much water we had. You couldn't bite them. So we used to go out behind our tents after we'd come back from the 'drome and we'd throw these things and they'd soar through the air. I got hit in the neck with one.

21:31 I think we invented the Frisbee.

What operations were you flying out of Gibraltar?

One of our pilots by the name of Jack Ellis, Captain Ellis. He flew with a lot of airways in Europe and he flew for Ansett. He torpedoed the last U-boat that was torpedoed in the Atlantic.

22:00 And he was going to get a good recommendation for it, except when the U-boat was halfway in, the British Navy dragged in, because they've got a big depot at Gibraltar and they took charge of it, and Jack got no mention of it at all, even though he was the one that captured the U-Boat. He was a great bloke.

22:36 **So what else was at the airstrip in Gibraltar?**

Well, Gibraltar was a pretty good set-up. They had beautiful living quarters. They were Nissen huts but they were all lined and they were beautifully done out. And the ground staff were equal to the aircrew in their huts and things.

23:00 Of course the Rock of Gibraltar was all hollow underneath, where the hospital and a lot of facilities were built into the Rock. And we weren't bombed at all there, because the war was pretty well finished. We had a great big water tank about as square as this room, and as about as deep as that picture rail there, and it was full of water.

23:30 The fellows used to climb up on it and swim in it. And this night they had a concert party from England. Cecily Cortnage was in the party. She was a very good comedienne, and she was fond of a drop of whiskey, and they got her rotten drunk in the

24:00 officer's mess and they threw her in this static water tank. But the worst of it was she had this beautiful frock on, to go to the concert party. And she was a real whiz, beautiful voice. Anyway, one of the fellows decided to put in one of the dye markers. If you go down into the drink, they've got a big dye bottle that melts in the water, and all this

24:30 yellow dye comes out. And it goes for an area of about a hundred yards diameter and that's a good marker if you're in the water. And they put one of these in the water tank and they threw her in the water tank. She came out and she was yellow, her hair was yellow. She went in fully dressed. She didn't take any notice, she was drunk. She'd been

25:00 on the whiskey. And that was one of the last things we saw at Gibraltar. We had a great thing at Gibraltar. It's a walled city, the old city of Gibraltar, and the walls were about four feet thick, and they had these huge gates. And from the Year Dot,

25:31 they've had this Ceremony of the Keys, and the British Army always do it, and they do it spectacularly. The guards, you know, the drill was to perfection. And they had this every evening. They unlock the gates and it's called the Ceremony of the Keys, and they invited the Australians to do it, and I was one of the guards of the keys, and we did this ceremony, but we trained for a long time to do it. Because we

26:00 had forgotten about marching. I loved my rifle drill and things, so they made me a guard of the keys, and I trained the other two blokes to be guards. We did this Ceremony of the Keys, and we're the only ones who have ever done it in all those hundreds of years. The British Army always did it, and they still do it.

So what happens during that ceremony?

I can't tell you the exact thing because I've forgotten a lot about it.

26:33 There are two squads, like two battalions, and they march in and they come to order and they present arms and everything, and the big boss comes by. And the guards do the same thing. There are three guards and the staff sergeant that carries the keys, the three guards are behind him to guard the keys you see. Then the

27:00 disip warrant officer, this is the one Ernie Lemming I was telling you about who came to Protville the day we got back. Well, he was the DWO and we did this ceremony pretty well. We got a good write up.

Where did you get the write up?

Some of the local papers. It even got back to Australia I understand.

So did you get to know the local people of Malta very well?

Not very well.

27:30 Most of the people in Malta came from Spain. They used to come across the border to work in Malta, and you couldn't get to know them because they all spoke Spanish, you see. The day the war finished in Europe was a great day for us. We just went made. And Gibraltar went a bit mad, too. They

28:00 lined the streets with all these flags, and I was looking madly for the Australian flag, and all of a sudden I spotted one. It was up about a story, and I went up the damn pipe and I got this flag. I've still got it. It's a red ensign, so that's the navy flag, I think. That was in May, '45,

28:30 and I've still got the flag.

Had the civilians put those flags out?

I don't know who put those flags out. I've got the idea that the navy might have decorated the streets with them, but I don't know who did it actually. There was only one Australian flag, but I got it.

What other kind of celebrations were there that day?

I can't remember. I know that everyone was drinking fairly heavily. I didn't, of course.

29:00 I was a non-drinker. I was barred from drinking because…what did they say? I've got a repulsive gland, so if I have one glass of beer I will be blind drunk for twenty minutes then I'm sober again. But I'm not allowed to drink because my face swells up. And I'm not allowed to drink now because of the medication I take, but I wouldn't drink anyway. But I am allowed to have a glass of red wine every now and then. But that's all.

29:30 **Did you ever experiment with drinking, when you were younger?**

Yep. Once. We were at Heliopolis near Cairo. Heliopolis was the Claremont of Cairo and we were there for a little while. And the boys got me a bottle of Canadian beer and they said "C'mon Singey, have a drink." I said "No." "Come on, you're stupid. Why don't you have a drink. Everyone has a drink." I said "No."

30:00 Anyway, it finished up they convinced me to have a glass of beer. I was drunk for twenty five minutes, and they still talk about it. How Singey gets drunk and gets sober in twenty minutes.

That's interesting. I've never heard of that before.

Neither have I. Some of them have got a photograph of me. I'm laying on the ground with my overalls on and a beret, and they're

30:30 pulling me along the ground because I couldn't stand up. One glass of beer, mind you. It's ridiculous, isn't it? A big bloke like me getting drunk on a glass of beer.

So I can imagine the rest of the blokes in the squadron had quite a few drinks that day, what kind of mischief did they get up to?

I think they were too drunk to do anything, really. A few of them went in the pool, I know that.

31:00 The officers were all in the pool. They were in uniforms and all, and they just went in the pool. But I went for a walk. I went up the Rock of Gibraltar, to see the monkeys. And they're really there and they're very tame. I can't tell you how many are there, but they reckon if the monkeys every leave the Rock, Britain will lose Gibraltar.

31:34 I don't know whether it's a myth because they replace the monkeys every now and then to make sure they're always there. But they're quite tame. They will take food from you and they will hold your hand and they will scratch your shirt, they'll touch your face. It's frightening sometimes, you don't know how far they are going to go, you see. But they're not big monkeys.

32:00 **It sounds like an interesting way to reflect on the war ending while everyone else gets drunk…**

Yeah, well I thought it was…I was at Gibraltar and I had heard about the monkeys on the Rock and some of the blokes had already been up there. It takes you an hour from where we were to go around and up on the Rock and come back again. I thought 'Well, that will be an hour well spent.' It took me more than an hour, I was away for about three hours.

32:31 **How did you occupy yourself while your mates were getting drink throughout your service?**

Well, there was another fellow by the name of Noel Walter. He was the same as me. He didn't drink at all. He didn't get affected like I did from one glass of beer. He didn't drink anyway. As a matter of fact, at the last reunion in Orange, that we had last April, May, Noel and I roomed together. We talked

33:00 about the old times. We really chewed the fat for a long time. He didn't go to Gibraltar, he left the squadron before…He was a lot older than me and he's still going. I'm nearly 84, so Noel must be 89 by now, I would say. But he was a great bloke, a really good bloke. He was an engine fitter. He was a really good bloke on the squadron.

It must have been great to have

33:30 **his companionship with so many drinkers…**

Well, I didn't see him much in the squadron, actually, because we were in different areas. We'd run across one another now and then. But it didn't affect me, and the blokes knew I didn't drink. They didn't worry about it. But they always worried about it when there was any beer ration. My tent mate, Norm Cugley, he'd come to me and he'd say

34:00 "Hey Singey, will you let me have your beer?" "Yeah, Norm, you can have it, but you can't have it until I give it to you. I'm not going to just let you go and take it. When you really want a drink, I will let you have a drink. But you're not going to have a dozen bottles all at once and make a glutton of yourself." And he used to come to me and say "Come on, Singey, I'm dying for a drink." I said "Yeah, well go away for a week and come back and I might give you a bottle." I used to bury it in the sand and he didn't know. But it was never cold beer.

34:31 I don't know how they drank it, but they'd drink anything. They would. In North Africa they had a real good go, because there's no beer there, but there was a lot of wine. I took some of the blokes down to the winery on my motorbike. I got caught by the group captain. There was four drunks and me on a motorbike. And the group captain pulled up in the car and he said "Where are you from?" I said "Mackenzie's Air force." He said " You know Mackenzie won't

35:00 let me do anything, but get off the bloody road!" And he was a group captain. That's a pretty high rank in the Air force. And he said "Get off the bloody road! Don't come back!" Two blokes on the back, and two sitting on the front. One was back to front. Cugs was one of them, I think. I took them down to the winery and they all got drunk. But they did a silly thing…and the Western Australians were the worst, too.

35:30 They emptied out a jerry can of petrol, and without washing it out, they would go down and fill it up with wine down at the winery and drink it. God, they must have been sick.…Well they were.

You must have thought they were a silly bunch, getting drunk?

Yeah, yeah. I couldn't see any sense in it myself, but they used to like it.

Did you enjoy yourself, or have a good time, just the same?

Of course I did.

36:01 As a matter of fact, Harry Jenkins the medical orderly, and Noel Walter and myself, we were as thick as thieves. We used to enjoy ourselves, the way we wanted to. I used to take them riding on my motorbike. In fact I had a motorbike and sidecar. And the sidecar, when I got it, had a machine gun mounted on it.

Was it something that you found?

The Germans left all their transport

36:30 when they were bushed off Cape Bon, in North Africa. They left all their transport because they had no ships to take it away. They had just enough room to get out themselves. There were an awful lot of them.

That must have been like shopping?

It was better than shopping. You just walked in and took your choice. One of my mates had a Peugeot motorbike, and I never knew they made motorbikes. I knew the cars were there. In fact, I've got a Peugeot now, but I didn't know they made motorbikes.

37:02 They made cycles, too. One of our fellows had a French car. It was a big one, like a Packard. A beautiful car. A French Rolls Royce, equivalent to a Rolls Royce. Delage. French Delage. Beautiful car.

37:30 Great big eight cylinder car. That must have been one of the generals or something that had that car. The bloke that drove it around, one of our blokes who got it, he was about six foot four anyway, he was a big bloke. Old Lofty used to drive this thing around, and he used to wear a German pith helmet. But we got in trouble from the CO for having too many cars and motorbikes.

38:00 The fellow who spoiled it was an aircrew bloke. He and his mate went out and they came back into the camp in this troop carrier. It had the wheels on the front to steer it, but the rest of it was klee track, and it carried about forty blokes, great big seats across it. And he drove it into the camp blind drunk and ran through a tent. Gee, did the CO go crook about that. He was a great bloke, Mackenzie.

38:30 **It sounds like you blokes were out there running amok with all these toys that you came across….**

Well, when you get these sort of things happen, they only happen once in a lifetime. How often would you hear of blokes picking up any type of motorbike or car they wanted? Trucks, klee tracks, troop carriers, the whole lot. And yet one of our blokes, we had a swimming contest against the Yanks and we beat them, and that was

39:00 at Algiers, we went into Algiers, and when they came back one bloke came back in Eisenhower's Jeep. Now how the hell he got it, I don’t know, because Eisenhower had a chauffeur and the chauffeur must

have left the Jeep at some time, and our bloke jumped into straight away. And you should have heard Mackenzie hit the roof. It had four stars on it. "Get that bloody thing out of here!" And he also had

39:30 a monkey. He stole a monkey that the Yanks used to have. And we had him on Squadron for quite a long time.

What was his name?

I don't know. I didn't call him anything except some pretty rotten names, because he attacked me. I was working inside an aircraft one day, and I had a taken a side panel off, where the side guns used to shoot from, in an emergency, we didn't often use side guns. And I took this panel off…it must have been too hot in the aircraft or something. And the fellow who had the monkey

40:00 was the fellow who drove the oil bowser, and he would come around to every aircraft and deliver the oil that was needed for that particular engine, or whatever, and he always had the monkey with him. And this day, he knew I was in the aircraft, and he put the flaming monkey in, and the monkey chased me up and down the aircraft. I got my boot into him. It was a bit rotten of me to do it, but I couldn't defend myself in any way against

40:30 the monkey. It used to bite you on the hand. It would just grab you and it would bite. And a monkey's got pretty long teeth, and it used to hurt. Anyway, I shut him out the door in the finish. Because where you get in the aircraft was underneath in the front, the door opens. The door was always open unless you lock it shut. I shot the monkey out there and shut the door.

41:04 But old Digger, he was a cow of a thing. The Italians spoiled him. He was really tame when he came there, and we had seven or eight Italian prisoners that used to work around the airfield and tidy up the road and everything, and Lemming, the DWO, you would have thought he was an Italian half the time. He used to go around with them and he'd have a shovel on his shoulder. DWO, mind you. And they'd make the roads,

41:30 if they had been washed away by a flood or whatever. These Italians, they poked the shovel at the monkey. They used to tie him up outside the mess tent. And he had a long chain. And this day, this Italian, was poking his shovel at the monkey and he took a running jump at this Italian, and the chain broke, and he landed on his chest. And you should have heard him scream. You could hear him in Belgium, I reckon.

Tape 7

00:32 **You were just talking, Des, about the Italian POWS. What did you actually think of these blokes?**

They were good blokes. I liked the Italians. In fact, when we were at Foggia, the little kids used to come around, and you'd pick them up and talk to them, and they couldn't understand what you were saying, and you couldn't understand what they were saying, but they knew that you liked them, because there was a little bit of affection there. The poor little kids, they couldn't help it.

01:01 The Italians didn't want to fight in the war. In fact, I know that one AIF corporal in the desert, I think it was near Tobruk somewhere, he brought in two hundred prisoners on his own. So that's a good indication that they didn't want to fight too much.

What about the Arabs? Did you have much contact with them?

We had a lot of trouble with the Arabs.

What would happen?

01:31 Are we going back to Egypt? We had thirty two vehicles in the squadron, and we used to park them in a square, like that. And we'd put four blokes on guard. He'd walk that way, and that bloke would walk this way, they'd reverse it. Yet in the morning we had six trucks without wheels on them.

02:00 The Arabs had got in during the night. They had put rocks under the trucks, then dug the sand away and stolen the wheels off the trucks. Now I don't know what they would have done with them, because they didn't have any trucks. They must have sold them to someone. But that's how quickly they operated. We had four guards on it, and we still lost the wheels off the trucks. But if we drove a truck through Cairo, we always had to have someone on the back. Because

02:30 they would hop on the back of the truck and throw everything out. You didn't have someone in the truck to stop them, that's what they would do.

So you didn't really have any positive experiences?

We had funny experiences in Cairo. We wanted to go and see the pyramids, which we did in the finish,

03:01 but they had what they called a garry. Do you know what a garry is? It's a horse drawn vehicle, and it

only seats two people. And sometimes there was a fold down seat, so they could sit four people, but the two people in the front are facing backwards to the horses, you see, facing one another in the carriage. We picked on this bloke and asked him would he take us. And the two fellows with me were bigger than me, and it

03:30 was only a two seat carriage. It was a garry of course and it had two horses. And we said "Look, why won't you take us?" He said "Too big, too big. The horses wouldn't pull us." I said "C'mon…" Anyway, we happened to pull up right where….you know the fez they wear? This beautiful red fez with this thing on it, a silky fez. They used to have a brass heater,

04:01 where they'd press their fez. They'd put the fez in it and turn this handle down and push a button and the heat would press the fez. So he wouldn't take us in the garry, so we got hold of his night shirt and we put it on the fez and tightened it, and left him screaming there, while we unharnessed the horses and put them facing in. I don't know he got out. Anyway, we got a taxi out to the pyramids.

04:33 That was a dreadful thing to do, wasn't it? Well, Lofty, the bloke that got the big French motorcar, he was one of the blokes, and he was a lot bigger than me. He was about six foot six. He wouldn't take us in his Gary so we thought 'Blow you.'

What did you think of the pyramids when you got there?

05:01 Well, they were an absolute marvel. There is no way to tell how they actually built those pyramids, because the stones they built them out of were about that high and about eight or ten feet long. And they must have weighed four or five tons each. How they built those pyramids? Everyone is still guessing, I think. They weren't silly in those days. They were beautiful things. You can go inside the pyramids, there are tunnels right through.

05:30 And I think that's where they discovered Tutankhamun's burial place. I climbed the pyramids.

Did you see any of that area?

The Sphinx? I got photos there of us

06:00 on the Sphinx, and underneath the pyramids.

Because that's pretty fascinating, the architecture…

Oh yeah, my word. They were very clever engineers, however they did it. There are a lot of unsolved mysteries there. It is a place that, to me, it sort of attracts you. You're looking for things that are new, they're not new,

06:30 they're thousands of years old. It was a fascinating place to me.

Did it give you more of an appreciation of that area of the country?

Yes.

Because you had seen a lot of desert, a lot of sand, a lot of flies.

We had been to they pyramids before we went up the Blue. The Blue was in the desert. They'd send us 'Up the Blue.'

So you got to see the good part before you had to suffer the ugly?

Oh yes.

07:00 When we went Up the Blue, we were there for a long time. We just kept going. We never went back to Cairo, we just kept going, right up to North Africa.

How did you keep the morale up when it's just day after day…

It's pretty hard. You had some down days, you know. I had lots of down days. I used to think of my Mum, and all that sort of thing. In fact, I used to cry myself to sleep some nights. I wouldn't tell anybody. It was pretty hard going sometimes.

07:30 But I was only 21, you know. And I was 26 when I came home. It was a long haul. But we all did it. No feathers in your cap, it was just something that happened. I was fortunate enough to get a trip to London out of it. Be it, sixty odd years on. It was only because I was fit and healthy, I think.

08:00 **What happened to your brother by the way? The crack shot who ended up the AIF?**

He died of cancer. He smoked himself to death. And his wife. They both died within a month of one another. She died first, and he was so devoted to her, I think he died of a broken heart more than anything. They had been married for 56 year. I had been married for 54 years when Mavis died.

08:30 **Did he end up serving in North Africa as well?**

No, he didn't leave Australia. As a matter of fact, it was funny. I came home from Laverton when I first joined the air force, and he was a regimental sergeant major. And I had a mate, in those days, by the

name of Hutchinson. We both had motorbikes. I sold my motorbike and Hutchie kept his. So we came home on the train from Laverton to Sunshine and I had my jacket on.

09:00 And I heard this voice "That man! Do up your jacket!" And I thought, I know that voice, that was my brother, and I just waved. Hutchie said "You can't wave to him, he's a big officer." I said "Oh yeah? Don't worry about him. I'll smack under the ear if he comes near me." He said "You won't! You'll be put in jail for life." I said "Don't worry, Hutch. That's my brother." He only did it to devil me.

09:30 "That man! Do up your jacket!" He also said to me "We'll have the war won before you do your jacket up." I said "Oh yeah?" And he never left Australia. He was the one letter I got, during the war, and I was in Malta at the time, and it must have been just after the air-raid in Darwin, because he did get up that far somewhere. I never actually know where. And he wrote me this letter,

10:00 he used to call me Henry, he said "We've just had an air-raid, Henry. You've got no idea what it's like." This poor fellow. So I didn't write back. I waited until I got home, and I showed him the letter that he had written to me. And he said "Isn't that silly?" I said "Well, sort of." I said "You'd never been in an air-raid, had you?" He said "No, I hadn't." But it was pretty bad, that air-raid up there. There was a lot of people killed.

10:31 **What did your brother have to say about the air-raids up there?**

He never said anything, actually. We never talked about the war to one another.

That's interesting. Why do you think that was?

I don't know. I didn't ask him any questions, and he didn't ask me any questions. I'd have answered him, if he wanted to talk about it. But I figured, he didn't want to know. And he figured that I didn't want to know.

11:00 It worked out that way. But we did talk about it later on.

What sort of relationship did you have with the pilots who were in your squadron?

The pilots. I had two aircraft in my command, and Jim Whittam was a real beaut bloke, a real corker bloke. As a matter of fact, at the last reunion we had in Orange, he wrote a little note.

11:30 He's a great man on boats and sailing. He wrote a little note "Introducing Mick Singe to…." Whoever it is from the sailing squadron here, and I haven't been to see him yet. I've been too busy doing other things. I'll go around.

That's a really lovely thing to do.

12:02 He's the bloke that let me fly between Foggia and Gibraltar.

Some fellows we've talked to have said the pilots could be a bit up themselves?

Oh, no, not this bloke. We didn't have that. Fighter pilots were. Fighter pilots were definitely that way. Yeah, but not bomber pilots, because they had crew to think about. They weren't their own boss. They were the boss the aircraft, and they relied on the navigator and

12:31 the radio operator, mainly. The gunners, of course, had their own job to do. It was just good team work. The fighter pilots would have had no one to argue with. They had their own lives in their own hands and they thought they were just it, some of them. It wasn't all of them, mind you, it was just sprinkling of them.

Did you get to meet many of those?

I met a few of them, yes. I met Bluey Truscott once.

13:01 He was a Melbourne footballer, and they thought he was hitting a bit, because he played football for Melbourne. And he was a fighter pilot and they reckoned he was hitting a bit. But he wasn't any different to anyone else. He wasn't better than anyone else. This New Zealand bloke, he was a good fighter pilot, I think he had thirty-two kills in the first six months of the war.

13:32 But Bluey Truscott? He was just a fighter pilot and that was it. But because he played football for Melbourne, they thought he was the whole air force. But I reckon Alec Barrisey was a pretty good bloke. He was the one who walked back from the desert, from over behind the lines. And gee, they nearly died, too.

That sounds like an enormous adventure….

It would have been, yes. They got highly commended for it.

14:02 **You would want to be.**

I would think so. They were dying for food and water. When you drink the water out of the radiator of a truck that has been left in the desert, it wouldn't be too hot, would it?

Another question I wanted to ask you : When the squadron switched to anti-submarine

operations,

14:30 **off Algeria, how busy was that time for you on the ground?**

Oh, just about the same. We did all the same work. They used to go and do their operations, and what they got shot up, we would fix it. It was mainly the same. I suppose the worst time for an aircraft being damaged was when we were in England for the first twelve months. Because that was early in the war and we got knocked about a fair bit by the Germans then.

15:00 But we had a lot of damage to the aircraft along the way.

If you are on anti-submarine patrol, the chances of getting shot up in your Wellington are slim, from where I sit. Am I wrong?

No. Of course the ground crew used to do a lot of flying. You'd do the aircraft and you'd say to the pilot "We fixed this and we fixed something else. And there was a bit of doubt about the undercarriage, but it's all right now."

15:30 And he'd say "Will you test fly with me?" And if you wouldn't test fly with him, he knew that there might have been something wrong. So I never refused a test flight. I've flown a lot of hours, but I never had a log book.

That's interesting. So they were double-checking to make sure?

Yes. Everyone on the ground staff has flown a lot of hours.

Was there any time that you maybe got it wrong?

16:00 No, I never had it wrong. Not with my aircraft. If I had it wrong I wouldn't be here, would I? No I was always very particular. I always remember my Dad. He always said "If you're going to do a job, then do it thoroughly." And he was the sort of fellow that would say "Have you finished your job?" "Yes." "Which bit have you done?"

16:30 "Okay, if you clean up and you sweep up and make it all tidy, then you can go." And that was after knocking off time.

It was pretty good advice though...

Yes, it was good advice.

So when you found out that the war had ended, you were on Gibraltar. Was there any sort of a celebration that happened because the war was over?

We didn't have a squadron celebration. The officers did their bit, and I didn't do very much and neither did the ground crew.

17:00 We just went into the township, which was about a mile away. We walked in, and they'd had a few drinks and they would sit and listen to the people playing the music, in whatever they went in. There were cafes and things, and they all had music. I think most of the restaurants and cafes had music. And you didn't have to have a meal, you could just go in and listen to the music. It was quite good. But you did that in Naples as well, in the palace in Naples.

17:34 There was a royal palace in Naples, and we had entry to the palace. This was during the war, with Italy, yeah.

So you had automatic entrance into palaces?

It wasn't automatic, we just went there. There was nothing automatic about it. We'd just go in and that was it. Magnificent palace, big palace. Hundreds of room and big music rooms.

18:04 In fact, I think the YMCA had part of it, and you could get a meal there. But I used to sit there and listen to all the Italian classical music. I loved it, it was good. I spent a lot of time at the palace, actually.

So this was a place that a lot of fellows would go to relax?

Yes. But we didn't have a lot of time at Naples. We were

18:30 on route to some other place when we got to Naples. We had enough time to go up to Mount Vesuvius and have a look up there. In fact, the last time Vesuvius erupted was while were in Italy. 1944, I think. Gee, that caused us a lot trouble, too.

Yeah? What happened there?

Well, all the ash came out and landed on all the trucks and the aircraft. There was ash that thick, all over the

19:00 aircraft, and you could hardly breathe because of the sulphur. I had forgotten all about that. Anzio Beachhead, that's what I was trying to think of when we flew over the Sicily. The Anzio beach landings were on, and that's where we got caught at Sicily.

Bad timing. So how did you manage to clean all this ash up?

Well, that was something that had to be done. We all worked at it. I think

19:30 we lost three aircraft.

Because it couldn't deal with the ash?

Well, no. The wings just broke. Unrepairable. When you take a wing off, you can place it again, but when it breaks, with so much weight on it…And yet, I've got photos of the full squadron on the aircraft, so it must have been heavier than that to break the wing.

You wouldn't want to fly around it?

20:00 There were big rocks in it as well you know. It's not just ash. They were coming out of the sky and they were worse than bombing raids. Being hit with rocks and things falling out of the sky.

So how did you actually discover this situation? Did you see it ahead of you, or…

It just blew up. A volcano doesn't say "At three o' clock in the morning I will be blowing up. So watch out for yourself." We were all working and these darn rocks used to fall out of the sky.

20:30 When you looked up, there was Vesuvius erupting, what, about thirty miles away. We didn't know what to do. What would you do? I just got onto the wing of the aircraft, until the truck arrived. We hopped in the truck. But when we got back to where we living at this paper mill, it was still covered in ash and stuff.

21:00 **So everything around you would have been black?**

Yeah, I can't really remember how long it lasted for. But when it spewed out, it threw it so high in the air that it went for miles around. I've been in everything. There's no good half-doing it, do it properly.

21:31 **So did you go and have a look at Pompeii?**

Yeah.

What did you think of that?

Pretty rude. Did you see that?

Yes I have. So I know what you're talking about…

The double things.

They certainly lived interesting lives.

Yeah they were, weren't they? They had the special one in the cupboard, did you see that? I opened the cupboard and there it was.

There are all kinds of discoveries there. I couldn't believe, though, how big Pompeii was.

22:00 **That's what stunned me. But also the fact that they had all this incredible plumbing going on. We think that those societies were pretty primitive societies, but it doesn't seem that there was anything primitive about it.**

The thing that worried me more in Italy, particularly the day we went up to Vesuvius, we went past this little church, and I said to my mate, "We'll go and have a look at this church." And it was absolutely chock-a-block, everything was solid gold. Beautiful. Yet out in the darned streets the people are laying there begging for food. And there was

22:30 millions and millions worth of gold in the churches. And yet those people were still begging for food in the street. That used to upset me.

That's world-wide situation, isn't it? The church holds the money and the power, and people just follow.

Terrible.

23:00 **So you've had a bit of a relax and a celebration now you've found out the war was over, so what happened for you next?**

We did the Ceremony of the Keys, after that. We trained for a good while to do the Ceremony of the Keys. Then we were shipped back to England, on the Stratheden.

Now I hope the ship is doing a few better things for you than the last few.

Well, the ship has lights on them, so that was good. And we went back to Brighton.

23:30 **I hate to ask, but what were the conditions like on the ship?**

They were on the previous two ships we were on. I really can't remember, but know it was good. And we came home on the Stratheden as well. When we went to England, we landed at Liverpool.

24:00 I suppose it was Liverpool. Anyway, we were there for a quite a while because they brought all the POWs home first, and rightly so. And we were just wandering around doing nothing, virtually. But we were stationed at Brighton. And later on, when we were for a long time, the hotel that Maggie Thatcher was in that was blown up? That's the hotel we stayed in, straight after the war.

24:30 I was in charge of the fire pickets, the night the Japanese war finished. And we all went down to the pier and stacked up the all the seats land lit a big bonfire. I was in charge of the fire. This was at Brighton. And we set this big bonfire going and we caught the train to London.

So the fire pickets, that was part of the celebration?

No, it wasn't. I was supposed to stop fires. I was a fire guard, I was

25:00 in charge of the fire picket. So we lit this big bonfire and we went back to London. And there must have been two million people outside of Buckingham Palace and right down the Mall. Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, they came out among the crowd. But they had six grenadier guards around them, and they were in the centre. You couldn't have got near them for thousands of dollars. But it was very nice to be close to them….We were

25:30 closer to her, this time, when we went back, but she wasn't Princess Margaret anymore, and she's a lot older, of course, but she's a lovely person. She spoke to us.

So basically there were thousands of people celebrating the end of the Japanese War?

Oh yes. London was really rocking.

What did you do to entertain yourself?

I couldn't do anything because there were so many people there, you could hardly move. We went from Buckingham Palace up to

26:00 Trafalgar Square, and it took us a long while to get that far, and we got to Trafalgar Square and we needed the loos. But there were no loos. They were all locked. Even the undergrounds were locked. So we gave the lions a bit of a drink, at Trafalgar Square. Yeah, well, nature has to take its course, doesn't it?

26:30 So we thought standing behind a lion would be as good as anything. I don't think anybody saw us.

When you've got to go, you've go to go?

That's right. And we weren't boys who were too frightened of anything.

After some of the experiences in the desert, I suppose you weren't particularly modest either.

No, we weren't by any means modest. Far from it.

So did you try to find

27:00 **any girls for a bit of a party?**

No. We went to Blackpool before we came home because we had to go to Liverpool to get on the ship. And we were billeted out at Blackpool, and I met a lass there. Kathleen I think it was. And I took her the dance

27:30 at the big place in Blackpool, the big dance. Have you been to Blackpool? It's a lovely place, too. And they'd sort of switched it back to what it was pre-war. They were getting back to the stage, anyway. There was a big dance hall and a beautiful band. Who was the English dance band?

28:04 But it was absolutely lovely. You could see all these couples dancing around and enjoying life once again, it was better than better. I took this girl out a couple of times, then we went back to Brighton and we were shipped home.

Were you still hanging out with your mates from your squad?

Oh yes. We all came home together.

28:30 **So how long was it from the time you arrived back in England to the time you got on the ship to come back to Australia?**

It must have been five or six weeks. Because all the POWs come home first. In that time, I had left my camera in my kitbag, and when I got back from London, someone had cut my kitbag and stolen my camera. Film and all. I lost it. That's the camera that I carried all the way with me.

29:00 I got an idea who got it, but I can't prove anything.

So on the trip back how did you pass the time?

We used to play cards. We used to upset the seamen. "Where's so and so?" "He's up the sharp end" or "He's down the blunt end." They would say "that's the foredeck" or whatever they called it. But we gambled a bit

29:30 coming home. We bet on our cards. We played pontoon. I played a lot of bridge in those days. I haven't played bridge since then I don't think. I've played poker and a few games like that. They're not classy games, like bridge. It's a lovely game, bridge.

Did you have any duties on board the ship?

No. We refused point blank

30:00 to do duties on the ship coming home, and they said "Well, we don't want you to do duties anyway. There's nothing to do." We didn't have to go on guard, we didn't have to do anything. We just lazed about for however long it took us to get home. I think it was something like five weeks, because there were no aircraft flying in those days. Not passenger aircraft. Everything was done by ship. Even after the war, the test cricket teams,

30:30 they went to England by ship.

Was there any tension between yourselves and the sailors?

No. We had a good time with the sailors when we were in Alexandria, in Egypt. We were allowed to go into the Navy Club. All Australians were welcome in the Navy Club in Egypt. When we were there, that was when the Vichy French came into the war, and we had a big blue with the Vichy French. But you couldn't

31:00 tell the Vichies from the other French, because they all dressed the same. And there was a hell of a brawl one night, and I got involved with some of the blokes there. I was staying at the YMCA and this fellow came running in, this Queensland bloke. "Quick Singey, there's a blue on! Jimmy Palmers in it." I thought 'Jimmy couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag.' He was a very nice bloke.

31:33 I thought 'Jeez, Jim's in a fight? There must be something wrong somewhere if Jim's in a fight.' So we went out and all of these Vichy French were attacking our blokes. We had a bit of work to do there.

How did it end?

Well, we dispersed them. I hit a bloke and I ran away from him. And he chased me.

32:00 I jumped up the gutter, which was about that deep, and when he came up I let him have it. Then I went back and joined the others. There's an art in fighting. You don't ever get in the middle. You walk around the outside and soon as a head comes out, you hit it. Never get in the middle. I used to learn boxing before the war.

32:30 **I didn't know that.**

I used to play junior football for Footscray, and the fellow I used to work with at Sunshine, when I first went to Harvester's, was the captain of the Footscray Football Team. A fellow by the name of Arthur Oliver. And he was a West Australian. He was a big man, about six foot five or something. He said "Why don't you come down and have a run with us?" I said "I'm not in that class, Arthur."

33:00 He said "You're only a stripping lad. You would be a good footballer." I said "Well, I play with Victor Socials in the junior league." He said "Yes, I know." I said "All right. When do you want me to come down?" He said "Come down Thursday evening, after work. Come straight down." I went down to the Footscray Football Ground, and there he was. I stripped off, and I only had my Victor Socials guernsey, and they never used to train too hard in those days. They'd run a couple of laps of the oval, and they'd have a kick to kick sort of thing.

33:31 And I think, this great big bloke, he played in the ruck for Footscray, and he came over and he knocked me rotten. And I thought 'Jeez.' So I got up and I shook myself and I started again. I got the ball and I had a couple of kicks, and he came around and he knocked me rotten again. So I got up and I went over to Arthur Oliver and I said "Who's this great idiot who keeps knocking me over?" He said "I told him to do that, to see whether you'd get up again." That was Ambrose Palmer.

34:02 He was the Australian welterweight boxing champion. He got Palmer onto me to see if I would get up again.

So that was the start of your boxing?

No. He taught me a little bit after that. I got to know him. He came over and apologised and told me that Oliver had sooled him onto me to see whether I would get up. And he showed me a few tricks about boxing. I was with him for about six to eight months, actually.

34:33 I learnt a bit about boxing.

So when you got into a brawl you knew you were going to be okay?

Yeah. "Never go in the middle, son. Always walk around the outside. As soon as a head comes out, hit it."

It sounds like pretty good advice to me. So what was it like being back in Western Australia?

35:00 Between sixes and sevens, I didn't know how I was going to be received. When we got to Port Melbourne, we had already been to Fremantle and Adelaide, then we went to Melbourne, and the rest of the blokes, of course, went onto Sydney after the rest of us got off. My Dad and my brother were there to meet me. And one of these two sons of my stepmother was there to meet me. And I really didn't know him.

35:30 I had been to school with him, but I hadn't seen him for a long time. But I knew that he was in the world of the living. They put us onto these big semitrailers, with seats on them, so we could drive through Melbourne. So the crowds could cheer us…

This was straight off the ship?

Hmm. They drove us all through Melbourne. Through Spencer Street and along Bourke Street and down Swanson Street and out to the Melbourne Cricket Ground,

36:00 which is out in East Melbourne. That's where all our gear was when we got there.

How many of you were put on parade?

I think there was about thirty people on the truck that I was on, but there was about eight semi-trailers. A full shipload of Melbourne people. I think there was about eight or nine big semi-trailers. And we had

36:30 swastikas and German helmets and all sorts of things, and we're waving to the crowd and they were cheering their heads off. I didn't take much notice of it anyway because I wanted to get home.

Did you have any souvenirs by the way?

I brought home a few souvenirs. I've still got a swastika armband. I don't show it to anybody, though.

How did you get hold of it?

Well, that's what I don't tell people. And I

37:00 loaned it to the East Melbourne RSL [Returned & Services League] for a while. They were going to put in the showcase there. But they didn't put it in the showcase, and before I came over here I asked if I could have it back, and they said "Yes, they would." But I haven't got it yet, but I will go and get it when I go to Melbourne next time. I've been back twice, since I've been here. Some of the boys wanted to see my photos and hear about my trip to London, so I went back to talk them about that.

37:32 **There was a lot of souveniring that went on…**

Well, I had a beautiful German belt with a big square buckled with the swastika on it. I think I gave it to the one of the schoolboys and he never gave it back to me. He took it for show and tell, and I forgot all about it. And by the time I remembered it, I was somewhere else, so I didn't get it back.

38:01 I had an Italian bayonet, I brought that home with me. I don't know where that went. No idea. I've still got an Italian bullet and I've still got part of a German Me 109 fighter plane engine. I've got a part of a tappet from the engine.

That's an interesting thing to souvenir. Why is that special?

Oh well, it was shot down near us.

38:30 It was giving us a bit of curry, and it happened to be shot down by one of the Spitfires. The pilot was killed. The next day I went out and fossicked around the engine. I got this part of a tappet, just something small to bring home. I got a couple of other little souvenir things.

39:00 **Considering what you were doing, tinkering away on aeroplanes, no wonder you find that kind of thing so fascinating.**

I've kept it. I've still got it out there on the bench somewhere.

Did it come as a surprise to you that you were literally marched straight into this parade, with all these people cheering you?

Well, it didn't fuss me because we didn't have to march.

39:30 We were on a truck and the truck just kept going, and that was good. They were just flat-top semi trailers, and they were only going slowly. They didn't go fast enough to tip you off. The crowds were cheering and we were waving to them. It was just another thing for me, I thought, that's part of the act. And when I got to Showgrounds, my Dad and my brother were there, and this other fellow was there with them.

40:00 And they gave us a special car to take me home to Surry Hills, which is about nine miles out of

Melbourne. I had my big deep sea kit bag, and another kit bag, with a lot of rubbish in it. Stuff I had gathered along the way. Apart from the uniforms and things. A couple of shirts, my desert boots.

40:30 I had my tailored uniform with me. That was 1945, September. When I built my house in Burwood I still had it, and the poor old bread bloke used to deliver on horse and cart, and it was raining cats and dogs, and he only had a shirt on. So I gave him the jacket. I don't know where the pants went to but that was the last I saw of my jacket.

We just have to change the tape.

Tape 8

00:32 **So tell me about the piano accordion, Des.**

Well, we were stationed at Ancona, which I told you was halfway between Naples and Milan, on the Aegean Sea side. And there's a little place called Castelfidardo, and it was about fifteen or twenty ks from Ancona.

01:00 And it's the only place in Italy where they make piano accordions. This little town. And my mate came back with this most beautiful piano accordion. This is the big bloke that used to drive the Rolls Royce car. He had this beautiful piano accordion, it was a big one, too. A concert piano accordion.

I said "Where did you get it, Lofty?"

He said "Get the truck driver to take you out to Castelfidardo, but take out

01:31 a jerry can full of petrol, and you'll get a piano accordion for a drum of petrol. I said "Do you know anyone on the petrol bowser who will let me have it?" He said "Don't worry about that. There's a petrol can full already outside your tent." So he'd already got it for me. He knew that I liked music. So I got this truck driver, who now lives in Merewether.

02:04 Anyway, he took me out to this Castelfidardo, and it was a fascinating little village. There's rows of houses, and each row of houses has its own family, and that row of houses makes a piano accordion and they call it their own name. They start off here with whatever they start making a piano accordion with, and they move it to the next house, the people are all

02:30 all related, and they do a bit, then it goes on to the next house, and they do a bit to it, and they pass it to the next house and it goes along about eight houses and it's a finished article. I went to all of those places and I thought 'Now, I don't want a big piano accordion, because it's going to be hard to carry it around all the time.' So I got this nice little ladies' piano accordion size, and I took it back to the camp and it was really good. I taught myself the bass end of it.

03:00 I knew music enough to know what I had to play for the bass end of it, because I hate music where people fake anything. So I taught myself the bass buttons. I didn't know the correct fingering. And I knew the keyboard part of it. So anyway, I think about eight or ten blokes had piano accordions, including this mate of mine that died recently, the instrument maker who didn't say he was a musical instrument maker.

03:32 He was a bit musical as well. He had a piano accordion. He had a bigger one than me but that didn't matter, they all sounded beaut. And I took this back to the camp and I learned what I had to do to play the bass. And one of the blokes said to me "How did you do that?" I said "Well, I have an advantage because I've got a very keen ear for music."

04:00 I knew after being a bandsman that I could work out what I wanted to know about the bass, and if it was the wrong chord I could find out the right one. And I did that. I think I taught about six of them to play the piano accordion, even before we got on the boat to come home. And that's how I got my piano accordion.

So how many instruments do you play?

I don't play many at all, really, I just fiddle with them. I learnt the cornet and

04:30 I can still play that. I wouldn't have any trouble playing a euphonium, I wouldn't have any trouble playing a trombone. My father used to make guitars and mandolins, so I can play both of those. So I've got those, the accordion, the trombone and the piano. So there is about eight. I play the piano sometimes out there. My mother-in-law, when David was only a little

05:00 fellow, he was about nine I think. She wanted to get this piano, and the fellow who was apprentice to me, at shop fitting after the war, his father used to make pianos for Allen’s, one of the big music companies and he used to assemble pianos. He had second hand pianos that he would do up and sell on the side, so he sold me this piano that we've got here.

05:30 Nan, as David called his grandma, she brought it for him and he learnt the piano for about five or six years. He never touches it now. And I go out and have a tinker every now and again. I had it tuned not

long ago. It's in pretty good nick.

06:01 **So when you returned to Australia, Des, what were your plans once you discharged?**

Well, I wasn't in very good shape when I came home. And the situation with my stepmother didn't exactly gel together, and I was in all sorts of strife for a while. And one of my squadron mates was engaged to this girl, and she was my wife's

06:30 best friend, and I wasn't married at that time, of course. And Jock said to me "Would you like to come out to dinner one night?" I said "Oh yeah, I'd love to." I went out to dinner with them on the Saturday night and there was this very nice person, who was a friend of Jock's fiancée. And we started to get along pretty well from that point on. We got engaged, we got married and that was it.

07:03 We were married for 54 years before she passed away.

What were your plans together, after you met.

When I got home from the war I said to Dad "Look, I don't like this engineering business anymore. I'm sick to the back teeth of it." He said "You're able to, through of the

07:31 returned servicemen's institutions to do another trade if you want to. Or you can go to university, like you missed out. You should have gone to university, but instead of that you went to the war, the big university." I said "Yeah, I know." He said "Well, would you like to go to university?" I said "No, I couldn't concentrate anymore on that sort of thing. I would love to go, but I'm not up to it." I was half-gone. It took me two years to really get over the war.

08:00 **What kind of difficulties did you have getting over the war?**

Well, I had malnutrition, I had sores on my back for nearly two years, because we didn't have any vegetables. We just existed on bully beef and these rotten damn sausages and things. And that was for nearly four years. It had an effect on

08:30 all of us. It took to me, really, two years to get over the war. But in the meantime, Dad said "Why don't you take on cabinet making? Something that you can work into?" So I applied, and I was working with this company for a while. We were making windows and I made

09:01 a big chopping block, for a butcher. Anyway, I wrote a letter to DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] and said "Could I possibly change my place of framing, because my Dad's foreman of a shop fitting firm and they've got

09:30 a space where they can fit me in now." And they said "Yes, you can." So I went to work under my Dad for a long while, although I had worked under him before the war. I knew quite a bit about it. That was an advantage for me. And they were going to give me a trade test, which they did. And they said "You qualify without having to go to any school. You know enough about it."

10:00 I had answered the right questions. So I went to work as an apprentice, as it were, under my Dad's tuition. I stayed there for four years until I was qualified as a shop fitter and cabinet maker. Dad said to me, "Well Friday night,"

10:30 this was on the Thursday, he said to me "You're not working anymore here after Friday. You're sacked." I nearly fell through the floor. He said "Go out and learn something from someone else. I've taught all that I can tell you. Go out and get a job with someone else and see what else you can learn." So I went out and worked for a building firm, Swanson's Builders, and I finished up becoming their foreman. And I got sick of that,

11:01 because it wasn't fine work enough for me. So I gave my notice there and they gave me a very nice reference. I went to work for the biggest shop fitters in Melbourne, RMS, which reinforced Myer shop fronts. I became their senior foreman inside of four years. And we used to do all the big shops, inside and out in Melbourne. I built

11:30 Myers windows. I've made lots of things since then. I can make pretty well anything I want to these days. So I just fiddle about now. I've got a beautiful bench out there, set up, and I do the work I want to do.

12:00 **It's great that you discovered a profession that you were passionate about.**

Yes, I worked for RMS for fourteen years, and I decided that I wanted to do something else. So I gave RMS my notice, then my long service was due in three months. Long service was actually twenty years,

12:30 but it was a pro-rata sort of a thing, but after fourteen years and nine months, I didn't qualify for pro-rata by three months, and they didn't give me a thing. Now I used to go interstate for twelve weeks at a time. I went to Canberra and I fitted out the law courts in Canberra. I built seventeen shop fronts and I fitted the shops out with a team of blokes.

13:02 I went to Adelaide and I fitted out David Jones. I was away for seven weeks that time, and when I got

back to RMS, the boss said to me "I want you to go away on Tuesday," this was on the Friday I got back from…I had been interstate three times, twelve weeks, and two seven weeks…That's an awful amount of time to be away from my family. David was about four weeks old.

13:30 I said to Alf Clarke "Look, I want to stay home, Alf. I've got a young son and he doesn't know who I am when I come home. And I won't be going to South Australia again, I won't be going back there." "Oh yes," he said, "you'll be right. Get your team together and you'll be right on Tuesday." I said "Alf? Do you want my notice now or shall I wait until Tuesday?" He said "You wouldn't do that." I said "You try me." Anyway, he did try me and I gave notice.

14:02 I knew the fellow at AV Jennings, and I went and saw him and he said 'Strange to say, but they're looking for a senior supervisor, and you would be just the bloke to fill the position." So I started with AV Jennings as a senior supervisor. But RSM never gave me a cracker after fourteen years and nine months. You would have thought that Alf Clarke would have said "Well, three months is nothing.

14:30 We'll let you have your long service leave, pro-rata." It was a lot of money. And I didn't get a zac, never got a penny.

That was pretty shrewd.

Well, he was a Jew, and that spelt a lot of things to me. But anyway, I went to Jennings, very happily, and I was on the staff at Jennings. I was the senior supervisor, which was the supervisor over the supervisors. And I worked with Jennings for fifteen years.

15:02 And when I left they said "You won't get your superannuation or your share money until the end of next year." And before the end of next year, would you believe that Jennings went down the gurgler? I never got a thing. I lost $27,000 in 1980. I lost the lot. And I had to

15:32 go on a Department of Veterans' Affairs pension. And I've been on it for twenty-four years. But in the meantime, in 1947, '48, I brought a block of land for thirty pounds, in Melbourne. And because I wasn't a registered builder, I had to hunt around and get my own materials and things.

16:01 It took me three years at weekends to build my own home, which I did, very successfully. We lived there for 54 years.

Slowly but surely you will building your own place, while you were busy building for other people.

I was working seven days a week. But I had the advantage because I was the senior supervisor, I had a car, and I could fit in time to do some stuff for myself.

16:30 But because I wasn't a registered builder, I wasn't a priority. I had to wait twelve months for roof tiles and that sort of thing. I went out to the brickworks and asked how long I would have to wait for bricks. And they said "Well, if you give us ten quid you can have them tomorrow." Wages were one pound ten a week, and he wanted ten quid for the building bricks. I said "No, I will wait for them." So I waited another month,

17:04 I think, for bricks. I waited twelve months for roof tiles. I had already built the frame. Because it was standing in the weather, it started to get a bit warped. I had a lot of work to do when it came to the inside fitting out.

Were you living on the property?

We were living at Elwood at the time, which is down by the beach. We weren't married. I got kicked out of home. I was living

17:30 with my future wife's mother. We got on very well together, she was a lovely person. After we built the house, we got married and that was it.

Do you think your experiences in World War II taught you something about perseverance?

Yes, a lot. An awful lot.

How did your service during World War II change you as a person?

Well, it taught me to be patient,

18:01 for one thing. It taught me to cope with anything that bobbed up, it didn't matter what it was. It taught me to cope, one way or another. I can still do that today. Face it head on. The main thing in life is to be honest, with everybody and yourself. Never tell lies. I try to tell that to the boys.

18:30 "If you're honest, you will go a long way in this world. And if you're not honest, you have to have a good memory." Don't ever tell lies, because it will backfire. They've proven that time and time again.

19:07 That's true, what I said. Very true.

I was going to ask you how the Squadron Association has been important to you since?

The Squadron Association? It's most important. I would put anything off to

19:30 go to the squadron meetings, I don’t care what it is. I'd put anything off. If I was playing in the finals of the Australian Bowls Championship I would put it off to go to the Squadron meeting.

When was the Association formed?

1947. A fellow by the name of Peter Alexander. He wrote a book called We Find And Destroy. It was all about 458 Squadron. There's been two

20:00 editions since then. Peter passed away a month ago, at the age of 88.

You mentioned earlier, Des, that your next meeting would be your final meeting…

We decided it would be.

Did his passing away have any bearing on that?

I think it's got a lot to do with that. It was decided before Peter passed away. He was at the meeting in Orange.

20:30 We decided that we'd send a letter to everybody in the Squadron, asking their opinion whether they would like another reunion, or was that the last one we already had? But apparently everyone said "Yes, we would like another meeting." There was no against at all, it was all for another meeting. But we figured that over the last

21:00 fifteen years, in between reunions, we've lost an average of about twenty percent our blokes at each meeting. So we're getting pretty low now, although we've got fellows in every state except the Northern Territory, and no one in Tasmania. We've got some in New Zealand, we've got some in Canada…they just had three deaths in Canada. And we've got quite a few in England. As a matter of fact,

21:30 I met a fellow in England that I haven't seen for fifty-eight years, and it was an absolute beautiful meeting. In fact, the Queen had just spoken to us and John Howard had escorted her back to her car. She couldn't stay and talk to us very long because George Bush was going there the next day. So we became second rate citizens. She did speak to us and told us how good we were. Anyway,

22:00 after John Howard had escorted her to her car, he came back down the red carpet, down the aisle. And that's just as Norm Duke, who is now the squadron president, we've never had an overseas squadron president before, because we're getting to our last meeting we made Norm…And we had just met for the first time in fifty eight years, and we were embracing one another, and John Howard came along and said "Hello, what's going on here?" And I said

22:30 "John, Norm and I were in the same squadron, and we haven't seen each other for fifty-eight years." And he said "By Jeez, isn't that great? After fifty-eight years, you've just met." And he shook Norm's hand and he shook my hand, and away he went. And Norm said to me "I didn't know you knew the Prime Minister." I said "I've known him for years." It was quite funny.

23:00 **So have you met annually since the Association was formed?**

No, it used to be every two years, but over the last ten years, we've made it every eighteen months, and we haven't had a reunion in West Australia for a long, long time. The fellows are getting to old to travel Australia now. They're all in their 80s now. They must be, or they wouldn't have gone to the war. I'm nearly 84, and

23:30 I couldn't be bothered travelling too far, I don't think. Although I've been back to Melbourne twice since I've been here. I thought I will go to the next one, I'll have to crawl to get there, I'll go. It's going to be in Canberra.

Why Canberra?

We figured that's where the War Memorial is. And the squadron is written up at the War Memorial.

24:00 I think it will be a good one.

What do you usually do when you gather for a reunion?

Oh, we just chew the fat. We have a meeting, of course. We've got an executive committee. When we have a reunion, we nominate and make our president. And he's from another state and that's where the next reunion will be. And after that reunion they do the same thing. Whoever is president, that's where we have the reunion.

24:30 And we've done that over fifty four years. And we still get a newsletter, which we will continue to get, from headquarters in Sydney. They can only send a newsletter out if each representative from their state sends in the news from that state. But we've got people in every state except the Northern Territory and Tasmania. We've got people in New Zealand and Canada and the UK.

25:00 And they all send in their newsletters, and it's all printed in the 458 News. And we have that every

quarter, for fifty five years.

What kind of news do you receive when you read those letters?

It's easier to show it to you than tell you. For instance, we've got a president here.

25:30 He's got a fellow down at Manger who was in the squadron; he rings this fellow with all the news that he gets, because he's the president. They ring him and tell him, and he rings the news contact at Manger, and he sends the letter to Sydney with the Australian news and that goes in the newsletter.

I was just wondering if you could mention what kind of news might be…

Well, anything that's going. If anyone had broken their leg or fallen off their bike or he's been promoted or whatever.

26:00 Just general news. It's pretty good. And you get to talk to your mates over the years through the newsletters. Wherever they are in the world, those in the Squadron get the newsletter. It's very good, actually.

You mentioned earlier that you went back to the UK in 2003?

26:32 Yes.

Would you like to tell me about that?

Well, I didn't know at the time, but the squadron had learned that there was going to be a memorial trip for the dedication of this War Memorial. And they put my name forward with four other names from the Squadron. Two blokes and me from West Australia went in. I don't know where the others were from…

27:02 **Why were you nominated do you think?**

I don’t know. I was in the Squadron and I suppose I was president of Victoria for fourteen years, and I've been a Squadron president. I marched in the Anzac March for 56 years. I got a Greek Cross in Malta. I think that might have had a bit to do with it, but my fitness might have

27:30 been a bit to do with it as well. I suppose that they considered I was a worthy representative. But I still had to be chosen by the DVA. They put the names in and I was luckily chosen. That was beaut because they chose us then that

28:00 we would have to have a medical. I went to my doctor here, and he went over me and told me how good my blood pressure was and that he wished he had it. He faxed them through while I was there to say that I was fit and ready to go. And that was on the 23rd of October, and by the 5th of November, we were going. And I had to get

28:30 a passport. And I had to get a birth certificate. I sent them my birth certificate, but it was only a copy, it wasn't the full birth certificate. So I had to send to Melbourne for a full birth certificate, express mail. And I managed to finish that in time. Then I got a letter to say that I have been chosen to go. Then they said they would get me my passport, because they knew number

29:00 and my passport pad run out anyway. They did that for me. Then they sent me a letter to say "Go to Fletcher Jones and get your jacket and four white shirts" and four something else. They supplied us with all our clothing. Then when we got to Canberra, Alex Kerr and I were the two that went from here…He was a professor at UWA [University of Western Australia],

29:30 he's retired now, but he was a POW for four and a half years. He got shot down on his fourth trip. He got shot down on his fourth trip.

You went together?

We went together, yeah. We were the first to get to Canberra, actually. So you know all about Alex? That's good. I hope he didn't tell you about me.

30:00 We were the first to get to Canberra. We got there on the Saturday night. We had to go to Melbourne first and we waited there a long time, but because we were travelling business class, we were able to go into the Qantas Club and spend a lot of time there. Whatever time it took before we eventually flew to Canberra. But we were the first to arrive anyway.

30:34 We went to the hotel. They had a car there to meet us, and everything was beautifully organised. We never missed a beat all the way. On the Sunday morning, they all arrived and we met the others. I don't know if Alec knew anyone, but I certainly knew…I didn't know a lot of people, but I knew the fellow I was rooming with, strange to say.

31:01 And on the Friday of the following week, we had a dinner at the War Memorial with Danna Vale, the minister of Veterans Affairs.

31:30 The next day….we had an afternoon tea with the governor general [Michael Jeffery] at Yarralumla. He was a great bloke. He's a West Australian as well.

32:05 He's a grass roots man. He's not a "I'm up here and you're down there" man. He's not that sort of bloke at all. As a matter of fact, he looked at me and he said "Where are you from?" I said "Western Australia." He said "Come over here and talk to me, I'm from Western Australia." He took me over to a seat beside the big pine tree that was there, and we talked for about ten minutes together.

32:30 Not many blokes who are the governor general of Australia would do that. An ordinary erk like me.…So I thought that was pretty good. And his wife came over and spoke to us as well. I said to her "Did this fellow have the audacity to take you up to Wiluna?" She said "Yes he did. And I hated it." He came from Wiluna apparently, and I knew that.

33:07 I know that he's a regular good bloke as far as I'm concerned.

How did you commemorate your journey?

Well, we went in and had our photos taken inside. But when we got inside, we were ushered into these three

33:30 rows of seats and we were facing the audience. We were on the stage, as it were. They called our name and you had to stand up and tell the audience where you came from and what you did and how old you were and how old your father was and all that sort of nonsense. And I felt a little bit humbled at that stage. I felt very humbled, because I looked down at the bloke in the first row and

34:00 he was wearing a VC. I thought 'God, here I am…' As each of us stood up, they told a little story about you.

What did they have to say about you?

I can't remember now, I was so embarrassed.

34:32 We were all dressed in our chits of course, with our medals on, which was all right, but when you look down and see a VC looking at you, you think 'God, there's a man that won a Victoria Cross and here we are skipping about what we did.' I could have crawled under the seat.

So what did that occasion mean to you, Des?

I think an awful lot, really. I really couldn't believe I was at Government House in Canberra.

35:04 It was a great honour indeed, to be one of twenty eight people picked out of the whole of Australia to go and represent the Air force in London. I still don't believe it happened. It was just one of those things that…It just doesn't happen, does it? I was dumbfounded

35:30 and humbled. Very humbled.

Was there anybody that you met that you recalled being an interesting person to have met, had you not had that opportunity before?

They were all interesting blokes in the air force, because they were highly decorated blokes, some of them. Especially Rollo Kingsford Smith.

36:00 I think he was the nephew of Charles Kingsford Smith of the Southern Cross fame. And he was a Lancaster pilot that flew twenty-eight missions over Germany. Highly decorated. And he was just one of the blokes that was highly decorated. The fellow that led the mission was a rear admiral,

36:30 retired. He was a young fellow, he wasn't very old. His name was Harrington, and he was in charge of the whole mission to England. He was a great bloke. They were all good people.

Did they share their experiences with you?

Not really. My room mate shared a few experiences with me. He came from South Australia. Len Frost, he was a CO of a fighter squadron. Squadron leader,

37:00 fighter pilot. And he also served in Burma, and we talked about things a bit. Because we roomed together. That was part of the deal, that you roomed with someone. I got this fellow, Len Frost, he was a nice bloke, too. We didn't talk much about the war.

How many days did you spend together?

Fifteen. Sixteen.

37:30 **What other kind of events were on the calendar when you were there?**

Well, I have a full list of what we did everyday. We didn't have a chance to take many photos ourselves. But DVA are compiling photo albums for each of us, and they promised they would come out this month some time. They were going to be in January, but apparently they had more work to do on them, then they recognised. In fact, one of the fellows that went with us

38:00 rang me up the other and said "You should get your album this month." It must be a beauty, because they started taking photos from the day we got to Canberra, and they were still taking them the day we

got home. They must have taken thousands of photos. He was a professional photographer in the Air force. So I presume it will be a pretty good photo album when we get it.

So you're waiting with baited breath?

No, not really.

38:30 I've been too far and too experienced to wait with baited breath for anything. I've been disappointed too many times. So if it happens…I'm a fatalist. If it happens it happens, and if it doesn't? Bad luck. And that's how I went through the war, as a fatalist. If I get killed, what the hell, you know? I take it as it comes. But a lot of people don't do that.

39:02 A lot of people don't have that attitude. I think most people are like that. Most people don't think about it. Most people wouldn't face up to it, knowingly. But I do, I face up to anything. If anything comes my way, it has to be my lot, whatever. And I have always been a fatalist.

39:30 **And did you observe what would happen to those, while you were away, who didn't think like that?**

I don't know. I have no idea. I would say that they knew they were under fire all the time, and if they got killed, some of them would worry about it, being killed. But it never worried me. If it was going to happen, it would happen, and that's the way I faced the whole war.

40:01 And it never worried me at any stage. It doesn't worry me now. No, the only thing that worried me was when my Mum died. But I couldn't do anything about that, anyway, so I faced that as well. But I did apply to go home, and they knocked me back.

What was your reaction to that decision?

40:31 I was pretty down at one stage.

That must have been quite lonely for you?

It was very bad, it was very bad indeed.

A good time to have mates around?

I was only 21, and that's not old, is it? Having been through the Depression and all that sort of thing. Bad time at school. Still facing up to odds.

41:00 Missed the chance to go to the university because I really and truly wanted to. I wasn't in any casual form to go to university after the war.

We'll change tapes.

Tape 9

00:35 The Minister for Veterans' Affairs gave us a dinner, before we left London, and this was at a special Italian restaurant and she booked the whole of the restaurant for us. And the catch was that we had to give an item, somewhere through the dinner. And as she called your name, you stood up, and she had made up a little rhyme about each one of us.

01:00 She's very clever, and she's got a nice verse as well. And when my turn came I was called out, and this lass that was in charge of the press and the media, she came running up to me and said "Quick, Des. Quick!" I said "What's wrong?" She said "Come on, quick!" So I ran with her and we went upstairs and she said "You're on Macka." Sunday morning, Australia All Over.

01:36 He's been on for years. And he interviewed me for about six or seven minutes, direct to Australia. They were on their phones for thirteen minutes trying to get though to Macka. I spoke to him, and a lot of people

02:00 I know heard it, some of the people at the Bowling Club heard it. I don't get nervous from things like that.

So what did you personally gain going on this journey?

Well, apart from the fact that it was a great honour, it gave me the chance to go to Runnymede, the air force centre in England.

02:32 It's not just for the RAAF, it's for all air forces throughout the Commonwealth. And I got a bit tearful because my mate's names were there. I lost them during the war. It was a long time ago. It was a really good service. Crying, tear-jerking, you know? It was a really beautiful service. the first day out,

03:01 we went to the Merchant Seamen's' Memorial, which is near Australia House, and I was asked to lay

the wreath. I thought that was a great honour as well. We went to the Tower of London. We went on the Belfast which is anchored in the Thames. And we had dinner on there

03:30 for the sailors, and they enjoyed that very much, because the Belfast was very much to the fore during the Normandy landings. It got belted around a bit. A lot of scars on it. But it did a good job, couldn't help to do a good job.

Did you make any news friends during the trip?

Well, we weren't allowed to go anywhere. We had to stay as a group all the time.

I mean friends from the group?

04:00 Oh yes, we went to a little place called Sutton Veny, and this is where there were a hundred and forty three First World War graves. It's on the way down to Portsmouth. And we were on our way down to Portsmouth anyway, and we had three calls that day, and Sutton Veny was the first one. It's somewhere near Stonehenge. We saw Stonehenge as we went past.

04:30 And this school, a state school, there's a big church there, a lovely church and these kiddies at the school entertained us and we had lunch with the school kiddies, then we went in and had a church service, then they all sang in the choir, and that was lovely. And then they allotted one of each of our fellows,

05:00 they allotted one of the kids from the class to show us around. And I had this sweet little girl, she was a charmer, only ten years old, and she had the most un-English name I have ever heard. Bianca Wollinksi. But her father was Polish and he moved to England to live. But she was a very English girl with a name like that. She was a charmer, really.

05:31 She took me by the hand and we went out around these graves, and then in the course of looking around the graves, she said to me "Do you have grandchildren?" I said "Oh yes. I have two grandsons. They're a lot older than you." "Oh," she says, "and what do they call you?" I said "Pa." She said "That's nice. Can I call you Pa?" I said "Yes." I was nearly crying at this stage, you know. And I said to the headmistress of this school "Can I give this little girl a memento of Australia?"

06:01 She said "Oh yes." So I gave her a ten dollar note, and she didn't know what it was. And when the teacher told it what it was, she put her arms around my neck and she kissed me. Anyway, we went all around the graves. And they have an Anzac Day Service every year, because there is an Australian teacher there, and she's educating them all about Anzacs. And this is where some of the Anzacs are buried. They were all sick men from

06:30 France, and they had been there to rest, and some of them died of pneumonia and that sort of thing. There were a hundred and forty three graves and they were beautifully kept by these schoolchildren. When we were leaving she bent down and said "Bye, bye Pa Des," and she kissed me and I really nearly cried that time. It was absolutely lovely, this little girl. It was one of the nicest things that happened to me during the whole trip.

07:00 I wrote to her when I got her, she gave me her address. And I wrote to her and she sent me a beautiful Christmas card, with a little Christmas pudding drawn on it, a couple of kisses and a letter.

Just getting back to Australia, I want to just have a word to about Anzac Day. I know that you've marched every year.

07:30 **What does it actually mean to you to be a part of Anzac Day?**

Well, first and foremost it's for the old Diggers of the First World War, but because we lost so many fellows in the Second World War, not only as squadron, we lost thousands of men from the Air force, in the big air-raids over Germany and the continent, as you well know. You can't help but think of those blokes on Anzac Day. Because we

08:00 that are marching, know what they went through. And we can't really imagine how frightening it must have been, when they were shot down. Not ever having been shot down, but bombed, it's a lot different. To know that you're on the last five minutes of your life when you're shot down, it's a dreadful thing. Of course, Alec got out of it, and a few others got out of it, He possibly told you how he got out of it. He was

08:30 pushed out by his gunner. These are the sort of things you think about on Anzac Day. While I can walk I will never miss an Anzac Day. I've been to everyone since 1935, with the exception of the war. And I'll keep going, while I can.

How has Anzac Day changed over the years?

It's changed an awful lot, actually.

09:00 When we first marched in the Anzac Day March, it was more about the First World War blokes. There's been so many immigrants and there's been two more Wars since then, Korea and Vietnam… Unfortunately, those blokes didn't get the recognition that they deserved, for some unknown reason to

me, because they were really hard done by. In my eyes, anyway.

09:31 I think it's a dreadful shame they were treated that way, because they were front line men, and what's the difference between us and them? I can't see it myself. So it has changed an awful lot. And I have noticed there are an awful lot of Eastern people who line the march in Melbourne. A very big percentage. For what reason, I don't know.

10:03 I can't tell if they are Vietnamese or Chinese or what they are. But they're there on Anzac Day, very much. And I've noticed…I've been going to church every Sunday since I got here and there are a lot of Chinese and Easterners at the church I got to. In fact, before our church service, they have a special service for them.

10:32 **Seeing different racial faces looking on to you on Anzac Day probably means that the culture of Australia is constantly changing.**

Oh, it's certainly changed an awful lot, but all the while I can breathe, I will march. I hope so.

I want to thank you so much for talking to us today, Des. You've been delightful. Thank you.

11:02 It's had more effect on me than I thought it would have. But I got through it and that's the main thing. Thank you very much, the both of you.

Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS