Australians at War Film Archive

Mervyn Pritchard (Merv) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:40 **Let's start with the overview.**

I was born in Brisbane, in 1918

01:01 and I lived there, as a matter of fact, very close to the two racecourses in Brisbane, one on one side of our street and one on the other. It was a 'happy hunting ground' for us as kids, when we played there. We lived in a suburb called Doomben and I went to the local state school at Hamilton [Hamilton State School], for some years

01:30 until I had a bad accident with my foot which laid me up for nine months. Today, they might have fixed it up in a few weeks. When I went back to school, I changed schools and finished up at Hendra [Hendra Secondary College], which was the second oldest school in Brisbane. When the immigrants came out from

02:00 overseas, they were sent to migrate to various areas, and Hendra, where this school was, was part of this area. A lot of farmers moved there. So a lot of the children that I went to school with, their parents had come from overseas. Germany, a lot of them. So I stayed there until scholarship, passed scholarship, and

02:30 I turned fourteen on the 30th day of August. And the very same day a man came to me, who was a Sunday school teacher, he came and offered me a job. Now that was in the days of the Depression, and jobs were hard to get. I had two other brothers and my Dad was a sheetmetal worker, and

03:00 contracted TB [Tuberculosis] during the war, being the head of the canning department at the meatworks, where they canned the bully beef and stuff for the First World War troops. There were no machines, it was all done by hand. And the spirits of the soldering irons got onto his lungs, and eventually killed him. So

03:30 after that the home was broken up there, and we moved to another area. Both my brothers, like me, had to go out to work at a very early age. The eldest brother at sixteen, the second one fourteen, I was only fourteen, to help support the home. Dad was gone, so that was it. So anyhow, we lived in this place, and at the time went on.

04:01 I served my apprenticeship. I did two years with this gentleman, as like the 'office boy run-about', roustabout, and then he said, "Would you like to become a watchmaker?" And he signed me up to an apprenticeship in 1934. I served five years under him and I passed out as a watchmaker. It was during

04:30 that time I think….I had sporting activities, I was very keen on tennis. But one day, soon after I finished my apprenticeship, which was in 1939, I got word from the government at that time, whoever they were, because I was at that age,

05:00 at that certain time, that I would be called up for National Service. Now that was before the war. You talk about it now, and nobody knows anything about it. It's not even on record, I don't think. They must have tore up the papers. Anyhow, I went in and did….It turned out to be five months, it was only supposed to be three months, but a hundred and forty six days to be exact, I went into the army and did National Service training, training with what was known as

05:30 the CMF [Citizens' Military Force], or Citizens Militia Forces, in those days. They were in camp at the same time, so we used to drill and work together, and go out on bivouacs and so forth. And it was during that period, that I made up my mind that the army wasn't for me. And I thought I could do better if I could get into something where my trade might be useful, and my mind turned to the airforce.

06:00 I'd always been interested in planes. As a kid, I made model planes. So I put my application into join the airforce, called up for trade tests, accepted straight away and taken straight into camp at Amberley. Now we did six weeks of foot-slogging. Now I had just come out of a hundred and forty six days in army training,

06:30 and I knew how to' slope arms' and march, all I had to do was learn it the airforce way. Half the time I spent as an instructor teaching the other fellows, because I already knew what to do. Anyhow, after that of course I joined up as an instrument maker, and we were given our posting then, as instrument maker. And several others, also in the same course, there were thirty of us, they also

07:00 were going to be instrument makers. So we had to go to Melbourne to do our training as instrument makers. So we went to Melbourne and for the next six or eight months we attended school at the Melbourne Technical College, every day, to learn to be instrument makers. But there, it was so early in the war, that even the man who taught us was not

07:30 really and truly an instrument maker. His profession was a thermometer maker. So we learnt most of our stuff from books. The only practical experience we had, was they had big workshops at what's-a-names and we were taught to work big lathes and drilling machines and grinding machines, and all that sort of stuff. And in another section, they had it all set up like a big watch factory, sort of thing, with a smaller lathe,

08:00 down to what they call an eight millimetre lathe. The big lathe was a ten inch monster like this. I was lucky, this friend of mine from Adelaide, he was in a 'by [?] trade' also, he had done his apprenticeship, and he became an instrument maker. We went to the same course at Melbourne Tech [Technical College]. When it came to the big lathe I knew nothing about it, but he did. He was an expert. So he taught me,

08:30 the instructor was busy with the others, so this lad, we were only quite young then, only what, nineteen or twenty or so, he taught me how to work these great big lathe and milling machines. We got so proficient at it, we were finished our work before the other blokes were, so we spent our time making 'foreign objects', as they used to call them.

09:03 We got through that. And when the time came to move to the other side of it, the small lathes, I was right in my element because I had done five years apprenticeship on those, so I taught him. We went through our time, we all passed out there. We got pretty good marks there, because as I said, we were actually tradesmen. Then we were sent down off to….

09:32 Richmond, to the big maintenance unit there, where we went into the instrument section and learnt to do the actual practical. We learnt somewhat there, but not a lot because there wasn't the facilities, because Australia wasn't

10:00 in the war. The only thing is, we approached the nearest to the war, and I saw them at this big maintenance facility, was the Wirraways [light training aircraft]. Wirraways were an Australian built plane. It was a copy of one of the American planes, I think the Harvard [light training/aerobatics aircraft]. And it was like more of a trainer, and we were turning it out as a fighter. That was only the aeroplane we had to work on. So after about six weeks there

10:30 of filling in time, the CO [commanding officer] called the parade and said, "A new scheme has been organised between the Australian government and the English government, for Australian airmen to transfer to the RAF [Royal Air Force]. And go overseas and serve." And of course we were all itching to go overseas and do our 'bit'. So we all put our hands up, some

11:00 six hundred of us. They said, "Right, we'll have you and you and you…" They split us into two sections. Three hundred and three hundred. And sent us down to Melbourne to the embarkation depot, Ascot Vale, it was the old race course. And they fitted us all out with uniforms and gear and stuff, and it was only then that we began to learn

11:30 that we were heading overseas, but we didn't know where. We were given summer uniforms and winter uniforms, and you could have gone to either England or the Middle East. Three hundred eventually went to the Middle East, of which I was one and my mate was one, the other three hundred went to England. They divided us up, then two weeks there and we were heading for Sydney to go aboard the boats….

12:13 **We will come back and talk about everything in a lot of detail, but if you can just run me through the different places that you were based overseas, during the war?**

Well, our first stop, the first three hundred. We went to Egypt.

12:32 First of all we landed at Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, just to take on water and fuel. The next day we moved onto the Red Sea, and we stayed there a whole week because we weren't able to land. Only three boats in the convoy, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Mary and the Aquitania, three

13:00 of the largest boats afloat at that point. And the HMAS Australia, the cruiser. She escorted us across to Egypt. They were bombing the Suez Canal, regularly every night. And also the ports. Tewfik at the southern end and Port Said at the top end. So we had to wait there until a clear day came

13:31 for us to move, and when that happened, that was after about a week, and we spent our spare time, which there wasn't any, unloading the boats. The Queen Elizabeth was full of cargo as well. So we unloaded…Us tradesmen became 'stevedores' and formed queues right around the boat, and right down in the bowels of the boat

14:00 handling cases of this and meat and fruit and butter, and went up around the circuit, passed from hand to hand, and out the side of the boats. That took us a whole week to do that. The day that word came through that we were free to go up, we just pulled up anchor and away we went up into Tewfik Harbour.

14:30 We couldn't get into shore because there were no wharves deep enough for us. We anchored out in the bay, and unloaded the ship there. There were over six thousand troops on board that, including AIF [Australian Imperial Force] and some Free French, they were from New Caledonia, and some New Zealanders, and about six thousand Aussies.

15:00 From there, we went out onto the shore and got into trains and they took us to what they called the embarkation depots, or the disembarkation depots, for the Middle East. Which was on the edge of the [Great] Bitter Lake, at a place called Ismailiyah. Well, that was our introduction to the Middle East, and Egypt. We had a fortnight there, getting acclimatised, then our first postings came through, and my first

15:30 posting….By the way, that mate of mine…That was not the last we saw of each other, but we were not together from there on, until we came home. I went to one place, he went to another. He was very fortunate. He was posted to Cairo, which was the capital and Heliopolis was where the RAF aerodrome was, and that was to be his place for his time overseas there. And I was

16:00 posted to rebuild a unit up in the desert, at a town called Kastari. The name doesn't mean a thing, it was just a blank space in the middle of the desert. This unit had just been evacuated from Crete. And they had lost everything in Crete. They had to leave it behind, because when the parachutists came into Crete, they had to get out. They got back to

16:30 Egypt in rowing boats and motor boats and anything that would float, only in the clothes they stood up in. They left all their tools and machinery and stuff behind. So they were reforming a unit. Eighteen Australians became a part of that unit, and it changed its name and became….

17:01 Number 51RSU. It was known as the 'Repair And Salvage Unit'. From there, we got together the unit and got spares and got equipment. What we could pick up, borrow or steal, to make up the unit so that we could get moving. And it proved to be an enormous experience, of which

17:30 I spent three and a half years up on the Western Desert, moving, moving, moving. This unit was split into three. We had a Base Unit, Advance Base and a Roving Unit. Our job was, if an aircraft flying over, theirs, ours,

18:00 anything at all that flew, if it had to come down on the desert, away from its drome [aerodrome], it may have run out of petrol, might have been shot up by the Germans, might have had engine trouble, anything at all. Hundreds of them came out into the Western Desert. Now the Western Desert ranged for hundreds of miles, from the Mediterranean Sea to about four hundred miles inland, and thousands of kilometres

18:32 going up the desert towards Libya and those places. So we were split up, even as a Base Unit and Advance Unit, and the Forward Unit, of which I was fortunate I suppose, it was a great experience…But when a plane came down, this is how it worked. When a plane

19:00 came down, usually the Army spotted it first. And they would wire back a signal back to base, "Plane down," and give a map reference. That would come to us, at the Advance Unit, and we were always ready to move. It compromised of, two six wheel drive GMC [General Motors Corporation] trucks,

19:31 a fifty foot long articulator, which could take a whole plane. Just dump it on the back of it. A coal screen, a mobile coal screen, which could pick an aircraft up like that, and equipment and food for six weeks, and water. Now we worked within three miles of the front line, all the time.

20:00 We had to find it from a map reference, with a compass and a map, and find our own way across the desert. No tracks, no nothing. Just everybody made their own tracks across the desert. And we'd find the plane, and it could be one of ours, who had engine trouble, or they've run out of petrol. Whatever it was, it was our job to service it. We took

20:30 a certain amount of spares with us. We all had a spare engine, which is on the back of one of the trucks. We had an undercarriage, we had wheels, and other bits and pieces that might have broken down that we could fix. And we would just 'jack' the plane up, put it up, the coal screen would lift it up, we'd put the jacks underneath it, rip the undercarriage off, if it was all twisted and tangled, and fit her up with new set. If they came down and

21:00 bent the blades, you'd put new blades and that on, and if possible get her flying. And at the same time, a lot of the times, the desert wasn't just sand, it was sand and dirt and stones. And we would have to clear a runway, which we'd go along on our bare hands, and pick up all the rocks and throw them to one side and just make a space. And when we were

21:30 ready, we had a wireless, we would inform base, and base would tell the unit that owned the aeroplane, and they would send a pilot, by road, in a truck, to where we were. He'd get in it. We'd have tested it and run it up and he could fire away. But at other times, if they were two badly wrecked, they could be repaired,

22:00 but if we didn't have the facilities, we would take the main planes off, and dump it on the articulator, which was called 'Queen Mary'…Why it got that name I don't know. We would drop the fuselage the length of this articulator, stack the wings on either side and all the bits and pieces and the driver would take off across the desert back to….

22:31 The main road there only went two hundred miles up into the desert, from Cairo. The main road. And it was put in there to service….All the wealthy people had seaside resorts at certain points along the coast of the Mediterranean. Especially at Mersa Matruh and at Tobruk. And that two hundred miles was the furthest point

23:01 that the water went. The Army put a pipeline from Cairo, right up to Mersa Matruh, and if we wanted water and we were anywhere, we had to send a tanker into the watering point, to get a tanker full of water, every day. Because we were on rations, and water rations particularly, was restricted to a pint of water, per man, per day.

23:30 Anything over that was used for cooking. So when we went out on these trips, we only had enough water for a pint of water per day. In that you were supposed to do everything. Wash in it, shave in it, and make tea out of the rest of it. I did that for nearly two and a half years. That brought me into contact with our own aeroplanes. Some Free French aeroplanes, Some

24:00 South Africans, because they were all over there. And we even picked up German planes. And if they were salvageable at all, we would put them on the articulator and send them right down to the base at Ismailiyah, where there was a huge maintenance unit, there, with two thousand men working, three shifts a day, repairing aeroplanes. And they would use them for experimenting to see if

24:30 the Germans had anything on them that was good for us. And I used to take the instruments out and we'd look at the instruments and see how they matched up with ours. They had good points, and ours did, too. That was just another part of our job. We would get back to base occasionally when things were quiet, but typically we were supposed to be within three miles of the front line.

25:00 There was many times we got chased out. The Germans were on the run. And I actually anticipated, I suppose you could call it that, three advances and two retreats. And the last retreat we made was when they pushed us back, right back to….where they made their last stand. Just thirty miles or so

25:30 from Cairo. Just off the Cairo-'Alex' [Alexandria] road. And that was only….He stopped there, and we were saved by the fact that just there the desert comes down to what they call the Depression [Quattara Depression]. And it's only fifty miles from the coast of the Mediterranean to the depression.

26:02 So the big wide Western Desert came down to a narrow neck like this, with a road coming down through it. We used to use the road to go up, and they used the road to go down. But the further you got up, the longer your lines of communications. So they found out, and at El Alamein, they found out the same problem then. They pushed us all the way back and we went back with the 'lick of our lives', because

26:30 they had a preponderance of armour, but they ran out of ammunition, they ran out of fuel. And they also got stuck out in the desert. They tried to come around the outside. So eventually they were halted by the Depression. And that's where they stopped, and we held them, then. At El Alamein until we brought up our forces. That's the time when Montgomery came in and took over. And that became…

27:00 It was known as the 8th Army. Besides the' Africa Star', which was the medal…The Africa Star was for anybody who fought on that area of the Middle East. But if you fought in that last operation,

27:30 there's a little rosette that goes on the little ribbon. That is only for those who served in the 8th Army.

And take me through the places where you were based after your time in North Africa?

Well, of course, we left North Africa and that becomes a big story. We

28:00 went by convoy through the Suez Canal, and out into the Mediterranean, and we joined up with a very large convoy there, of about twenty six boats, I think. And a whole heap of armoured auxiliary cruises and also destroyers, to take us through the Mediterranean. And that wasn't such a bad trip, except there were quiet a few breakdowns in the convoys,

28:30 and they had to slow down. But they apparently timed our trip through….We were actually under surveillance by reconnaissance planes the whole of our trip through, but never bombed. The first place you passed is Malta, going west along the Mediterranean, and after Malta comes Sicily, and we passed there…And we saw

29:00 Mount Etna, and it was spouting ashes at that out of it. We passed it at night-time. This was because the Germans had planes, based in Italy, Greece and Crete. And if they knew we were coming….That made it a bit of an uneventful journey, but there was plenty of activities on the boats and things. And

29:30 finally we went through the straits of Gibraltar. We didn't see that either. We went through that at night-time. Because they always had spies there, and they would wire back to wherever they were, that there

was a convoy going through. To avoid aircraft and submarines and things like that, we went

30:00 straight out into the Atlantic, as far as the Azores. Now if you look for them you won't find them. They're only a few small islands up in the middle of the Atlantic. We went out past them and then turned directly north and went up to Iceland, and came in over the type of Iceland, very freezing, then we came down into the Mersey Channel, and we docked at Liverpool.

30:30 That was our first stop in London. Now there was still three hundred of us, airforce, but there were other people on the same boat. But anyway, they transferred us straight off the boat onto the train. We had a little wait on the train, and when it eventually did get underway….We found out later

31:00 which way we went. But apparently you can go almost across England in half a day. It's very narrow. So we went down towards the South Eastern corner. But to get there, we had to pass London. We didn't go into London, but we passed London at night. We were all blacked out, but there was a terrific

31:30 air-raid going on over London. There were searchlights and there were bombs and the balloons were up, and 'night-fighters' were up. We could see all that going on as we went past. We were heading for Brighton, which is where they had their disembarkation depot. They unloaded us there and put us up in one of the big hotels, that was on the sea front of Brighton. It had been taken over by the Army.

32:00 There were still a few civilians there, but the Army had virtually taken over. And the Airforce, and I'm talking now about the RAF, we became RAF, from the minute we put our foot on the…So we were paid by them, we were fed by them, our discipline was from them. We heard little or nothing from Australia. As a matter of fact, we came later on to believe we were the 'forgotten brigade'. Because we didn't get

32:30 any promotions. My first promotion came through from the RAF as a corporal, when I was on the desert. The Australian equivalent didn't get until we got to England. I was corporal for a day, then I became a sergeant, and only a matter of a month or two after that, I became a flight sergeant. From the embarkation depot,

33:00 they gave us a fortnight's leave. My first station was; I was sent straight up to Scotland to join a 459 Squadron of Beaufighters. Now Beaufighters [long range 'night' fighter] in those days belonged to coastal command, and I was straight into the war.

33:31 At a place called Lucas Junction. Now Lucas Junction is only miles from Edinburgh, so our planes in coastal command, were out after the shipping, going up and down the Dutch and Norwegian coast. They used to take off from there, which was one of the closest 'drones' to the French coast. So they only had a

34:00 ten minute, or a fifteen minute, flight and they were over enemy territory. And they so used to fuel up, bomb up, mostly machine guns in the Beaufighters, two in the crew, and they'd go up and down the fjords. They would be flying at sea level and shoot up all the shipping that was in the fjords, and then go for the 'lick

34:30 of their lives'. Because the fjords were hundreds of feet out of the water. And they had gun emplacements up on top, and when our blokes came in, they would either shoot up at them, or shoot down at them. But our fellows used to opt for the few feet above sea, and they got away with it, time and time again, But they

35:00 had a pretty good score of boats and camps, all the way up that coast. I was only there for about four months or so, when I was sent on detachment from there….They decided to move the Squadron to the north of Scotland, as far as you can go. We were within six miles of John O'Groats.

35:30 Now John O'Groats is the most northern portion of the British Isles, and the drome was on the cliffs, to fly out over the North Sea. So if you missed and didn't get going, you dropped down into the North Sea, about a hundred feet below. We used to take off, over the edge of the cliff. And they were that much closer to the coast. I spent quite a lot of time there.

36:00 Then they moved me back to Lucas Junction again, spent some time there. I was shifted to Salisbury, and Bath, and places around there, where I had to attend….They were updating you all the time, with your equipment and so forth. And if something new came out, the first you would see of it, it would be in a box, and you had to take the old one out

36:30 and put the new one in, and you'd have to read up the literature review, and find out how it worked. So every now and then, they would give you a week or something, at this huge training place, and bring you up to date on a certain kind of compass, or a certain type of altimeter or anything at all. In those days, there were very few electronics. They were mostly pressure gauges and suction gauges.

37:00 One of the main things that I had a lot of work to do on was the gyro-pilots, or automatic pilots. And in the English planes, in most of the airforce, they had the English version of the Mark Five Automatic Pilot, and that was driven by air. So any planes that came in with automatic pilots on, that used to be my job.

37:31 I spent some time there, and then….Going back to the Middle East. One stint, only a matter of months, they sent me off to the Middle East torpedo training school [Air Torpedo Development Unit], because of

my expertise on the gyropilots, and I became the gyropilot operator on torpedoes. And they used to use, at Tewfik Bay….

38:02 They were training torpedo droppers and they were trying different types of aircraft, and they were trying to find out which was the best one to use. We experimented with the torpedoes, by using the gyroscope, to run so many hundreds of yards and then turn around and come back again. That was a very interesting thing…But later on,

38:30 I got to use them even more so, because the next unit that I got sent to, they called it an 'Eschelon' [Rear-Eschelon repair base], but it was a peace time station, in peace time, and they had permanent barracks and Nissen huts [prefabricated barracks]. They had a huge staff there. My job, in the big workshop, only two instrument people on it, but the job was when

39:00 they manufactured aeroplanes in the factories, they did it by the first original plans that were drawn of the plane. They never deviated from that, right through the whole production line right till it came off the end. But those plans were drawn some years ago…So when they got to the far end, and they sent some of these out to the squadrons, they found

39:30 that they weren't up to date. The instruments and the equipment they had on it were not up to date. So right, they started this unit. Planes finished on the production line, were brought to us at this 'echelon', and we had to modify them up to operational standards. That means that if the compass was not the proper 'Mark Five'. If the one they had in it was 'Mark Two', out it came. And sometimes they were different sizes,

40:02 so we had to make new brackets for them. Other instruments were the same, if they were old, obsolete, had to be changed. And by the time we left that unit, that plane, and we fitted them out with life jackets and thermostats flasks, goggles, watches for the navigators, blocks for the dashboards. And when they left our place, they could go straight out to a squadron and fly out on operations.

We'll just pause there…

Tape 2

00:39 As I say, it was a job that had to be done. One silly fellow pinched a clock went on leave, and he put it on the bottom of his kitbag…

01:00 **We'll come back a bit later and ask you about the clocks. You were telling me about this conversion unit that you were in? Where the planes would come in and you would modify them and get the ready?**

Yes, that's right. The unit was called an 'Echelon', but actually the main body, the base part, was always at one place, at a place called Bircham Newton. Bircham Newton was interesting, because Bircham Newton was only seventeen miles from 'Sandringham' [royal estate],

01:31 and only a few miles from Kings Lynn. Now Kings Lynn was big country town, lots of churches and so forth….By the way, everywhere we went, we used to buy a second hand bike. It was too far to walk between these places. And we used to ride around Sandringham, right around it, on our day off and after work. Twilight was

02:00 eleven o'clock at night. After we'd have something to eat, we'd get our bikes off and ride around Sandringham and back again. All the birds, all the pheasants and quail, and all sorts of ducks. Just wandering around freely, all over the roads. We used to go very close to 'skittling' [hitting] them on the bike.

02:31 That was of an interest. And also we weren't that far from…By they way, Kings Lynn and those places where the drome was near, were in Norfolk. And Norfolk is on the coast, it sort of 'bowls out' down the south east corner of England, and juts out into the channel. And it's not that far across to the French Coast.

03:05 See, the war was moving at a pretty fast pace at that time. They sent us…They probably thought they had enough planes. So I was sent back to my original unit, the 459 Squadron at Lucas Junction in Scotland. And of course, those Beaufighters were having a ball, and by this time,

03:36 ….it was all secret to us, but now June the 6th [D-Day June 6th 1944]was upon us. The boys on the planes were having a ball, because there was a lot of traffic in the canals and that, and we were building up a tremendous Army on our side, and they were out there making sure that they didn't find out. We were kept very, very busy flying.

04:07 As a ground rule, unless it was a bomber or something like that, more than one engine, we weren't allowed to fly, even for test flying and so forth. But I flew a lot of the twin engine and four engines, but I never got a trip in the Beaufighter, and I died to get a flight

04:30 in the Beaufighter. Because they had two pilots. Anyway, I 'conned' my way in, back at Lucas Junction, to have a flight. This fellow didn't have a co-pilot, and we went on a test flight. And he flew me all over Scotland. We didn't go out over the sea, we went all over Scotland. A beautiful trip and I was made. Anyway, D-Day came.

05:00 We knew something was happening, days before it happened. The instructions came to us, every plane had to be camouflaged. And the camouflage wasn't really camouflage, it was an identity. And every plane, all ours, the whole squadron of Beaufighters, had to be painted with stripes. Black and white stripes, on the fuselage,

05:30 white black, white black. It measured about four foot wide when we were finished. So that went around the fuselage, around the centre, and then on the main planes, around the centre of the main planes were these stripes, both main planes, and also on the tail planes. So we were flat out for about three days, before D-Day, painting strips. Twenty four hours a day it went on, painting stripes on these planes.

06:00 Of course, we knew something was imminent. So come D-Day, June the 6th, at three o'clock in the morning, they started flying over. And the first planes to go over were the gliders. Of course, everybody got out, they knew something was on, and we could stand and watch these planes. The first ones to go out were the

06:30 gliders, towing another glider, with parachutes and troops on board. Some dropped parachutists. Others were cut loose from the plane and just glided into land. I can't tell you how many crashed on landing, but quite a number did, because it was still dark and they had to pick a field out…That was the start of D-Day, then by

07:00 about six o'clock in the morning, the bombing started. There must have been a couple of thousand aircraft in the air. The poor blokes, they had a terrible time. They did the same to us, though. So it was our turn to get some of our money back. And that went on all day and all night. In England,

07:30 the Beaufighters didn't go out at night, they went out in the day time. But the big stuff, the 'Lancasters' [heavy bomber] and 'Wellingtons' [medium bomber] and 'Sterlings' [heavy bomber] went out at night-time in 'thousand bomber raids', all over Germany, and back, and over France and places like that. If you went over to the Germany, to the far side, it counted as one operation. And there would be about seven men on board a 'Lancaster'. And when they come back, some were shot full of holes

08:00 and they had to be repaired and got back flying. Then in the day-time the Americans went over a thousand at a time, with their flying fortresses [B-17 Medium bomber] and Boeings and all sorts of things. And they carried on the bombing all throughout the day. Of course, our troops had started to go off at dawn, across the channel, and into Calais and places like that,

08:30 where they landed mostly. So it was really 'on'. And we were busy people for quite a while. But as the war moved further forward up through France, and we were pushing them back, Germany, there wasn't so much work for us in the Beaufighters. Although

09:00 they still did their reconnaissance up and down the channel. And of course, their job was also protecting the landings. So they pulled me back to this echelon again, and I stayed there until I finished out my section of the war in England, because it was getting onto October, November.

09:33 And the day came that a note came to me to report to the Air Ministry in London, and this starts my journey. I had to pack up all my gear, they said, "Bring all your gear with you." That meant kitbags and all the stuff out of stores and so forth.

10:00 And by the way, most of those trips up and down to Scotland and back down to London, we did them a few times, I had a dozen opportunities of travelling in the 'Flying Scotsman' [train]. You know the train that used to go from London to Edinburgh, I got a trip in the 'Flying Scotsman'. Non-stop from London to Edinburgh. Beautiful ride.

10:31 Very austere and that. But during the wartime, no free meals or anything like that, you took your own. Anyway, I went back and I stayed overnight at one of the club's there, because I didn't have to report the next morning. So I landed without kits and so forth, the next morning, I booked them into… somewhere. And I had to go to Air Ministry in London. Now London

11:00 at that time, was so heavily sealed, sandbags and barricades and all sorts of things, you were flat out finding any place, because all it was, was sandbags up as high as you could see, against bombing. By asking 'coppers' [police] I found my way to the Air Ministry, and greeted at the gate of course, by the usual guards and taken into the guard room and

11:30 looking at papers and checking you out to see who you were. Because that was the 'holy of holies', the Air Ministry in London. Because everything centred around the Air Ministry. I was taken away upstairs, to a room, to see this gentleman, he was a wing commander. Sitting at the table, nothing else in the room, but a table covered in papers, with a chair

12:01 this side, like you and I here. And we started chatting away you know, "Where have you been? What have been doing?" Then he started questioning me, and I think I went through about the most intensive interrogation that you could ever possibly do…He went back to where I was born and

12:30 my father and what were my father's political affiliations, and what were mine? And where I did the school and where I had been and where I served my time. You know, that man had all that in front of him. He had all my papers in front of me, and he was just checking me out.

13:00 The upstart was when he got all this….Two hours, all this 'chit-chat' back and forth. At the end he sat back in his chair, and he's 'toffee-nosed' [upper-class]. He was an RAF man by the way, a lot of them were 'toffee-nosed'. "I suppose you are wondering what this is all about?" In that sort of voice, you know. "Yes," I said, "it wouldn't be a bad idea. I'm quite in the dark as to what

13:30 all these questions are all about." He said, "I'm about to tell you." He said, "We're forming a flight here in England. It will be all Australians, who have served over here." He said, "A special flight has been formed of sixty, and you will have a special job to do. Now you will be trained here before you go, and you will be sent home, then you

14:00 will be ready to take up your job, when you get home." I said, "Oh, yes…" He said, "What we are going to do with you now. You go and get your kit and I'll give you all the papers and you report to Manchester." Now that was on the western side of London. "Report to the station CO there and they will give you instructions on

14:31 where you are to go to. You are being sent to Avro's factory, where they make Lancaster bombers. You will be going there, and you will be billeted outside, and you will go each day to work, and to learn." So righto," I got back to the unit, got onto the train, now I knew where I was going.

15:00 Headed to Manchester. I had to change trains two or three times. You didn't get a train straight through, if you were crossing the country. After about three changes of trains, I got to Manchester. I had to get a bus out to some suburb, and it turned out to be a suburb called Ringway. And that also turned out to be where the factory was,

15:31 but I had to report to the local police. I went to the local police. I wasn't too sure about what it was all about, but he said, "I suppose you're looking for a billet?" I said "I'm looking for somewhere." It was dark, at night, by the time I got there. Anyhow, he got out his hat and truncheon and so on. He said, "Come with me."

16:00 And he had a bike, he got his bike, and I had to walk and he road his bike, and we went down to the local village there and he took me to a house, introduced me to a lady and said, "This will be your billet, while you are here." And she was a woman who had lost a husband in the war, and she let her home out for billeting. The next morning I had to report to Avro's factory at Ringway.

16:30 And I had to get my own way out there. I had to hitch a ride. It wasn't that far, but it was out in the suburbs of this Ringway town. And I found myself actually embroiled in the production of the 'York' aeroplane [heavy transport], which was going to be the one that I was going to work on. It was on the production line of the Lancaster bombers. They were all in rows, and they were all coming off the rows

17:00 and here on this row was the 'York' aircraft. Now the York aircraft turned out to be a transport version of the Lancaster bomber. Except in looks, but in most things it was a Lancaster bomber. The engines were the same, the instruments were the same, the equipment was the same, but the shape was different. The Lancaster bomber was oval-shaped like that, the fuselage round like that, but this one was squarish

17:30 but rounded corners, and she was bulbous in the centre and she tapered away like that. What they were doing and what we were there for, we were taken to the architect's office, and he presented us with a roll of plans that you couldn't put underneath your arm. Each one of us that went there, "This is your section." But I had

18:00 to do the instruments and the electrical. They didn't have an electrician, so I had to take on the electrical part as well as the instruments. That didn't go down too well with me, because I wasn't trained to be an electrician. I learned a lot about it over in the Middle East, but I wasn't accredited. We were straight into it, they put us on the production line, we got to work on the plane. What we had to do, what

18:30 the whole point of it was, that the inside of the aircraft was going to be covered up. On all war planes, there was just the skin on the outside, nothing was covered up, so everything inside you could see. If you wanted to find a wire, leading from the front to the back, or a pipe, or a join, terminal box, it was there, just screwed to the side of the aeroplane. But this plane

19:00 was going to be covered up, right from the front, right down to the back, and so all the mechanical parts that ran from the front to the back, some came down the wings and went down the back, some came from the four engines down to the back, we had to know exactly, to the dot, where all those instruments

19:30 or parts of instruments, like junction boxes, we had to know where they were. Because, he said, "If something goes wrong and it's behind a panel, we will take it out of your pay if we have to take that lining out to get to it." That was okay. Every day we went there. We ate in the manager's mess, or dining room.

20:00 They treated us right, but it was a concentrated six weeks. You had to learn an awful lot in six weeks,

working on the planes, studying the plans, and looking for maybe faults and things like that. I'd worked on 'Lancasters' and I'd also worked on the

20:30 all the instruments, but I worked on the automatic pilot. I was an expert. Even if I do say so myself. And getting towards the end, it came off the production line and they wheeled it over to a section on its own, where they do the finishing off work. Now she was clean skin on the outside, shiny aluminium.

21:00 Definitely a no-no for war planes, because they were all camouflaged with paint and all sorts of things. And the propellers on them, they were also shiny. And you had four of those. On these huge planes, these propellers were only a few inches from the ground. When the plane was level, the nose came down, the engines were this far from the ground.

21:31 And when it went up, you could hardly walk underneath, and you'd skim your head on it, if you hit your head on the propeller. They were a big bone of contention, the colour they painted them. Every day, I suppose through the last fortnight that we were there, every day a couple of car loads of 'big knobs' [higher command] came out to the plane to inspect it.

22:00 And the head of these blokes was the equerry to the governor general, who was then the Duke of Gloucester. Now they appointed three equerry's, one from the army, the navy and the Airforce. The airforce equerry was a wing commander who was going to be a pilot, but he served as an equerry at official functions. The army bloke was an army brigadier,

22:30 with a purple band on his cap, and purple pants. He got the nickname "Purple Pants." His name was Shriver and he was a pig. There is no other word for it. He was the worst kind you ever came across, a snob, upper crust, anyhow, we got our own back on him….And the other fellow was a naval man, but

23:00 he seemed to have the most say about everything that was done around the outside of the aircraft. Not the working parts of the plane, but the decoration of it. Because it was fitted out in sections, pilot, crew, ground crew, galley, first lounge, second lounge bedroom,

23:30 toilets and baggage compartments. That was how it was sectioned off, and you went through doors to get to each. They argued about the tips of the propellers…Now, anyone with 'light sense' painted the tips of the propellers. Because if it was clear, like aluminium, you couldn't see it. And many persons walked into an aeroplane propeller because they didn't see it. On most planes they painted them black or they painted them red.

24:03 About two inches wide, down the bottom. Well, we tried that, we tried red, he didn't like that. We tried white, he didn't like that. And they wasted so much time, this bloke did. "Oh no, it couldn't be camouflaged…"

24:31 This is what they used to argue in front of all the staff. "Will we leave it shiny? Or will we paint it red, white and blue?" And they argued about that, and time was going on. You know what, in the finish, the propellers got painted red, the outside got left shiny, and they polished it. Our job was done, I went back to my

25:00 unit where I was…No, sorry, that is wrong. By that time, the time had come for us to leave England. So I went straight from Manchester, by train, down to Brighton, where the embarkation was, and the other fellows had also been given their ticket, and they had to report down there. And we were to leave from there, from the embarkation depot. That finished my term, which

25:30 occupied about a full twelve months. I was in the Middle East for three and a half years, I was in England for twelve months, then another eight months…And overall, almost August to August, five years, I spent. And so I had a fortnight in Brighton, they shifted us by train across to Liverpool, put us on board a boat, and we sat there for three days, and it was Christmas,

26:00 and we were still on the boat on Christmas Day…I will never forgive them for that. Because we had organised Christmas dinner at a friend's house in London. We had to give that away. They kept us on board the boat, waiting for the convoy to gather. The boat we were going on was called the Athlone Castle. Now the Athlone Castle was the largest motor vessel afloat. I've been on one of

26:30 the larger steam boats, the Queen Elizabeth, and going through the Canal, I was on board what they called the bay liners. Now the bay liners were the cruise ships that used to ply between England and Australia. There was about six of them and they all had names on them, and there were two of those auxiliary cruisers in the convoy

27:00 from the Middle East, but the…..Athlone Castle was the one we were on. We didn't leave…And then they decided to scrap the convoy, it didn't go. And we went on our own. One boat alone, out on the Pacific Ocean. The war was going on pretty hard and fast,

27:30 out on the Pacific. But she was a twenty six thousand toner, and she was pretty fast. Not as fast as the Queen Elizabeth, but she had a good turn of speed. She was a diesel, that's why we call them motor vessels. Anyhow, we started off on our own…And there was two thousand Navy. The boat had been commandeered by the Navy, and they were taking a contingent of people who were going to set up a hospital

28:01 in Sydney. And there was two thousand of them. Nurses, VADs [Voluntary Aid Detachments], doctors, crew, orderlies….A whole hospital complete, was on board that boat, and six hundred Aussies. You wouldn't believe it, would you? Anyhow, we pulled out, the morning after Christmas Day and set sail for Australia.

28:30 All the way, it was a wonderful trip, we had a good time. We talked to nurses, we talked to VADs. And being then, what I was, a flight sergeant, I had risen to the dizzy heights of flight sergeant….But being on a navy boat, a flight sergeant in the airforce is the equivalent to a warrant officer in the navy. They got you certain privileges, so we had a mess of our own. We didn't eat with the 'irks',

29:00 the ordinary blokes….We did going over. We went to a mess with just the warrant officers. We were officers, of course we had a mess of our own. We got pretty good meals. That was just a perk we got on the way home, and I think we deserved it. After what we put up with on the Queen Elizabeth. It was a shocker of a trip, gee, it was a shocker.

29:30 Anyhow, we went right down to Panama, pulled in at the northern end of the Panama Canal, it was night-time, and we tied up the wharf. And 'blow me down', what did we get? We got a concert party. ANSAR [?], the American equivalent of ANSAR, concert party, came down onto the wharf, set up a stage…We couldn't get off the boat, because there was riots on in Panama.

30:05 So anyhow, they gave us a two and a half hour concert. They showered us with oranges. We hadn't seen an orange in four and a half years….Sorry, when we went to Palestine once, we saw some oranges, they grow there. Anyhow, that was nice. Then at the crack of dawn the next morning,

30:30 they started moving. Now they moved this Athlone Castle very gingerly into the first loch of the Panama Canal, which is three lochs going up. The nose touched the front end and the stern just missed the back end. And the sides, you could have put your hands out and touched the wharf on either side of the boat, that's how close it fitted. And when they run her in, they pumped the water in, and

31:00 she comes up. And they have little 'donkey' engines that run alongside, and they go straight up the wall like that, the three stories…you go through three levels of lochs. Then you come out the end of the third one and you're in a lake, a freshwater lake. And as we went through there in the day time, they turned the water on. Because the

31:30 rest of the way we were rationed to water only at night time. But going through the lakes, they run the water through the pipes from the lakes, and we had showers all day. That was great. We got to the other end at night, stayed there until the morning, then we went down three, into the Pacific Ocean. I forget myself…

32:00 'Righto', we pulled out there, and we thought we'd head straight for Australia. Instead of that, we went right down the bottom of New Zealand. They didn't think we would find any U-boats down that way. So we went right down the bottom, then we came up and around and into Sydney. Now I did a whole world trip, right the way around in these troop ships. We came into Sydney, right into the same wharf as we

32:30 got on, into Woolloomooloo, only this one we could pull into the wharves. You got onto the wharves, straight onto the trains, because they ran onto the wharves down there. Then off down to Ascot Vale again, to the embarkation depot, and turned in all our kits, rifles and so forth. Then we were sent on leave.

33:00 It was supposed to be a fortnight's leave….We decided to get married. We did, on the 10th day. We got everybody we could get together, and they all turned on for us, and it was a beautiful job, they did good. We got married in just about, all borrowed things. I had nothing. I had no clothes left at home…

33:31 They sold the house up, when I went overseas. My house wasn't there any more. And my wife, she got married in a wedding dress that was flown out from America, by one of the American nurses. And the bridesmaids, they did their job in dresses that they had for their 21st birthday party. And flowers?

34:01 Beautiful flowers. My wife was a floral artist, and her people and mother, they supplied all the flowers. They did it right. Then, as strange as it might seem, I was billeted in a hotel

34:30 in Brisbane, and we just hung around there, filling in time, until word came, "Right, get on your way." We went by train back down to Melbourne, then we went straight out to…

35:00 Sorry, we went to Sydney. Richmond in Sydney, to the airforce aerodrome there. Then we had to sit and wait then, we had to prepare a whole hangar ready for the planes to come. Then we found out when we were going to have three planes. The York, the Proctor and an Avro Anson [Utility aircraft] all in the one flight. Anyway, they flew the 'York' out from England in two stops.

35:31 First stop Egypt, second stop Perth, third stop Richmond. That's pretty good going. They had to ….they left half the crew….We came home by boat, of course, before them. We were here when they arrived, but the others had to come home the best way they could get home. Then we were there to welcome the plane when it arrived, with the crew and that on. Then eight months of that there was another story, flying around Australia

36:03 and New Guinea and places like that with the royalty…

Can you take me through a little bit about what you did after you finished flying the governor general around? How you

36:30 **went back into civilian life?**

VJ [Victory over Japan] Day, in England, VE Day [Victory in Europe] in England, Victory in England, I was there then, you see, but I was also in Australia, at Richmond, with this flight when VJ Day came along.

37:02 My wife came down to what's-a-name, and I got her a room there, with a family there, a nice family there. I used to ride to work every day, on a bike, six miles, in the middle of a Canberra winter? It was freezing. Anyway, I enjoyed her company and we used to go dancing at night. The war wasn't on. There was nothing to do with the war there, except all the work I had to do

37:30 on the plane. It was pretty comprehensive because, any time before we went anywhere, we knew in advance, and so the plane had to be prepared. You would normally take off at eight o'clock in the morning. So the plane had to be inspected and all that work done, but the final inspection had to be done on the day they flew.

38:00 So if they took off at eight o'clock, we had to get down there and be there for six o'clock and do a test flight. Now test flights were comical things, for us anyhow. We used to take half the drome up with us, just for the ride. "Can we get a ride?" There was a couple of times that some stupid 'aleck' would be sick and we'd have to clean up the mess, and that was a problem.

38:30 But the wing commander who was captain of the aircraft never flew a test flight. It was all done by his second in command, and he was a flight lieutenant. A good pilot, mind you. His name was Anderson, so he had to do it. She was a powerful plane.

39:00 She had these four twenty-four cylinder engines, and she could really 'chew up some juice', and he would fly all around, all over the Snowy River, and take you up Mount Kosciusko and have a look around. And then while he was doing that, I was checking my instruments and checking the electrical work as well, and the

39:30 air frame bloke would be looking around at controls and so forth, and the engine bloke, he'd be checking rev counters and the engine block, and all this sort of thing that would go on. So we all had something to do. This particular time…this Shriver, the aide-de-camp, he invited himself on a test flight. He was going to fly at eight o'clock anyhow. But he had to come on board and show himself.

40:00 In the plane, the floor went like this, and the captain's cockpit was up here. So he had to step, step up to that level there. He was a tall bloke, he must have been about six foot three, this fellow, and 'bald as a badger', and when he was inside he never wore his cap. Too bad, for him, this time. And so when we're doing the flight, he'd bank around…..He could fly on one engine, that was in the test.

40:33 Turn off one engine, fly on three, turn off two, fly on two, turn off the third one and fly on…maintain the height, on level. That was part of the test. Anyhow, got through all that. Anyhow, this Shriver came up from down the back where he had been sitting, in one of the posh chairs, real flash armchairs they were.

41:00 "Come and look through the cockpit window," so he had to stand on one of these steps. In an aeroplane, there is as many controls above you as there is below you, sometimes, in front. Above here, was all the landing gear controls, knobs and sliding knobs and all sorts of things up here. He was standing there, looking around, and his head was a couple of inches from this….

41:31 'gargle' of controls. And of course, we were laughing to ourselves because we knew what was going to happen. Then down went the nose, and when he went down, Shriver went up, cracked his head on the hydraulic lever…..

Tape 3

00:37 **Tell us the story of how you became an apprentice? What were you doing before, and what happened?**

Well, as I said, in August I became fourteen, and I was studying for a 'scholarship'. That was the top level of exam in primary school in those days.

01:00 But at fourteen, the situation at home….My Dad was an invalid and couldn't work. As a matter of fact, he was very close to passing out. He had consumption, or TB. So he lasted only two more years, he died when I was sixteen. So he was at home. My Mum and that…we were virtually nursing him at home.

01:31 I was virtually finished school and it was decided that we had to try and get a job, because there was no

income. Not like today, Dad didn't get compensation for injuries at work or anything, because the spirits of salts on the soldering irons, that they used to use, hand soldering irons, to do the bully beef tins.

02:00 Every time he put his soldering iron into the pot, up came the fumes, and the fumes got on his lungs and ate his lungs away. But today, he would have got a great big handout of compensation. When he got too sick to work, they just sacked him. In those days. That was 1930, I'd say, maybe a little bit before. That was the middle of the Depression. 1929, or somewhere near about

02:30 the middle of the Depression, I can remember…Because things were very tough and Dad could only work at a bit of gardening, occasionally. And later on, he became so sick he was at home. So I didn't go looking for a job at fourteen. I used to belong to the Methodist Church at Hamilton. And I used to go to

03:00 Sunday School. I was in the top class at Sunday School. And the man who used to be my teacher at Sunday School, I didn't know this at the time, I just knew him because he was a lot older than him, he used to take the Sunday School class. Anyway, this Sunday after Sunday School, he came up to me and said, "Merv? How would you like to come and work for me?"

03:30 My ears pricked up, because we had been talking at home about trying to get a job. Now, to get a job at fourteen, in those days, the queues were that long. There was no work for anybody. Anyhow, I said, "I will have talk to my parents first." He said "Righto, you go ahead and do that and you get back to me as soon as you can," he said, "because I am starting a business on my own. I was a foreman

04:00 watchmaker for one of the large stores in town, in Brisbane and I'm going out on my own. But I need a young fellow like yourself.…to start up the business." So I said, "Righto." So I went home and talked it over with my parents, and they virtually threw it back in mine…they didn't want to make the

04:30 decision, because if it was the wrong one…They just weren't in a position to take blame for anything like that. It certainly wasn't my father, it would have been up to my mother. So they said, "Look Merv, if you want to take the job, okay. It's okay with us." So I did. I took the job. I borrowed my brother's bike and I rode about five miles to where he lived,

05:00 on the Sunday afternoon, and knocked on the door. "I will take the job." He said, "Righto, you start on Monday." So I did, I started on Monday. I started as just an office boy, at fourteen, in an upstairs room, in Queen Street. Where we started off…He was at the bench, doing repairs. It turned out he was one of the

05:30 best watchmakers around at that time. Well, he was foreman of a large workshop, so he had to be. I did the menial tasks around the place. Sweeping floors, making the bench up, tidying the tools up, running messages. We used to do what we called 'trade work' and parcels had to be made up, and they had to be taken to the post office, last thing in the afternoon, before I used to catch the train home. And so,

06:00 I did that, and I polished cases and I helped him out in every possible way. Then one day he came to me and said "Merv? How would you like to be apprenticed?" I had just turned sixteen, in the August. "Oh great. That would be great. I'll do it." He said, "Unfortunately, in the apprenticeships these days,

06:31 you have to pay a premium, to be an apprentice." And that was fifty pound. He said, "Do you think your Mum and Dad can raise fifty pound?" And I said, "I can only ask." But I knew what the answer would be. They didn't have fifty bob, let alone fifty pound. But I spoke to them about it and asked them, and they said, "No, it's an impossibility."

07:04 I was very disappointed, and I said, "Oh well, I will just have to tell him, 'No can do.'" So I went the next day and told him, "No can do. We just don't have this sort of money." He said, "It's done this way, these days, it's like a bond." He said, "At the end of the apprenticeship, you might get it back." But I wasn't too sure about that.

07:31 So I said, "I better finish at the end of the week." So I finished at the end of the week…You wouldn't believe it, the next week, so that made it about a fortnight without me, he was on the phone, "Mervyn? You better come back. I'm in such a mess. There'd be no fifty pound." So I got my apprenticeship without putting out any money,

08:02 and I did my time, for five years. In those days you didn't go to college. You brought books and you did your apprenticeship.…He was the master, he taught you the trade. I was set up on a bench alongside him, and I brought tools and I got my tools on 'time payment'. Even the lathe, which was the dearest part

08:30 of our equipment, it was twelve pound ten. So the firm that sold them supplied us with all the parts and so forth, and he had been a good customer there, and I had been over there for two years getting parts and that, so I was well known. So I approached him and said, "Look, can I pay it off?"

09:01 He did. So over my time, well, before I finished my time.…I started my apprenticeship at ten and six a week. Ten shillings and six pence. Second payment, I got fifteen. The third payment I got seventeen and six. It went up in such small amounts…

09:30 And by that time, we were working all sorts of over time, no over time pay. We worked at nights, I would

be working on Saturday afternoon, at night-time. When all the lights came on, I would still be working. No ‘over time’ in those days. A forty eight hour week, we’d be working. Anyhow, I was learning. And I turned out a good watchmaker.

10:01 He paid me a compliment. He said that I could teach him, when I’d finished. And I did all practical work, and a few books. But by that time, we had nine…Our business had grown, we had nine watchmakers. And he said,

10:30 “I’ll make you a foreman.” So I became foreman of a watch repair department, with myself….Not so much as a boss, because he didn’t do so much of the work then. He had branched out, into another place. So I was manager of that place, and foreman of the workshop, at nineteen. So that got me on, okay.

11:00 We come to the wartime, which was in….Oh, he let me have the time off to go that….I don’t think he could have done anything about it…He let me have time off to go and do what we thought was three months training as a National Service, and that was done in 1939. A lot of people today haven’t heard of it, but I did a hundred and forty six days National Service, in the army,

11:31 out at Redbank, outside near Ipswich there, and he carried on…I did my ‘boot training’ and all that, with a unit of the CMF, who were in camp at the same time. And they were from the country. In those days, they used to call it the Citizens Militia Force.

12:04 When I looked up my discharge, I see that I am listed as belonging to the CMF. Nothing to do with coming in under this scheme of training people…So I served a hundred and forty six days up there, learned how to slope arms, again, but I realised

12:30 then that the army wasn’t for me. So I had made up my mind. The last day on parade, when they were saying goodbye to us at Redbank, the CO came up and said, “All right, you all know how to do the drills. We’re looking for instructors.” He said, “Anybody who wants to volunteer, we will take you into the AIF

13:00 as instructors, with three stripes.” I could have walked straight into that….

Why wasn’t the army for you?

It wasn’t the army for me. I thought I could do more with my time, and my talent. So, I went back, the next day I put in my application to join the airforce. I sent a letter in and got a letter back in a week and it says, “Show yourself at Amberley for a trade test, then we will take it from there.”

13:33 So I showed up there and did a trade test, the stupidest trade test that anybody could ever do. Ridiculous. They couldn’t judge anybody on what they did as a trade test, whether you were going to be a good instrument maker or whatever. There were two categories. You could be an instrument maker or an instrument repairer. An instrument repairer was never allowed to open an instrument. He was never allowed to do any repairs on it.

14:02 He could change an instrument, he could test an instrument, and do all that, but he could never open one or do any repairs. But an instrument maker, was what I chose, and I had to go to Melbourne then, to do a course at Melbourne Technical College, as an instrument maker, for I think about eight months. That’s how I met that mate of mine from Adelaide, and we became great pals.

14:33 It was a bit of a farce, because the man who trained us there…Most of my learning about instruments came out of the books. On printed sheets of paper. He worked for a firm that made thermometers. That was all he knew about it. He told us straight up. He said, “I don’t know anything about aircraft instruments.” All he could do, he taught us a lot about

15:00 thermometers. But all the rest came, he read these things out of books. But half the course was practical, as well as theoretical. I learnt more at the practical side of it, because they taught us how to use ‘Hugh’s Lathe’. They had a ten inch…Do you know what a ten-inch chuck is? Well, the chuck that you put the work into, its diameter is ten inches. The bed of it was ten foot long.

15:30 I just came from a watch-making department, where the thing sat on the bench alongside of you, and it only stood that high, the lathe, and the bed of it was only that long, and it only had an eight millimetre chuck. That meant it could only hold things eight millimetres in diameter. And we used to turn by hand. We never had any machinery. So onto this machine I got. I never knew…You had to wait for the instructor to come along and show

16:00 you what to do. And fortunately that mate of mine from Adelaide came along, and we teamed up, side by side, on these lathes. And he was a fitter and turner by trade. He had done his apprenticeship. What he didn’t know about lathes and machinery, it was nobody’s matter. So he taught me how to use it. We were finished our trade jobs and that, hours before the others, and we used to fiddle around with what we called ‘foreign orders’. Making aeroplanes out of castings

16:30 and that sort of stuff. Then halfway through the course, we changed to the small section, where they had a room full of these small lathes, right up my alley, so I taught him. So we came out of the course on top. It didn’t get us anywhere, but still….Out of thirty blokes on it. We were signed out as instrument makers.

You mentioned that the trade

17:00 **exam was useless. Why was that?**

I only had one thing to do. He gave me a file….They have different names, flat file, round file, half round, pointed….And one file is called a 'bastard' file. Now it was given that name because it's a very rough file. Extremely rough. Meant only to do the sort of rough work, then you go down to finer files.

17:30 He gave me a screw, a brass screw about that long, and he told me, "There's the vice, here's the file, file me a square on that round screw." Now a brass screw, a round screw, is tapered for a start, and you try to put it into a vice and it will only tighten it at one point, and the rest of it is loose. So here I was trying to file a square, on one side,

18:00 then you turn it around and do another side, then you turn it around…I had to file a square on a round tapered screw. I did it all right, but that was no trade test. No trade test at all. So this was just by the side, when the war finished, they gave us a fifty pound handout, the government did, to buy tools or to do something that might enhance your trade or something like that.

18:34 I said, "I'll get some new tools." Because all my tools had been put away, or some of them I took with me. That's another story. So I said, "I'll go to night school and do a bit of fitting and turning. It can't do any harm." So I used most of my fifty pound on going to night school. But there again,

19:01 they gave me lathes as big as this, and here I am used to five millimetre diameter pieces of material to work with, so….So that was my trade. And he passed me out. He said, "You know all about it. You know as much as I do. Probably more."

Do you remember the very start of the war?

No, I don't. I don't really.

19:30 Although, I suppose it did come on us a little bit gradually. They must have felt and sensed that it was coming, because why did they put us to training, as conscripts, to learn? Otherwise, what would have been the point? People higher up…We could only go by news and whatever. We used to read about Chamberlain [Neville Chamberlain , Prime minister of Britain, 1937–40] and what he did with the going over to Hitler

20:00 and trying to talk him into not going to war. He took on Poland first, then later on Russia, then down into France. He never took a notice of Chamberlain at all. As it turned out, he didn't say what he was going to do, but he did it. And that actually kick-started the war.

20:30 **What about your impressions, though? How you felt about it? Did you want to join up or…**

I did. That's why I volunteered to go. Practically dropped my RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] identity, and became RAF, because England was in the middle of the war, being bombed, day and night, and planes being shot down. I thought, "Yes,

21:00 I'd like to be in it." And of course, the run up to it, doing that training with the Army, and one day I was ex-army and the next day, I was RAAF. I suppose, I didn't have anybody in the family or anybody else. I was the first of the brothers in, I was the youngest, I went first. My second brother, he went later. He was conscripted in, he didn't go voluntarily.

21:30 And my eldest brother, he was 'reserved occupation'. He was manager of the Rockhampton General Hospital. And they said, "You can't have him. We want your hospital for wounded, and sick people." So he spent the war in Rockhampton. Colin, my brother, he got a 'cushy' job in ordinance and never went out of Queensland. And finished up a captain. Good luck to him.

22:03 We could read a bit about it in the paper, but as far making a decision about going into war, I think that was a bit later when I had a taste for the army…I was young. I was still under 21. I thought if I had to go in at all….I used to play around with model aeroplanes and that when I was a kid.

22:30 We made model aeroplanes and flew them around. But nothing that serious. Certainly not with a lead to anything like that. My boss said to me, when I went away. "Mervyn," he said….Of course he was a lot older than me, and he was not a very robust sort of a man, and I don't think they would have had him in the army. But he said "Merv, when you go,

23:00 your job will be here." It was. I went back to work for him, when I came out. Still with the 'old dose' [crew] of watchmakers in the place. There were about seven when I went back. And then the government put on a scheme of paying people, who had some sort of training,

23:30 before the war or during the war, and thought they might like to become a watchmaker, or a carpenter or something, they paid towards training these fellows. And I got three of them, came to us, and I had to teach them how to be a watchmaker. It wasn't too easy, because one bloke was a cripple. He had Polio. He didn't wind

24:00 up a watchmaker, but he wound up pretty efficient on clocks. So I taught him to be a clockman, he used to do all the clocks.

So tell us about the first moments when you joined the RAAF. Do you remember the first day?

The RAAF? I remember it to this day. It was an amusing day. We had to report

24:30 to Amberley…I've forgotten how I got up there. Must have been by train, I think. Got to Amberley. We got fitted out with our gear and so forth. Of course, everything was new. There was thirty of us to the squad. The first thing we had to do, we had to learn drill. So 'righto'…I don't think it was the first day, because we got kitted out, but perhaps the next day it happened.

25:00 We were taken out to the 'bullring', as they used to call it, to do the training. And we had a little fellow, 'pint-sized', and his name was Corporal Fenton, and he was the drill instructor. And he took on blokes, my size. I was six foot tall, even in those days. We had all sorts of trades in there, too. He lined us all up, he did the counting off.

25:32 We started by doing a bit of marching, 'left right left right'. Half of them didn't know the left from the right. I had just come out of the army. It was just easy for me. Sloping arms and doing rifle shooting. I had been through the lot. So he marched us down the road. Anyhow, coming down

26:00 the road towards us, was a fellow already in the airforce, and he had his cap on, and he had a bunch of papers under one arm, and one hand on the handlebars, and he was pedalling his bike down the road, coming towards us. And just as he got opposite us, he looked at us and yelled out at the top of his voice, "You'll be sorry."

26:30 Then went head over heels over the handlebars. I've never forgot it. My introduction to the airforce. "You'll be sorry." Maybe I was sometimes, very sorry, but it didn't….I now class it as the greatest experience of my life. I was thrown in the deep end, I had to fend for myself, I had nobody to show me anything, right from the first day I landed in the Middle East.

27:04 Because nobody knew anything. They just got out of Crete, and they got landed with a box full of instruments and they were told, "Here, you, fix those." So talk about being thrown in the deep end. But I learned bit by bit, books and so forth. I even had time to ply my own trade. I took a box, that long, about that wide, and that deep,

27:34 with all the tools, pliers, tweezers, files, all sorts of things that I thought would be useful, they went in my kitbag and I took them around the world with me and brought them home again. I've still got them. And I had opportunities, a thousand opportunities, to make a lot of money.

28:02 I didn't choose to do it…I wasn't doing it in my time, but in someone else's time. I had the facilities, I had a bench to work on, and I had the materials I needed and so forth, and I repaired dozens and dozens and dozens of watches that belonged to the airforce. When a pilot was issued with all his gear, he was issued with a watch, that had all the

28:30 stop watch and navigation things on it. And also the navigators got a very similar watch. And those watches used to be on their clothing card, and they had to account for that. If they lost it, they had to pay for it. The same with their clothes. It was the same in both the RAF and the same overseas. In the Middle East, our biggest enemy was dust. And the chappies, their watch would stop, they knew….

29:00 We had told them, that if they sent the watch in through the channels, through the store, back down to base to get fixed up, they would never see it again. And they probably would never get another one. So when they learnt there was a watchmaker around, I had all the watches in the world come in. But I fixed up their watches on the spot, as complicated as they were.

29:30 And worked in filthy conditions. You have no idea. When you first saw the fighting in Iraq, and you saw the tanks, and you saw that dust flying, we had it every day over there. We had winds there that blew for four days at a time. 'Khamsin' Winds, they called it. You couldn't work. Sometimes the dust was so thick, well…

30:02 We weren't supposed to open an instrument under those conditions. We were supposed to work in an air-conditioned room, with an airlock. We laughed at them. This is what the good book said. "You mustn't open instruments unless you are in a proper air-locked room." I repaired watches and I repaired gyroscopes,

30:30 and all sorts of things, under those conditions.

Were you ever given any kind of payment or favour for repairing watches?

The biggest favour I think I got mostly was a couple of 'Mars Bars' [confectionery] or a couple of bottles of 'plonk' [alcohol], which were usually rationed. And I enjoyed that, because I am a non-drinker. And I used to trade the bottles of drink for the 'Mars' bars or something out of the canteen.

31:00 I lived on Mars bars. No, I never charged. There was nowhere to spend the money, anyhow. You know, I didn't have leave on the desert for eighteen months. We were so busy in advances and retreats…I went up three times and came back twice. So every time you went up, you dragged your gear and everything with you, you set up shop and we worked

31:32 …under the most appalling conditions. Particularly when you went out into the desert to pick up a 'kite'

[aircraft]. You ate sand.

Still on the training, how did you cope with that initial basic training, when you first joined the RAAF, before you went off to Melbourne?

32:00 Well, I'll tell you, it was easy for me, because I had just done the training in the Army. The only thing different, was that the airforce saluted differently. They changed step differently. A few things like that, but the rest was easy. Sloping arms…I turned out later, and I proved to be, even when I was overseas, to be a

32:30 'crack' rifle shot, but it didn't happen then. I learnt out in the desert. I could hit a kerosene tin at two hundred yards, and not shoot at anybody. We practised and practised and practised. I don't know, I seemed to fall into it. There was nothing peculiar about it. I enjoyed my time,

33:00 even though we said a few nasty words about the conditions and the food that we had to eat. But I have always appreciated that as an experience. Even from the start, I just fell into it. As I say, halfway through that course in the airforce, I was taking the job of the drill instructor, teaching a bloke who had two left feet. And I used to have to take him behind

33:30 a tree and show him how to slope arms. And that's how I spent my time in the squad, teaching somebody else, because I had already done it. And when of course we went overseas, it just automatically fell in….at every opportunity we got. There was always ample ammunition floating around. And we'd go out in our time off and stick a

34:00 can or a bottle up, and blast away at them. Shooting away at them with armour piercing bullets and incendiaries. That was the bullets left over out of the aircraft. Because when they came back and they hadn't finished a whole 'belt' [of bullets], the armourers just tossed it. Never used them again. In with a new belt, because the

34:30 belts were already done. Although they would have to do them in their spare time. Sit there, one by one, shoving them into the clips. And mixing them up, they had to be mixed up. You couldn't have two incendiaries together, or two armour piercing. Mainly because incendiaries were mainly used as target markers. Particularly in the dark.

35:01 You saw where the incendiaries were going, and you followed it up with the others.

How were they mixed up? What kind of ratios?

I'm trying to remember now. There was armour piercing, incendiary, just plain bullets, about four or five different kinds. Incendiaries and armour piercing and just ordinary bullets and….

35:35 Say about four, in groups of four, so that would give the bloke time to shift his sights. He couldn't follow the others, because they didn't make marks through the air, but incendiaries did.

After the basic training,

36:01 **what kind of expectations did you have of what you would be learning, in Melbourne?**

We 'passed out' [graduated]. We were number one squad when we passed out, so that was a feather in our cap. I happened to be…or the squad that we went in…Amberley Aerodrome was

36:30 just built, and we were the first squads into Amberley, as a unit. Everything was brand new, and we got beautiful food. It was just like being in a hotel. So, I suppose we expected when we got out that we would get similar, but so many things…When we went to Melbourne, we went

37:00 to the barracks in Latrobe Street, which wasn't a huge place, it was mostly used for training in peace time, and they soon found they didn't have enough room for people to sleep there, so they put us out in a billet. So this friend of mine from Adelaide, 'Curly' I called him, we got together, and we found a house at North Melbourne, with a family.

37:30 A man and his wife, who worked, and three children, of a similar age. And they took us in and billeted us, they got paid for it, mind you, but we got home food. That was great. The camp food was never the best, at any place that you went. And all the time that we were there…

38:00 And every morning we caught the tram into North Melbourne, got off at Latrobe Street, and all the airmen that were going to the college, and there were some hundreds of them, they all had to march… Latrobe Street was down near the station. We marched from there, up Latrobe Street to

38:30 the top of the hill, where the college was, at the attention, say about four hundred men, marching at attention, and we just came off the drill square, so we knew how to…In those days, we marched with our arms straight out like this, like a signal, down here and up there like that. And when we saluted, we had to slam our left foot down. 'Bang'.

39:00 As they marched up…The road goes down and up like that. When we were at the bottom end, just leaving, the others were up the top. And yet, there wouldn't have been an arm out of line. There was a line right up the street. And the CO used to sneak around, and would come out a side street, and stand

on a side street, and if you weren't looking

39:30 out for him and you didn't salute him, you were in trouble. That's all he would do, race up there, stand on the side of the road at attention and you had to give him a salute. Well, I can tell you, the windows used to rattle, when those blokes would come down with their boots, the salute, 'crash'.

40:00 We had the big boots on, with metal things on the bottom, and gee they made a racket. They taught you how to march

We're at the end of the tape.

Tape 4

00:39 **You were just saying?**

After the parade on that Sunday afternoon, we had our tea, in the barracks upstairs…I had made up my mind to go to church, in the big city church in Melbourne

01:00 that night, and I just got up in the room and said, "Would anybody else like to go to church? I'm going to the Methodist Church." And another voice said, "I will go with you." And it turned out to be my mate, Curly Pascoe. He came from Adelaide and he was a Methodist, used to go to a big church over there. We went to the church that evening, after tea,

01:32 and we were welcomed. We stayed afterwards, they had a coffee shop afterwards. The rest of the time we were in there, we used to spend our time either in the Methodist Church coffee shop, after church, or in the Presbyterian, whichever had the nicest girls.

Did you get to know some girls? Did you have some time off?

Oh, well, we just got to know them, to talk to them.

02:04 We had more to do with the people in the home, where we were billeted. We used to go out. I enjoyed tennis, I played a lot of tennis, I considered myself not a bad tennis player. And any time off, I used to go across to the lawn courts at Melbourne and have a game of tennis. Any time else I could get a ball… These people lived in a

02:30 street where they had a brick wall. And I used to bang the ball up against the brick wall. Just practise. Other places we went to, the both of us, we went together just about everywhere. This might give you a bit of a laugh. We went to the Airforce Club, there was always an Airforce Club in the big cities. So we'd go along and we'd ask, "Any tickets for today?"

03:04 And sure enough, there would be tickets. This particular day there were some tickets going for the Theatre Royal. It was a vaudeville show in Melbourne. Me and Curly elected to go on the Saturday night, free. We got the tickets free. So we went down, we get out seats,

03:30 and they turned on a pretty good show of vaudeville dancing, and blokes juggling, and all this sort of stuff. Then they had a band and played music. Towards the end of the program, the MC [Master of Ceremonies] got up and said, "This is the time of the program when it's audience participation."

04:00 Oh, yes? We'd heard of those before. "What I want," he said, "I want a volunteer to come up and sing a song for us." Well, there was dead silence. Then, you wouldn't believe it, the bloke next door to me stands up, "I'll sing." So he marched up the front,

04:30 and he went over to the band. "Now what are you going to sing?" He scratched his head a bit and said, "Do you know 'Trees'?" The blokes on the band were only used to jazz music and stuff like that. "Trees? We've never heard of it." "All right," he said, "I'll sing it without the music." And he did, too, and he turned out to have the most beautiful voice.

05:01 I suppose it might be before your time, but have you heard of Nelson Eddie? Jeanette McDonald? Know them at all? Well, that's going back a few years, but they sang all the most popular songs. 'Maid Of The Mountain' and all that sort of stuff. Light opera. And he sang 'Trees' and he was an absolute dead ringer of Nelson Eddie.

05:33 Ten bob he got for singing that. So that was quite a night, a bit of fun.

You said how you almost had to teach yourself how to use the equipment in Melbourne. But at the end of it, how well did you feel you knew the equipment?

I could tackle anything. Anything that came along. As I said, before, when I went into the Middle East, I was

06:00 dispatched to the Middle East Torpedo Training School. Now, in anybody's imagination wouldn't I have

thought, I would have anything to do with torpedoes. And yet, there I was, pulling torpedoes to pieces and repairing the gyroscopic instruments in torpedoes, which had a rotor almost as big as a football in it, which was

06:30 triggered by a mechanism…When it was shot out of a tube or anything, it triggered the mechanism and it gave the gyroscope a kick. Before it touched the water, it was doing two thousand 'revs' [revolutions], and by the time it got to the target it was doing six thousand revs. That was the spinning gyroscope. That was the…weight of them. So a gyroscope's properties are that

07:00 they remain steady, no matter how the axis moves, they remain steady. The axis moved. So that's how, when you put a gyroscope and things, and you put an axis around it like that, and you move it…You attach your controls to the 'gimbal rings', as they called them, they move your controls, but the gyro stays straight ahead. I learnt to do that.

07:37 The one on the….The British one, the gyroscope for the British aeroplanes, only does two thousand revs, but it's only that round. But it started off like air pressure. It gets a burst of air pressure, and it hits buckets and it spins it, and then the pressure builds up and it gets up to speed.

08:00 But that torpedo, it was a huge torpedo. Sixteen or eighteen feet long, I think they were. And it had to guide that against waves, battering. So any movement would be automatically corrected by the gyroscope. So okay, you can say, I knew what I was doing. But only because I learnt on the smaller instruments.

And then,

08:30 later on, 'Sphery' comes along with an electronic one. That I didn't know too much about. But fortunately for us, they were fitted mostly in the American planes, and we didn't have too many of those in the Middle East.

09:00 **After Melbourne, where did you go and what were you doing?**

After Melbourne, the first posting was Richmond. We went up there and I'm a bit ashamed of what we did up there. There was absolutely nothing for us to do. There was one Wirraway, training plane, that was our airforce.

09:30 We actually did have a squadron of Lockheed…supposedly to be bombers, but they were civilian aircraft. They were at Amberley, when I was at Amberley, there was a squadron of Lockheed Hudson bombers [medium bomber/transport]. In Richmond,

10:00 they had a beautiful set-up. They had air-conditioned rooms to do repairs in. I learnt a bit about compasses and built a few compasses. I learnt a bit about that. But there was little or nothing to do, because there was only enough work for the fellows they already had there. Then they got loaded with a bunch of blokes coming to do some work. So,

10:30 we used to have to go and find somewhere to hide. So we'd look out and find an old airforce crate. The big crate that came in the ships on. A popular hideout. We'd just go there and play cards. Just to get out of the peoples' way. "We've got nothing for you to do, go and find something to do." Fortunately, we weren't there

11:00 for very long. Six weeks was the length of time I was there. But I did learn a few things, and I think that was the first time I fully opened an instrument. Myself. And learnt a little bit about it, and how to get them airtight and all that sort of thing again. And they had the proper test tanks to put them in and check them, evacuate them, whatever. Different instruments worked different ways. Some worked

11:30 on a vacuum, some worked on pressure. But it was about six weeks when the CO pulled us altogether on the parade ground and said that this scheme had just come to light, where by anybody who wanted to they could join the RAF. Now a few…civilians and that had gone to England,

12:00 in the early part of the war, to train. They learned their piloting and that over there, but nothing like that for ground crew. So this came up, that we would become completely subordinate to the RAF. They would pay us, they would feed us, but we still retained our RAAF identity. Which was a good thing. We still had our badges and our insignia…

12:30 Very proud of Australia up here. And we carried that all the way through until we came home. We never had any bother with it, in the English units and that, in the airforce and that, you came across all types of people….All the different counties and that, in England, and they all spoke a different language.

13:00 And when we went there, we couldn't understand them. But after a few months, you almost talked the same lingo as the 'Geordies' did and the 'Cockneys' used to do. We've got a slang of our own, haven't we? And not everybody that comes here catches onto it straight away. But by jove, it was bad over there. But this was in the Middle East and the whole unit was RAAF, and of course it was even worse when I got to England and I came to meet a lot of

13:31 the local population and that sort of thing. Particularly out in the wild, wild west and you tried to find out if he had any eggs for sale, or something like that. It was very hard. But you got used to it. I had no

problems and I made a very good friend of an English fellow in the workshop. By trade, he was a carpenter.

14:01 And he made a beautiful 'port' [suitcase] for me over there. And instead of having a kitbag to cart around, I had a port as big as that. Made out of plywood, beautifully made. Strong as anything, and I packed all my stuff in that port. And because we were in this advance unit, I just grabbed the port and threw it on the back of the truck and off we went.

14:30 **Can you tell us about being split into two groups to go to the RAF and then sent off on the sea trip?**

Well, yes, that happened at Richmond, and as I said the CO came off and told us….They only wanted six hundred. At the time they didn't specify that we would be split up into three hundred one way, and three hundred the other. That came a bit later when we got down to

15:01 Ascot Vale. It was the racecourse then, still is I think. But they turned it into a embarkation depot, and put bunks and that into it. Then they started feeding us the information that we might be…that only three hundred will be going to the Middle East. And it started to show in the uniforms that we got.

15:31 We were given uniforms for the summer, and we were given uniforms for the winter. We had both. When we went to the Middle East, we had both uniforms for the winter and summer. If you went to England, you only had winter. So that sorted the boys out. Because you knew when you got khaki, it's Egypt. If you're just getting the woollen suits

16:00 and that. that they had. So that was all done there, and also vaccinations. Oh, the needles. They lined us all up, 'bang' 'bang', this one that one. And some take, some don't take. And if yours didn't take, you went back and got another one. After about a week, when they usually settle down and you say, "Well, that's over," but

16:30 two or three of them left a scar on your arm, particular the vaccinations that they used to scratch, they always left a scar. At the end of the week, I was called up to the orderly room…I was an AC1 [Aircraftsman First Class] then. "Pritchard, we haven't got any record here that you've had your shots." I went through it with

17:01 everybody else. I said, "I've got one scar here to show it." "Oh," he said, "but we haven't got anything here to show that you've had any at all." I said, "What are you going to do about it?" He said, "What you are going to do about it, is you are going to have them all over." I had to go back and have second doses of shots, and I was 'crook' [sick] from it as well. A lot of the times they used to make you very sick. Anyhow, I was still enough to get

17:30 on my feet when the fortnight was up, and they told us, "Righto, you're on the train for Sydney." That's about all Ascot Vale and that comprised of, kitting us out and getting us ready. But three hundred of us were practically certain that we were going to the Middle East and the others were going to England. We went by train, and it was mostly at night, we travelled at night, and we got to Woolloomooloo,

18:00 and they took us right onto the wharves. The train runs right onto the wharves at Woolloomooloo, and we had to climb onto small boats and be taken out to the Queen Elizabeth, because she was out in the harbour. She couldn't come in too close. When we were down on the water, we looked up at her…The front nose of the boat is a hundred feet from the water.

18:32 I think there was six floors below waterline, in the Queen Elizabeth, and there's about nine above. Not including the first class deck, the promenade decks and boat decks. And there's nine miles of corridors that you can walk around. And we did it. We walked around it for exercise.

19:00 So, my family….There was no way of telling them where we were or how we were going. They didn't see us off. But we had quite a rousing send off from Sydney. When, by the time that everybody got on board…And by that time, the army were already on board, and there's six thousand of them and only nine hundred of us. But there were also contingents of

19:33 soldiers of some sort, from the Free French, from the New Caledonias, and also Kiwis from New Zealand. They were already on board, because the 'Elizabeth' had already been to New Zealand before she came to pick us up from Sydney. So, we went on board and these lighters, there was just this big doorway in the side of the ship, and

20:00 we came up it, and we climbed on board with these two kitbags, stuffed with clothing, because we had two, hot and cold, our rifle, our bayonet on our belt, our knapsack on our back, tin hat and a gas mask, which we never put on in the five years I was over there, because there was no gas in the Middle East. We had

20:30 drill, but not in earnest. Then we had to climb these stairs from about water level to about the third floor down, which was our floor, where we were going and we were all marched there. And it turned out that what would have been in peace time, but it had never got that far, a third class dining salon. And it was beautifully set out.

21:00 The walls were a beautiful blue, like a sky or azure blue, and it was covered with stars and rainbows

and moons, in gold. I can tell you, the stars didn't last long. They used to put the forms up against the wall and pinch the stars out of them. She must have been a wreck after a few times as a troop ship.

21:32 There was, I think there was over three hundred were in there sleeping, with their bunks from the floor, first one, second one, the third one was two feet from the ceiling. So if you picked the wrong straw and had to get in the top bunk, you had to roll into it. And if you sat up in a hurry, you would crack your head. But anyhow, that was

22:00 getting onto boat. Later they took one of the kitbags away from us. We never saw it again until we got to England, because we never wanted it in the Middle East. But when we got to England, we got into blues. And packed what we had of khakis away. We still have them.

Tell us about the journey.

22:30 **What was the journey like on the ship?**

Well, as I said there was three boats, the Aquitania, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth. In size, the Aquitania had four funnels, the Queen Mary had three funnels, the Elizabeth had two funnels. That was the Elizabeth One. Since then, there's two and three now, I think. They've just launched the third one.

23:01 Eighty seven thousand tons, all up….

What was it like for you on board this ship? What was the journey like for you?

Well, okay….We had to eat in a second class dining room, much larger, and we ate in three sessions. Two thousand men at a time, three sessions,

23:30 so, whoever had the last one had a pretty dirty table, I can tell you. But the food was shocking. Absolutely shocking. We lived on hard boiled eggs and corned meat, marmalade and butter and jam bread, and occasionally some sort of a cake. But the strangest part about it was all the food on board was made in

24:00 the first class cookhouse, whatever they called it in peace time, in the kitchen. And the officers ate in the first class mess, were served a seven course meal with waiters, and we sat and ate hard boiled eggs that were like rocks, they were black.

24:33 As a matter of fact, we just took the eggs and dumped them straight into the bins. They just weren't fit to eat. And we had those for the whole trip, over to Ceylon. We had a strike on board. A sit down strike at one mess, when the eggs showed up again and the meat….And we just refused

25:00 to get up, until they brought us some other food. Well, they didn't bring us food that day. They promised it would be better the next day, and it was better the next day, the next meal. That was the midday meal, we got chops. And the next day, we were back to the same again, eggs. And that was, I think, the greatest racket that was ever instigated during the war.

25:31 Those boats were paid an enormous amount by the Australian government to ship the troops overseas. And that included feeding us. Now, if they could cut down on the food, that's so much more profit they made per man. When you talk about six thousand…Now when that boat went to England and…

26:02 It went on the America-England run, it had twelve thousand men on board. They slept in three shifts. A man would get out, and another would get in the same bed, and when he got out, someone else got in. How did they feed them? We never found out. But it was like that…The Stratheden, when we went to the Middle East, was fair tucker. It wasn't bad. And so was the…Of course, when we were

26:30 in the warrant officers' mess, we had pretty good tucker, on the one coming home from England to Australia. But the others, well, whatever…Night-time was always a bad time on board the troop ships. There is nothing to do. When we were going over to the Middle East, they had a lot of AIF on board. And there was a tremendous number of First World War AIF going back to have a second go. And

27:00 a lot of them, they gave them stripes and straightaway they were put in charge of sections and that, you know? And in the day time they would give those blokes the job of instructing us. There would be a whole gang sitting on the deck, or sitting in rooms, and these fellows would come and talk to you, because they'd been to Egypt and the Middle East, in the First World War. The Camel Corps and the Light Horse [Australian Light Horse Brigade] and that sort of thing.

27:31 And they told us all sorts of stories about….and told us things to look out for, and what not to do and how to look after yourself and all the naughty things and that that they got up, that they the blokes would probably do it when they got over there. Very enlightening for me, anyhow, and others like me.

28:00 At night-time, the only thing to do was play…It was like the casino. Every space on board or on the floor, had a 'Crown & Anchor' going, crib, poker, anything you like; two-up. All going underneath. Windows shut, doors are closed, the smoke, you could cut it. 'Curly' and I used to go up on deck,

28:32 and we used to like going right out on the front of the boat and standing there, with the jolly wind blowing in your face, and the spray coming over…The incident that we had going across the Great

Australian Bite, I think I told you, the HMAS Australia was our escort, and she was on

29:00 port side, about two or three miles, the others were scattered around. Three boats, only three boats. Anyhow, going across, we run into a terrific gale. An enormous gale, and the winds were blowing so you couldn't walk outside. You couldn't go outside, you would get blown off the deck. And the boats were going up like this, like a lift, and then they come down, 'crash'. Even the big fellows.

29:30 And the poor old HMAS Australia, she didn't go up and down because of its weight, she used to go straight through the waves like that. And you'd see the waves go right over the boat and come out the other side. Anyway, with all that, we eventually got to Fremantle and we had to stay there, out in the harbour, we weren't allowed to go ashore. Because the Aquitania blew her boiler. And

30:00 the Queen Elizabeth lost all the degaussing gear. You know the degassing gear that is used for electronic mines? It goes right around the edge of the ship. About two or three rows of this magnetic cable. It knocked it right off the front of the boat. They had to go and have it all repaired in Fremantle. We sat in harbour, on board the boats, and we weren't allowed to go ashore. Because the boat that had been there before us,

30:30 they wrecked Fremantle. They did all sorts of things. So they said, "No more AIF are going to be allowed ashore at Fremantle." So that was us. And after we left there, we had another scare going across the Indian Ocean when they thought they'd….I think the Australia thought they'd seen a submarine on the horizon, and they turned off and went out towards it.

31:01 The Queen Elizabeth and the Aquitania and the Mary turned around and headed back towards Australia again, and they opened up the engines. We were normally 'stooging' along at about twenty eight knots. You know what we were doing, on our way back to Australia? Forty three. Now forty three knots is over fifty miles an hour, and that huge boat

31:30 was thumping along at forty three knots. And the others weren't far behind us, but after a while the signal came back that it was only a whale. It wasn't a submarine at all. So we turned around and headed back. And the next part of our journey was Ceylon. We stopped off at Trincomalee in Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, and we had to take on water and fuel

32:00 there, and we stayed overnight. And of course, the very brightest AIF boys said, "We're not going to stick the night out here, let's go ashore." So they jumped overboard, off the Queen Elizabeth. I don't know how they got down, because that's terribly high to jump off, even the lowest deck. But they jumped over, swam ashore, had a night on the town, saw some girls, swam back the next morning into the arms of the MPs [Military Police],

32:30 who put them in the brig [shipboard prison]. That was just an incident. But I saw one of the most beautiful sunsets in my life, while we were sitting at harbour, in Trincomalee. And it was sort of, almost a land locked harbour. It had a small opening, enough for the boats to come through. And the sun went down between the two hills. And colours, unbelievable. I took a camera with me, and I took a lot of photos.

33:01 I wasn't able to get that one. It must have been downstairs somewhere. I took a number of photos of the boats steaming alongside of us in convoy, through the porthole. I got some beautiful photographs, of what went on during the war. Everything was censored. If you put them into a

33:31 local photographer, and anything was like that, he would call the police. And they'd confiscate it. So a lot of mine were done 'under the lap' [secretly], and because I was an instrument maker….Another part of my jobs was cameras. Every aircraft had a camera on board, sometimes they had two, so when anything went wrong with cameras? 'Muggins' [myself]

34:01 had to fix it. Because the blokes who worked on the photography section only knew how to take pictures. They didn't know how to fix them. Or they knew how to develop. I said, "All right, I'll fix your camera for you, you develop my pictures." So I had a working arrangement. Whenever I had a film, I didn't send it into town or anywhere like that, I gave it to the photographers and

34:33 they'd run off a few for me. So that's how I got most of my photos, and kept them. A few that I had to send in, when we got them back they were very poor quality, they'd lost their colour. But the others were all gloss photographs, I think. I had a few really good photos that would take a prize anywhere.

35:06 **Tell us about coming from Ceylon and then arriving in the Middle East?**

Well, after we left Ceylon we were heading for…The first port in your sight is Aden, but you don't call in there. We deviated from there and went up the Red Sea. Now the Red Sea is like a great

35:30 big gulf. And we learned we were only going to be there for a little while because the Suez Canal was constantly bombed. And there was quite a number of ships that got hit and were sunk in the actual canal itself, and they had a lot of jobs moving them, or destroying them. Some of them, they left them there and just went around them. You see,

36:00 the Suez is ninety miles long, but it's split up into three sections. There's about thirty miles of the front section of the canal, that they dug by hand, done by de Lesseps [Ferdinand de Lesseps, canal engineer],

and he's got his monument at the end of it to prove it. Then you run into the first lake, a small bit of lake, which is Bitter Lake. It's called Bitter because it's got salt in it, it's got salt coming in from both ends.

36:30 And then you get another bit of canal, then you get the Great Bitter Lake, which is bigger again, and it's also bitter. Then you've got another section, thirty mile of canal, which is at the Suez end. So it takes you quite a while to go through the Suez, practically all day. It's got to be clear of shipping, for a start, for us to go through, but we didn't go through the canal, they disembarked us at

37:00 the southern end, the bay called Tewfik. And we got off the boat the same way as we got on it. Onto barges, through a hole in the side, and went ashore that way. And we cleared about six thousand of odd troops in the day, in these little lighters and pontoons and boats that they brought alongside, and it turned around and

37:30 'went for its life', before dark. They couldn't afford for it to be in the harbour at night-time, because that's when they bombed, at night-time. In that period of time that we waited in the Suez, they had bombed Tewfik Harbour, and they had hit one ship that was….lying at anchor in the harbour, and the bomb went down the funnel, blew a hole in the bottom, but they managed to beach it.

38:00 They had enough power left to go and beached it, run it up onto the beach. And as we came in, that was one of the first things they pointed out. We could have been in there, but we weren't. So that sort of constituted the actual boat. It was boring on the boat while we were in the Red Sea. There was nothing to do, nothing to see, except we had to work like wharfies.

38:30 Loading and unloading all the stores that they had packed down in the holds. That all had to be brought up by hand. No cranes, no nothing like that. So we passed them along in a great chain, from down in the hold and out of the side. We passed them out like that. So that kept you occupied and we were pretty fit by the time we finished it.

39:01 Then of course, the next thing you're on land, and off the boat we got straight onto a train, at Point Tewfik. We ran parallel with the canal, until we got up to the small bit of the lake, and there was the town of Ismailiyah, and there was the embarkation or disembarkation is.

39:32 Quite well established, because they go through there by the thousands. Ships came in at that end, or came in the top end, so they didn't have to go through to Ismailiyah.

We'll just pause there…

Tape 5

00:50 **What were some of the first things that struck you about the Middle East? About the weather, or the environment?**

01:03 I don't know how you'd put it….We came from Australia to the Middle East. Not a great deal of climate change or temperature change. That was more evident when I left the Middle East in the middle of summer, and we got to England in the middle of winter. We really felt the cold. But I think we got acclimatised pretty quickly. Now, we had a fortnight down on the shores of

01:30 the Bitter Lake. Now that place was highly organised out there. They even had a clubhouse. They had boats, they had canoes. They had a jetty, then another fifty or a hundred yards further out they had a platform on drums. So you could dive off the jetty, swim out, then back out there if you wanted to. If you were game enough,

02:00 because it was pretty hot. The second time back, on the way home, was quiet a different matter. And there was a bit of story there. But what we noticed, a lot came in from England, boatloads coming in from England, in their shorts….Our biggest asset was our felt hat. We used it all the time,

02:30 in the sun. We worked in it, swam in it, slept in it, washed in it. We did everything that you could use it for. But when the English people and that, particularly, came from England, oh my goodness me, they were shockingly outfitted. You thought…You know in the days of the [British] Raj in India? That's where you thought they were going. They had their pith helmets on, sleeves down to

03:00 here, Bombay bloomers down to here….We soon knocked that out of them. They finished up playing football with their helmets. They would have loved to have got their hands on a felt hat. It wasn't easy….We could have got a fortune to sell them, you know. Anybody would have paid you any money for them, but they were too valuable to us. But, we went swimming there

03:30 a lot. In the period, in the first time we were there. But later on, the second time, on our way home, we had a bit more time there, and we even went to the extent of making a sail boat. And all the bits and pieces we could find around the place, and the three of us got together and made a sail boat. There was one sail on it, made out of a tent, canvas off a tent and so forth. And we sailed

04:00 right out into the middle of the lakes with it. Had great fun. And there were times that we actually swam, from the shore, out of sight of land. Right out into the middle of the lake. I don't know whether there were any fish or sharks or anything there. I never gave it a thought. But the three of us, we just stroked along, and paddled along, and floated for a while, and swam a bit further. We just had the time, and the water was a beautiful temperature.

04:34 On the time off, we would go swimming. And so, the introduction to the place was quiet good, because we had the time to go swimming, but we were only there for a fortnight, before I was first posted out to my first station, or squadron. There I was thrown in the deep end.

05:01 We had only tents, and very few facilities, because that was the unit that got left behind in Crete. All the equipment and so forth, so. So if you wanted to wash there, you did your best in your steel helmet or in a kerosene tin. A number of times you'd have a half of tin of water and you'd get all soaped up and all ready with nothing on,

05:30 a whirlwind would come through the tent, and you would get plastered with sand. It was all hard to get off when you haven't got very much water to wash it off with.

What were the other men in this unit like?

Well, there was only eighteen Australians went to this unit. Not one of us had any rank. We were just in the airforce, LACs, which is Leading Aircraftsmen.

06:03 It didn't take long for the Australians to assert themselves. They have a lot of initiative, Australians. And a lot of these fellows were tradesmen. Motor mechanics and things like that. They went into engines and I went into something in my own type of trade, working on the instruments. And it wasn't

06:30 long before they were all made corporals, and put in charge of a section. And if you there was a shortage of tents, or if there was a shortage of some kind of tool or appliance that was required, just ask an Australian. The next thing they would find one for you. They were very good at acquiring things, as we called it.

Any particular tricks in acquiring things?

Oh, I better not tell you about those.

07:04 There was lots of opportunities to do it. You would have a whole camp, nothing but tents, with nobody in them. Wide open to helping yourself to a tent or two. So if we were short of tents, we would go and help ourselves to a tent…

How were the eighteen Australians regard by the rest of the unit?

They fitted in very well.

07:30 We all fit in. There was a very young English lad. He was the only other instrument…He was an instrument repairer, and I was the instrument maker. So I was allowed to repair instruments, but he was only allowed to fit them. And do small jobs like that. No, I don't think we had any….

08:00 Not in my section, or in the workshop where I had my section to work in, I don't remember any time that we had any….There might have been a few words thrown around in the mess when they got a few beers 'on board', or something like that. But on the whole they worked very well, because we had to work in a very close community, sort of thing. Particularly

08:30 when we moved from there, and we started moving up the Western Desert, and we broke them down in to base unit, advance unit and forward unit. See, those forward unit men, there would only be twelve of us, and you had to live in each other's pockets, for six weeks at a time. Sometimes longer. So you had to learn to get along with people.

What were the main differences between Australian

09:01 **members of the forces, and the British?**

I think on the British part, you can put it down to the system. Sometimes, the lack of initiative, they won't ever do anything off their own back. We would go straight ahead and 'bang', into it. And it would all be over and done with. And such things as acquiring something or other….You heard of a 'steel gantry'. Now a gantry

09:30 is a thing, that starts on wheels here and goes up like this, on top, and she's got a hoist on it. We used to use it for lifting engines out. Nobody was using it, so it was a 'fair cop'. We had no tools. We didn't have anything to lift an engine out with. So we made good use of that one. But it was actually captured from the Germans, originally. And while they were getting this

10:00 unit together, somehow or the other, I don't know where it appeared. You see, when we first got over there, we were there at a time when we were still fighting the Italians. It was the Italians who first came into Egypt, and they were trying to fight the Egyptians and take over the canal system. So they could stop anybody they didn't want to allow, through the Canal. And of course, Mussolini and Hitler were hand in hand and they were working together,

10:32 so the Italians started. When the old fellows first went over there, that was who they fought. They fought the Italians. But the Italians were the worst fighters that we ever came across in our life. They had not guts, for 'staying the steel', as we used to say. They never liked the bayonet fight. And even when they saw it, they put their hands up and surrendered.

11:00 They surrendered in the thousands and thousands and thousands. When we arrived there, there was concentration camps, of barbed wire enclosures, with all these Italians in the middle of the desert. You would run across these camps full of Italians. Well, somewhere along the line, there must have been a unit…Similar perhaps to what we were going to do, that had machinery. And in that unit they had two

11:31 fully completely fitted out workshops, on board the back of a big Lancer, that's an Italian truck, diesel trucks. One was a machine shop with lathes and saws, machine tools and all the things and that for a machine shop. The other one was a carpenter's shop. It had circular saws and band saws and planers. They just

12:00 walked out and left them behind. So they became ours. And we still had them at the end of my time there, after three and a half years, we still had those and they were a central part of our body, that when we moved up….Not with the forward unit, it was a base unit, and we were lucky to have a German Jew. He came down from Palestine to join the RAF, and

12:30 he was a fully trained operator of the machine shop. Gave him the job. Then an English boy who was a carpenter, he was put in charge of the carpenter's shop. And also to go with those, there was a 'charging unit', electric charging unit [generator], which they hooked onto the trailer at the back, so that wherever you stopped you had power. The power to

13:00 run the machines and that, and enough power to run some electric lights as well. So they were some of the best things that we acquired, and we had them all the time and serviced them and kept them still going. When I left the place, they were still going strong. And they went up on the advances and came back on the retreats.

How long were you with the unit before you started going out with the forward

13:30 **unit?**

Hard to tell. You sort of slowly fitted into the routine of the place. I'd say it was probably two or three months, because they already had crews getting this together, because they lost everything, as I said. So we had to get geared up, then we got

14:00 two GMC six wheel drive trucks, which would go through sand and that sort of thing, and this big articulator became another part of the unit, and the tractors…We came upon it, bit by bit.

Describe the articulators?

The articulator…You often see them. You know what a 'scammer' is?

14:30 You often see these big long loaders, where they run a 'grot', or a big caterpillar tractor, they run it up onto, they're very low to the ground. They could be….it wouldn't be that long. But ours was about fifty foot long, powered by its own engine, like a semi-trailer would be. We used it

15:00 mainly when we had to move a whole plane. We'd just take the wings off the plane, we had a 'Coles crane', which was another mobile thing. That came from England, the mobile cranes, they were called Coles cranes. We had a number of them. Sometimes you had to use two of them. If there was something heavy, you put one on either side and lifted it up. They

15:31 just lifted the planes, straight up off the ground and we'd take the undercarriage off, that's the wheels and the struts and things off, any extraneous parts, and the wings would come off, and we would just lift the fuselage up, from its lifting points and drop it straight onto the articulator. And it used to take up almost all the room. At the front of it and at the back of it, they used to have

16:00 stands that fitted it equally all the way around, and you could attach an engine. Take the engine off and fasten it to this stand, so you had a stand and a fuselage and another engine at the back, if it was a two engine plane. And the wings would go down either side of the fuselage, and we'd just strap them on, pat the bloke on the back and tell him, "Off you go." And he would head for home, or down to the main road and get back onto bitumen,

16:30 if he was anywhere near it. But a lot of the time we never saw the roads. We just travelled across the open country.

Where would he take the plane, then?

He would first take it back to our base unit, which would be quite some mile back, down the road. And they had another job to fulfil, too. They repaired a lot of the planes of the squadrons around about.

17:02 They would come and bring them there, and they would repair them, there on the spot. Some of them would need main planes, some would need engines. But if the plane was so badly battered, they would say, "Righto, on your way." And it would go right back down to the canal zone, where they had that big

maintenance unit, and they would take it off. They might use it for parts, or they might build it up again

17:30 and get it ready and send it back into operations again. Then the articulator, the 'Queen Mary' as we called it, we nicknamed her the 'Queen Mary'…

Why is that?

Oh, well maybe because it was bulgy and squat, and slim in others….Anyhow, it was commonly known as the 'Queen Mary'. Then she would come back, then, to our forward base, and she would stay there

18:00 until she was called for from the advance unit. You see, not every plane had to be picked up and brought back. We must have repaired hundreds of them, on the spot. We'd take spare engines, we took spare wheels, we took spare bits and pieces, air cleaners, you name it, whatever, some instruments and that we took with us. We never did that many actual repairing of instruments out there. The thing was to get

18:31 them working, if you could, test them….Well, we often did a lot of cannibalising, you know. Forage it off here to make that one, because we knew that one was going to be out of commission for a long time, so we would pinch something off that to make this one work. You asked me earlier in the piece about the difference between the English and the Australians? We would go ahead and do it.

19:00 They would stand by and wait until they got orders to do it. They would be sending messages backwards and forwards, "Will we do this? Will we do that?" By that time, we'd have it done. This was the difference between the Australian tradesmen and the English ones. Another thing, too, they lacked incentive, the English people. Their system, particularly in the army and airforce and navy, I think they're all the same.

19:32 You have to go through a lot of training, a lot of waiting for promotion. It took years and years and years. Now people who had been in the airforce or army or so forth, when they were young, they went straight from school, they could go straight into it. And

20:00 they'd learnt their trade in there, and they'd been there for years and years. And the war came along, and it was more years and years and years, and they hadn't even got to corporal. To get a sergeant, you'd have to be in there for twenty years. Terrible, their way of promotion. And I think a lot of them used to get a bit tired of that sort of thing. They lacked incentive. Now I think if they'd been handed out promotion a lot sooner, I

20:32 think they might have got more out of some of the blokes. But there was definitely a difference between the Australian units, working on the Australian unit and working on an English unit. As I say, I wound up, as far as I could go, as flight sergeant, I couldn't go any further. That's the highest rank I could get as an instrument maker. Otherwise you have to go into a commission rank, and you'd have to come back home and go to school and

21:00 go back to college and all the rest of it, sort of thing, to get a commission. And there was very few availabilities of commissions for what we used to called 'tradesmen'. The only commissioned officer we had to deal with, on any unit, squadron or whatever, he was an engineer. He was an engineer and he was commissioned officer. But he would have been 'in it', all his life.

21:30 **Do you remember the first plane that you performed this repair and salvage….?**

Planes were just planes. Two wheels and the wing; a wing and a prayer. No I don't, I can't tell you. As I said, anything at all that came down. Whether it had run out of fuel, and that's all we had to do was fill it up with fuel and on her way it would go.

22:00 Or sometimes you had to scrape a runaway for it, get rid of all the stones off it, and he'd take off down the desert and go back to his squadron. I can't honestly say that I know the first one that I did, because we'd done a lot back at base unit, before we got into the forward unit.

What were some of the main planes you were working on, back at base unit?

22:32 I think a lot of them would have been English planes. You see, there were practically no Americans in the Middle East at all, until later in the years. We had Blenheims [medium bomber], we had Beaufighters, we had 'Wimpys' [Wirraway, reconnaissance], Wellingtons, we had Lincolns [medium bomber], we had

23:02 some small ones, Lysanders [reconnaissance aircraft], Avro Ansons….Which actually, none of these belonged to our unit. All we did was repair them, but they came from squadrons round about. And we had probably the facilities, at the base unit, of doing these sort of repairs, major repairs, than what you would do on a squadron, because on a squadron you did repairs

23:30 to keep them flying. And sometimes they flew on a 'wing and a prayer', too.

Were there any types of planes that seemed to need more repairs than another type of plane?

I don't know. Some of them we thought were pretty 'cranky' old planes. Blenheims, we thought, were shocking planes. I saw three take off from our drome, fully loaded with bombs, got to the end of the runway, and all crashed.

24:01 Took four men in each plane, twelve men went west, just like that. I didn't have a lot of….I flew in them, we had to test fly them. We had to sign on the dotted line that it was good enough to fly in. I flew in Wellington bombers….We didn't get much chance

24:30 of flying single planes, but anything with two seats in them, we'd fly. Because we had to sign what was called the Daily Inspection Sheet. You had to sign off that everything was okay, and it was right to fly, but to do that you could only do it in flight.

What kind of a plane was best to work on, in terms of repairs?

Not Americans….Terrible things to work on.

25:01 They used to build their planes like they built cars. Everything was enclosed. The best aeroplanes to get at were like the 'Wellingtons', the 'Lincolns', like the bombers….Later on the 'Manchesters' and the other…They were pretty easy to work at because nothing was covered

25:30 up. Some were darn awkward to get into, I know that. You get into a cabin, and all the way around is Perspex and you're outside with forty five degree heat, nearly all the time. Not just once in a while, all the time. The only thing that we wore was a pair of shorts, never shirts.

26:01 You had to get….My job, in particular was one of the worst, because all instruments were up in the front panel, up against the front of the plane, with the just the nose in front of it, and just beyond that was the pilots seat and gear down here, and levers and things. The compass fitted in there somewhere. Hydraulics and all the rest of it, and you had to get in.

26:30 The only way to get an instrument out was you had to get behind it. So you were upside down and up like this, getting behind. Half an hour was as long as you could stay there. You'd cook. Sometimes, very few of them you could get from the front, the instruments that they had in the wartime planes.

27:01 I wouldn't like to be on the present day ones, they're a nightmare. But they're all electric. Everything's electric. Very few electrical things in the wartime planes. Very few. Towards the end, of course, they started to get remote control compasses and things like that, and they were run by battery.

27:33 Altimeters and things like that were electric. Things to do with the electricity and things like that, they had gauges which were electric. But the majority of my type of instruments were either run by air pressure, run by suction, or run by straight out pressure.

28:02 They were what they called vacuum sealed. So you had to have, on the engine, out on the plane somewhere, attached to the engine was a vacuum pump, and it used to provide the vacuum for the instruments, and if it failed then half of the instruments could go out. And also, at the same time, you had pumps for oil pressure and gauges and that, here, there and everywhere.

28:30 Yes, it was a nightmare, at times, but you got used to it. It was just a job after a while…

And of the repairs you had to do on the planes, where were most of them from? Were they from mechanical, like a failure within the plane, or were they from enemy injuries?

Oh, a few of them got shot up, yeah. In a lot of the cases, if

29:00 they were good enough to shoot up the instruments, they shot up the pilot, too. He would get shot up as well. So, quite often, we might have to change a whole panel, as big as that. It's got about twelve instruments on it. We could take the whole panel out, and put in another one.

Why would you have to change the whole panel?

Quicker. Then repair the other panel, providing you could. But if it was shot

29:30 up with bullets and that, you couldn't repair the instruments, but you might have been able to cannibalise them and save a few of them and use them again at a later date. Or, many times, we had a plane that was doing what we called a two hundred and forty hour inspection, which was after two hundred and forty hours of flying, they had schedules where…The first one was daily inspections, the next one was a forty hour inspection, the next was eighty hours, the next one was

30:00 eighty hours, the next one was two forty. 'Two forty' was a complete overhaul. You took the plane to pieces. And so it could often be there for a few weeks or more. You might borrow something out of there to keep this one going, because this one was in service and it was flying and it was needed. So you used what you had up here to keep things flying.

And what was it like working on a plane where you

30:30 **knew that the pilot had been shot up?**

I think you became hardened to it. I did. As I said before, I had many times where I had to clean up pilots, rear gunners, tail gunners, who had been shot up by night fighters or something like that. And when they used to do that, particularly the tail gunners

31:00 the machine bullets used to go like that, and cut the man in half. And when you'd go to get him out.…He was jammed in there, and blood and guts all over the place. You had to turn the turret by hand and turn it around, because you could only get him out a certain way. He had to squeeze his way into the narrow space. Then you had to get him out and clean it up, bury him.

31:32 The deserts over there were flooded, all over the place, with the graves of airmen who died. Either shot down, or they crashed. They were all marked with their names and their tags and things. And if it was a pilot or an air gunner or a navigator,

32:02 the tools of his trade were planted at the head of his grave. Like a machine gun would be for the gunner. The navigator.….Or wireless operators, they would have an aerial strung the length of his.…And the pilot would have a part, say, a three bladed prop, they would take one prop out. Or if it crashed, they'd just have

32:30 to pick it up and knock the dents out of it, and plant it upside down as a headstone. They were all over the Western Desert.

Would you do this immediately? When you found a plane that had been shot down…

Yes, mark the graves and take their names and collect tags, and they were forwarded through the base back there to the

33:00 powers that be, and that gets into the Graves Commission [Commonwealth War Graves Commission]. But by now, all of those would have been dug up and planted in war graves. But in an advance and a retreat, there was no time to plant anybody. They would come back and do it, or they had units that would do it. With our own fellows, we would look after them, and that's how

33:30 they got marked, with whatever part of their job was.

What if it was an Italian or a German plane that had been shot down?

Well, we did the same for them, when the occasion arose. But somehow or the other, it didn't arise too often, because I think sometimes the army had been there before us, and had

34:00 already done that. You see, the army roamed the desert. They weren't just here in the slit trench, based here like they were in World War 1. It was a 'mobile war' all the time. The Western Desert went inland about four hundred miles, and consequently they used to send roving scouts, right around their front line to

34:32 get around our front line, to shoot anybody up that they might find, or run up against at the back. And we would do the same with them. So, as I say, it was a fluid sort of a war in a way. A lot of times you never had a base. Some people have asked me, "How did you get on?

35:00 Did you live in slit trenches?" and things like that. If we were in any place long enough, we dug ourselves a hole. We carried what they called ridge tents. That's a tent that comes up the side, up the top, got a pole through it there, then there's a fly right over the top like that. That was our main tent. Now what we would do, we dug a square hole, the size of the sides and the

35:30 front of the tent. Which would probably be about eight feet. We used to dig a hole down about four feet into the sand, throw the sand up, all the way around, then we would pitch the tent. The first section of the tent, with the sides coming up on top of the four foot, up like that and across. Then we would sand bag it all the way around, up four feet

36:00 from that ground. So that we could actually stand up inside the tent, and we would still be covered. The sandbags would be higher than our tent. We never got out of our tent or dugout, if there was an air raid. Never got out. Even though we had slit trenches outside. If it

36:30 was close enough to hit that tent, you were gone anyhow. But if it was only a near miss…I've got an example of a near miss downstairs. I brought it home, a piece of shrapnel, and it missed my head by about three feet. I was lying down in the bed that we made, and this ripped the sandbag and stuck in it.

37:00 When we got outside in the morning and we looked around, there's this dirty big piece of shrapnel stuck there.

How did you get the sandbags?

There were plenty of sandbags about. There were sandbags by the million over there. All you had to was fill them up with dry sand.

What was the actual bag?

Like a sugar bag.

37:32 They're only about that wide and about that high.

Would you carry them with you?

Not necessarily. There always seemed to be plenty of them about. In one instance, we pitched ours there, another fellow pitched his twenty feet away there, the same as ours. During a raid in the night, nobody got out of bed. There were bombs dropping

38:00 around and about. There was one very close one, and I said, “Gee, that was close, wasn’t it?” Nobody got out of bed. And when we got out of bed the next morning, and climbed up our steps and out from under our tent, one of us fell down the hole. It landed between the two tents, luckily.

38:30 You were lucky. Other times it was fate. Whatever, I don’t know…

How often were there air-raids?

Out on the desert, it’s not like a town. The desert is such a vast, vast space. And an aerodrome could be anything up to six or seven or eight miles in diameter. And we’d disperse the planes all the way

39:00 around it. The orderly tent and workshop and that would be over here. The main living tents and that were dotted all around the place. You never crunched up into clusters. You spread them all out. If there was a hit, only one would get hit. The planes were the same. That’s why we had to use trucks to do our inspections on planes that were six or seven miles across the ‘blue’ [horizon].

39:33 And we had bikes, too. One German aerodrome we took over, we came across a whole collection of BMW [make of] motorbikes. And the petrol to fill them up with in ‘Jerry’ cans. So just about everybody on the station had a motorbike to go out and do his inspections on. They were just lying

40:00 out there in the desert. After an a retreat on their behalf, and an advance on ours, they just left them behind and that was that. Motorbikes to burn. Revolvers everywhere. Everyone was walking around like a real gangster, with a ‘Luger’ [German Hand gun] holstered on the side. A Luger pistol.

We’ll just pause there….

Tape 6

00:54 It was a very fluid war. We were moving up there and they were moving this way, and then we were going this way,

01:01 up and down, up and down. In a lot of cases, we had to get out quick. And we left things behind. In this particular case, we were on our way up, towards Tobruk. Now that time was not the last advance we made after El Alamein, because we didn’t stop there. We just continued on, like a train,

01:30 and we went right up to Benghazi. But the one before that, the second advance, we were pushing them back and our people were in Tobruk at that time, holding Tobruk, but the Germans went around them, when they chased us down, and our fellows stayed there for months, didn’t they? [siege of Tobruk, March to November 1941] They held out in Tobruk for months. But when we went back after them and chased them back,

02:00 they, the Germans, at one place just inland from Tobruk, off from Bardia actually, Bardia is a bit along the coast from Tobruk. Inland from there is an escarpment, like a big wall up, and the main road used to run at the bottom of it, but at the top of this escarpment and on the side of it, over the top, the Germans had built an aerodrome,

02:32 at the top there. So when we came through, someone leading up front said, “This is a good place for our units. We’ll stop here.” So we pulled in at the top of this escarpment and settled ourselves. This is where we found all this stuff. They just went out and left the lot. We took over. They had complete workshops, they had

03:00 motor bikes galore, boxes and boxes of Luger revolvers, a complete hospital dug into the side of the escarpment. They sandbagged up the front. They could use it to shoot from there down onto the road. They had a good high spot, and they could shoot down onto the trucks and that, on the road. But we took it over. And they

03:30 walked out and left the lot. So we took it over. And of course, we had a great time with the bikes, and anything else, and a lot of equipment. They left an enormous amount of equipment and some of it was extremely good stuff. Some of it was good to see, to compare it with ours. Whether we had better stuff, like ground sheets and cutlery, and all that sort of stuff. They had made-up sets of cutlery.

04:01 You folded it all up together and made a tiny little ‘thing’. And groundsheets, to lay out on the ground. We had to use that a lot, because of the scorpions. There were millions of scorpions over there on the desert. You couldn’t lie down on the ground without something underneath you, so the scorpions wouldn’t come over…

04:30 They left jackboots behind. Those riding breeches they used to wear? Clothing and stuff like that. Our blokes just had a ball, they got stuck into these things. They tossed away their own clothes and got

stuck into wearing these jodhpurs, is that what they call them? And long boots and the hats and….

05:03 It got a bit out of a hand for a while. The officers and that, gave them a bit of licence because there isn't a lot of things to amuse you in a war like that. But after a while he called a parade, lined them all up, and looked them up and down, up and down the lines. Then he

05:30 came out front and said, "Front rank, turn around. Front rank, turn to the back. Now have a look at yourselves." So they did that, they turned around and had a look at themselves. And he said, "What are you? Whose army are you in? Righto, that's enough of that. Finished, get out of that stuff, get rid of it." And somebody found out about the motorbikes, and the next thing they had the transport brigade come up and

06:01 confiscated the lot, under the pretext that they were to be used for dispatch riders. But we knew they 'darn' well weren't. Someone down at base got them. But they were the very latest shaft driven motorbikes, BMWs I think they were. Beautiful bikes. Anyway, we lost all those, too. We kept a lot of the hospital stuff,

06:30 that was very good for us. And then as the war went on a bit further, we moved from the top of there and we came down to the Front and that was actually the first time that I went into Tobruk. The whole unit went into Tobruk. We were on the road, it was getting dark and they decided to pull into Tobruk. And they found a 'safe' field. Now, when you say a safe field, that's a field that has been cleared of mines. Because

07:00 that place was mined like 'nobody's business' [a great deal] there. But they cleared an acre or so of ground, and we had all our trucks and things. So we climbed off the road and got onto this patch and bedded down for the night. And what do you think? An air-raid came over that night and they 'plastered' Tobruk and us, too, and the only place we had to go was underneath the trucks. No slit trenches, because it was a

07:30 mine field. Anyway, we came out of that pretty well unscathed. And after the raid, we finished our sleep.…We used to sleep on the tables of the trucks. It was cooler out there, and not prey to scorpions. We used to play with those scorpions a lot. We knew they were venomous and if you got bitten with one,

08:02 it could be 'curtains' [death], unless you got attention straight away. They used to have a contest, who could find the biggest one. And if you found one, you pinned him to the tent pole. Live, you put a nail through him and pinned him to the tent pole and let him die slowly there. And then every so often they would have the contest to see who had the biggest scorpion.

08:31 Nothing else to do sometimes. That was fair game. But we always had on issue to us, a blanket. The blanket was woven in Egypt and it was made out of camel hair. Now it was the roughest thing…If you got it near your skin it would take the skin off, it was as rough as rough. It had one purpose, if you had to sleep

09:00 on the ground, you put out this rug first. Then you put out your ground sheet, then your blanket on top of that, and that's what you slept on. Scorpions would not cross that blanket. They have a sensitive underbelly and they would not touch that blanket. You could sleep in peace, and we did, many times. Nowhere else to sleep but out under the stars. So, those sort

09:30 of things provided a bit of interest, occasionally. I went to my first church service over in the Middle East, in Tobruk, in the chapel that used to be there, before the war. It got horribly bombed. But they salvaged enough of it to have an altar, and they made us some seats and that. And any visiting padre would hold a service.

10:00 We went to that, just that couple of days that we were in Tobruk. It was Sunday and they had a service, so I went. Quite a moving type of service. We didn't see the padres very often. Of course, we were moving a lot and I probably blame that for it.

Was religion important to you, then?

Yes.

10:31 All my life I've been attached to the church. I started at four years of age, in what they used to Call the Junior Christian Endeavour, in the Methodist church. And I worked my way through the church. I've held every office there was to be held in the church. I sung in all the choirs, I performed in the concerts.

11:00 It's only in the last eighteen months that we haven't been able to go to church. We belong to the Southport church down here, 'United' [Uniting Church of Australia]. But when these opportunities came, in a town, if there was a church about.…I've been to New Zealand, three times and I guarantee you, there wasn't a Sunday that we didn't find a church somewhere that was having a service and we joined in.

Did you turn to religion when you faced danger or a

11:30 **bad kind of scene?**

No, I didn't turn to it. I knew that I had it. A lot of people do, when things really get tough they cry out

for help, don't they? No, I know what my position was at the time. Look, I can tell you, I would be the only person of a whole

12:00 squadron that didn't drink. And fellows honoured that. If I went into the bar, at night-time and there was smoke and whatever going on, plenty of drink, they always had a drink for me. And they used to call it' battery juice'. It was a concoction they made up out of orange juice and this and that, and that. No alcohol in it. That was mine. That's all I had.

12:30 I never had any worries. And the other blokes….I put many hundreds of them to bed, when they couldn't walk back to their tents. If they were left on their own, they would have finished up dead, out in the desert somewhere or the other.

So what did you think of being the only one sober?

What did I think about it? I was proud of the fact that I could resist

13:00 it. And smoking, too. The opportunity of smoking. 'Comfort boxes' [parcels provided by Australian Comforts Fund] coming right, left and centre, all had packets of cigarettes in it. And there was a ration given out to you every so many….every week or two. I used to exchange mine for 'Mars Bars' and things like that. Or canned peaches, if there was something like that about. But no, I didn't put myself above anybody.

13:30 But it was good, perhaps to have a witness, and to say that you don't drink. It's my business, nobody else's. And very, very few if any ever 'chiacked' [teased] me about it. A lot of them had their own problems and they dealt with it in their own fashion. Some of them drank, and some of them didn't. And I came through it all right.

14:01 **Why were so many drinking?**

Boredom. Fear. It was a hell of a life, when you come to work it out. Nothing to do. Always that risk of bombs. Strafing was one of the worst things…I detested it

14:30 more than anything, and I would crawl up any old hollow log to get away from it. They used to shoot up the camps. If they came down the road and there were cars and trucks, they would….There would be three of them….We did it. There is no excuse for us, we did it, they did it. You'd have one going down the middle of the road, one bloke going out there and that bloke going out there, so if there was anybody on the road and they run to the left or the right, they would get hit by one or the other.

15:01 That was common practise, out on roads.

Can you remember any particularly close calls for you?

Yes, I suppose there's one particular one. We were miles out in the Western Desert, miles from no place, and a plane was down and the only people we had with us were a couple of

15:30 army scout cars that had machine guns and that on them. We were so close to the front line, the next thing we knew we had shells whistling across the drome, at us, from the other side of the drome. And there's German blokes with portable, mobile guns, shooting at us over what they called 'open sights', which was flat barrel like this….

16:01 It was that close. A few of those around, we got out pretty quick. Another place we had a 'Boston' [light bomber] plane that was all fixed, except the brakes wouldn't work. We were very close to the road. It had come down and run off the road. So we fixed him up

16:30 and got him more or less mobile, but we couldn't fix the brakes, for some reason. The air frame bloke, he couldn't fix them. It wasn't my job. But anyhow, they worked and they worked all day and all night. And the next day, the armour came down on their way back and said, "Look, you're going

17:00 to have to get out of here quick, or you will be staying here." We said, "Look, we only want about half an hour or so to fix the brakes." He said, "Look, you haven't got that time." So we said, "Look, if we get it back down the road a bit further we will probably have time to fix it." And that was a plane, that could be used again. And so, we had a tractor with a tow bar on it. We hitched it onto the tail wheel and pulled her out, off the side of the road and got

17:30 her onto the bitumen and started off down the road with it. Well, plus other cars and that were going in the same direction, it was a bit funny with an aeroplane, with wings out like this, cars going around. We kept going and going, and we were doing a pretty 'fair bat' [speed], too. We came to a bend in the road, and she didn't take the bend. She went over and toppled over.

18:01 There was nothing we could do with it. She didn't quite wreck herself, but she did a lot of damage. So we just put an axe through the petrol tank and threw a lighter into it and just burnt it. That was done a number of times. Just burn it so that….And if we couldn't do that, the army used to help us out with an armoured car or a tank, and they'd just run over the fuselage halfway up

18:32 from the tail, and just break the back of it and leave it there. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of aeroplanes. In wartime, you never counted the cost. And there was a lot of cost.

Tell us about those retreats. What was it like having to retreat?

19:06 You get a bit blasé about it. Can you understand what I mean? You fight out a war in circumstances where you're being shot at and bombed and strafed and you say, "I haven't been hit." I only got hit once. That's all. But you take

19:30 things very blasé and say, "Oh, it's not going to happen to me." But, in a lot of cases, the army managed to give us time to get out. Even if we had to leave a plane behind, we had time to get out. We had the equipment to get out. No roads to follow, you just followed a compass bearing

20:00 back to where you come from, on the main road. And so, as I said, I went down to London once and we stayed the night, that was almost before we came home, and we stayed in the Victoria Club and Curly and I got to bed, window wide open,

20:30 getting this beautiful breeze and never gave it a thought. In the middle of the night, London had an air-raid. Bombs dropping all around the place, and the wail of sirens and bells ringing and in this club, "Come on, everybody in the cellars! Everybody!" We never got out of bed. And the next thing we nearly jumped out the window, we got so much of a fright. There was a 3.7 [calibre] ack-ack [anti-aircraft] battery under our window. Because in the daylight, you saw…

21:01 It was on what they called a common, or a green, or an oval, and here was this battery of 3.7 ack-ack guns, on this green, and one of them was underneath the window. We nearly jumped out of bed. That's the attitude. If it's going to hit you, it's going to hit you, and we had survived this long. Okay. We went through 'the Blitz' of the

21:30 'flying bombs' [V-1 Rocket], in London. I went out many places when we were there, and you heard the flying bombs coming, and you'd listen, and if it cut out, somewhere up there, you ducked for cover. If it got over head and cut out, you didn't get out of your seat, because you knew it had a mile or two to glide before it came down. But if he stopped two or three miles up in the distance, you could hear them,

22:00 they made a terrific racket. But you got used to them. "Oh, he's going overhead. He'll miss us." Otherwise you'd dive under the table, or you would get under the stairs, if you were in a house. The people of London did exactly the same as us. They learned to live with us.

Back in the Middle East, when you were a part of that unit, tell us about how you would go and collect some of the downed planes.

22:34 **Tell us about the trucks that you were using to get out there.**

Well, that advance unit of ours, it was comprised of twelve men, different trades, and a driver. A driver for the articulator, and a driver each for the….Practically all of us could drive the six wheel drive GMC truck. Six wheel drive

23:00 they were. They could go through sand or anything. They were a mighty truck. They could all double up in their jobs. So they could work the Coles cranes, do other jobs and that. And if you couldn't do anything else, you cleared the runaways. And that was probably some of my job. Instruments and electrical were my job.

23:30 I was no good on engines or anything like that, but I could do other work and help out. So when we went out for a job like that, we might have a section of bitumen to travel first, and then you would have a map reading and a compass bearing. And that would be given to us by the army. And you would have to then…Just take off ….

24:00 no side roads or anything, just out, across the desert, follow your compass, and head in direction…At times you would run into the army and say, "Have you seen a plane around here somewhere?" And they would have, and they'd say, "Righto, you're on track." And we would find that aeroplane, which could be a couple of hundred miles off the main road, and that could take you hours and hours of driving. And then when you got there, it might be dark, you'd set up camp.

24:30 All we took with us was water, enough for six days, bully beef and biscuits. That's all we had. We made a porridge out of the biscuits for breakfast. We ate bully beef and biscuits until we looked like them, and enough water for six weeks. So, they were able to do two jobs, all the people that went out there. You'd say you had

25:00 twelve men, they were probably worth twenty men. And so, once you found the plane, there was always somebody who was a sergeant or whatever, who was head of the party and he would make the assessment as to whether the plane could be fixed or not. Each man, or each trade, would go to his particular section. The engine or the undercarriage, wings, main planes, tail planes, any

25:30 part of it at all and give his assessment of it, then they would get together and say, "Well, look, this needs that, this needs this." Or, "This is too big for us. We'll have to take it back to our base and leave it with them." If we thought we could fix it and we had the spares to do it, we'd get stuck into straight away. The Coles crane would lift her up and we'd put mobile jacks underneath. One on either plane to hold her up while they repaired the undercarriage.

26:02 If they had done a belly flop and screwed up the props and things, well, we'd have two spare props on

board. We'd whip the props off, put the other props on. We did all those sort of repairs, on the spot. It might take us a week to do it. But it was a plane that could be salvaged and it could be flown again. And so we ate our biscuits and we slept at night.

26:30 Sometimes we'd have a visit from an army scout car, who just roamed the desert, indefinitely. They just roamed all over, miles and miles and miles of desert, and that's all they did. Just looking for enemy scout cars and people who were trying to sneak around the 'back door' [flank] and come down the inside. It was lonely enough, but we managed all right. You had to be careful at night-time. No lights,

27:00 or covered lights. We didn't try to work at night time if we could possibly help it, because if you dropped something in the sand it was gone. Dropped a nut or bolt or something, if they didn't have another one, that was that job. And when it was all finished, one of the fitters would get in it, he would start it up, if the battery was okay. If not, and he had a spare battery, in would go the battery, start her

27:30 up, give her a run up and let her go. We'd all sit on the tail plane while he run her up, because if you didn't and you didn't have her properly chocked with rocks and things under the front of the wheels, the tail plane would lift up like that and the nose would go in the ground, when you opened the engines up flat out. So everybody jumped on board the tail plane, or leant over the fuselage like that, and threw the weight on the tail, and you got showered with

28:00 rocks and dirt and stuff. Oh dear, that was a lousy job. But it gave you a chance to give a test for take-off. And that was that. When we were finished, we had a radio and we'd radio base and say, "Righto, so and so," we'd give the number, "is ready for take off," and we'd just clear a path for it through the rocks and so forth. If it was at all possible.

28:30 Not always. Sometimes it was too rough. And you might have to get a 'grader' [road clearance] come up and do it for you. But mostly we managed to fly them out. So they sent for the pilot and he came out in his own truck from his squadron or wherever he was, climbed on board, "Goodbye boys" and on his way, and we drove his truck back for him.

What about finding pilots out there, where the plane was?

Not too often that happened. Because,

29:00 mainly, we got our information from the army. We didn't go out looking for them. We didn't roam around just looking for them because we had too much heavy equipment. We got calls from the army. As I say, these scout cars, they didn't miss a trick. Or from one of our planes, up above. He would radio back in and say, and he would look for the number, and say,

29:30 "I saw so and so plane down below." And that would then come through to our base unit and then to us, and then we would move out from where we were. We were very seldom less than about three miles from the front line. But it was never a straight line. It was just through the desert and it was just an imaginary line. It was a map reference and that was about all it was.

30:01 **Well, having said that was there any cases where you did come across the enemy in scout cars or….**

Well, I told you one, just a while ago. They crept up on us and they started firing on us, from the other side of the aerodrome, and we thought it was more than time to get out. And then the army blokes, they were there handy, so they helped out by shooting from our side, across the open desert.

30:31 We went for our lives, cleared out. We left the plane and all. It was the only thing to do. Lives were more important than planes.

Tell us about some of the innovations that you were learning? That you were doing?

Innovations?

31:00 I know Keith Robertson was used quite often.

What was that?

Ingenuity, man. Ingenuity. Held together with string and wire. You had nowhere to fall back on for spare parts, you had to make do. We mended tires. We had a puncture kit, and if they'd blown a tire, we'd put a patch on it and blow it up again.

31:30 You just used what you had. If that wasn't enough, then you had to resort to other measures. I don't know, we seemed to manage. So over the years we didn't make too much of a hash of things. They were all….high class tradesmen.

32:00 The top blokes in the unit. They were the only ones that got the job. They had to be fellows who had initiative and they could make a decision, on their own. It was no good sending somebody out there who couldn't make a decision whether he'd fly it or 'chop' it up. We made the decision on the spot, as to what to do with it. And I did that for three and a half years, virtually. I never flew squadron, not in the Middle East.

32:33 I didn't fly with a squadron, I didn't fly with bombers. We often had fighters. We picked up fighters. We had two Australian fighters in the Middle East. 450 Squadron and 451 [RAAF]. They were there before we got there. They were the first Australian squadron in the place, and they did a mighty job. We often picked up one of their planes.

You mentioned how you would fix up a plane, what if the plane

33:00 **was deemed not repairable, what parts would you save? What would you take back with you?**

Oh, not too much. You see, a lot of the planes that we had over there had done hours and hours of flying, and they weren't anything but new, but you had to keep them flying because they had no replacements for them. I think it was the

33:30 judgement that you made, that you didn't think they were worth fixing, or worth carting all the way back. But if we had the equipment there, and we were able to, we'd toss it on the back on the 'Queen Mary' and haul it down to base. And then base made the decision whether they'd send it further back, or just cannibalise it and use the parts. It was more their decision, not ours.

34:02 Because that part, we were only NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers]. When you went back to the major unit, you had squadron leaders and flight lieutenants and engineering officers, to make those decisions for you. Which we were glad to have, somebody to do that for us. It wasn't our job, really. But we could make the decision and say, "We could fix it."

You've told us about

34:30 **how you advanced and retreated. Three advances and two retreats. Talk us through what you would have to do when you were given the order that you were moving?**

Up or back?

Let's say advancing, at this stage.

Well, of course, your army always led out, you know. And it would be tanks who would lead. Any of the advances and that, it would be the tanks who

35:00 would lead out. They had to crush their way, or batter their way, because the other blokes probably had as many tanks as you did, and there could be an enormous tank battle before anything was decided as far as….Then one side or the other had to give in, either because of a lack of ammunition, lack of petrol….Petrol and water was an enormous problem over there. Every ounce of petrol had

35:30 to be flown in, or brought in in those 'Jerry cans'. The Germans invented that 'Jerry can', which carried ten gallons of fuel in it. Knock it over, roll it over, drive over it, never hurt it. And it had a lip that used to open up, and it had a thing on it, you just dropped the lid back down on it.

36:03 It never leaked or anything like that. And we pinched, many times we'd run across a cache of Jerry cans out in the desert, with a cover over them. We'd go and help ourselves. It was all good petrol. Although tank was a different grade of petrol. It was no good to us on the planes, because we used a 'hundred octane' [grade] petrol. Where

36:30 cars and trucks didn't. They only used about 'eighty' something or other. But the Germans used a lot of castor oil. Now that was something strange. We came across a whole cache of castor oil and we wondered what it was for. They used it in their diesel cars. Castor oil, you wouldn't have thought of that, would you? What we used to call an aircraft bay, it had sandbags up this way and sandbags that way, and they used to pack the stuff,

37:00 just to shelter it from shrapnel or shooting from either side. And that is how they used to keep stocks of petrol and stuff like that. You couldn't bury it. It would be too much of a big job.

And so after the tanks had advanced, what would happen next?

Well, we followed pretty close behind, because there was always somewhere along the line, there was always a plane down somewhere that had to be picked up.

37:31 Our front unit was, in most cases, not more than about three miles behind the front line. Every time the army moved, we moved. Of course, with a tank you can move a lot quicker than that. You can go for your life. But you've also got to have a free run, and there wasn't many roads there. There was only one road up, and then it retreated

38:00 into desert, and from desert right there up to Benghazi, was all desert. So you drove through the sand….And sometimes, it wasn't very much sand. It seemed to be more of a mixture of sand and dirt. And if we went through it with a truck, the back of the truck sucked it in inside it. It came up billows behind you. A truck that was going along, if they didn't put the back of it down, it sucked the

38:32 air in and sucked the dirt up. You us to shovel the dirt out of the inside of your truck. And if you happened to be sitting in there, you got covered with it. But most cases you would pull the back flap down, and tied it down. But it didn't keep the dust out.

And when you moved camps, what kind of place would you like for to set up another camp in?

39:00 The open skies. That was for us. Occasionally, when we came across…That place outside of Tobruk, an already built aerodrome and they left it as it was. There was few and far between of those, I can tell you. We didn't have any, we took off the desert. And so did the enemy. But occasionally there was….

39:30 One ready made aerodrome, ready for the planes to land on, but that was few and far between. You'd look around for a spot without too many rocks and stones and things and that on it, so that you didn't have to clear it first before you could land planes on it. It was all part and parcel of your job. Some were quiet rocky, others were sort of gibbers [stones]...

40:01 And no rain. I looked through my diaries from '42, '43, '44, one day I've got mentioned in my diaries that it rained. One day.

We'll just pause there.

Tape 7

00:37 **I was just wondering when or what you heard about the Japanese entering the war?**

We got the news over the radio. It was very little, I think. I don't remember exactly. Just that the Japanese had come into the war.

01:00 It certainly made some impression on us because we were over in the Middle East at that time, and it struck us like, 'Well, what are we doing here? We should be home in Australia, fighting in Australia. Not fighting this mob here. Leave them to fight themselves.' That was a bit of the feeling amongst the Australians there. Then we waited for the word to come that we were going to be shipped back home, but it never came. They didn't want us there.

01:30 Plenty of 'bods' [people] without us.

Do you ever remember discussing the Japanese with the British troops?

No, never. We never knew much about the Japanese. What did we know about Japanese? He was the 'washer', or running the local laundry down the street. What else did we know? I had a

02:00 little more to do with Chinese, perhaps, when I lived at Hamilton on the backwater of the river, at Hamilton, there used to be the Chinamen's gardens there, and my grandparents lived across the road. We only lived about a mile down the road, and we came down to see them. And we'd walk across

02:30 and we used to go to the gardens and buy their vegetables. And they seemed to be as harmless as anything. But the Japanese turned out to be far from harmless, weren't they? But it didn't become apparent of some of the dirty tricks that the Japanese did, until a bit later on in the war.

What sort of news did you hear about how much threat Australia was under?

03:02 Well, in letters from home, they thought they were in a great threat. My mother, who lived in Brisbane, she used to live in a home on her own. It was only my second brother and myself, we were the only ones still at home. And I went, and later on my brother went, and then the scare was on that the Japanese were coming down, and

03:30 they were going to do this to the population and do so and so forth. She said, "I'm getting out of here," and she sold up and went country wise. She just packed up and went way up north, and a bit inland, to a place called Laley. Now if the Japs [Japanese] had come down, Laley would have gone with it, too, because it wasn't that far inland, from the main highway.

04:02 But I think a lot of people, and the same with the people in England that cleared out and went to America. They sent thousands and thousands of kids to America. And so I think the people had the same fear of the Japanese. What they'd heard about what they'd done to the people in Singapore. Mostly, I think, that was the start of it, was Singapore. They took them over and how badly treated

04:31 the people up in there, were. So that filtered down to Australia, and I think the people down here got very edgy. A lot of them were calling for our boys to come home, because a lot of AIF were in the Middle East,

05:02 fighting the war over there, when they perhaps should have been home fighting the Japanese. But the Japanese weren't in the war when they went over there.

How did the threat to Australia from the Japanese change your commitment to the war you were fighting for the British?

It didn't change it at all. I had a job to do, and that was it. No, I did feel that when our term was up,

05:31 or coming due, because we had been over there that long, that we would have been brought home to

Australia to join up and do a bit of ‘resistance’, or what we could do. Do something with the airforce. But it didn’t come about. They sort of ignored us and thought the war in Europe was more important.

06:00 Well, that’s what we thought, anyhow, and that’s why they sent us over to England. But the war was nearly over. It was only a matter of six months and it was ‘D Day’. You see, I arrived there at Christmas and ‘D Day’ was June the 6th. So there wasn’t a lot of activity going on in Europe. We were building

06:30 up our forces to make the big plunge. And that was going on for months and months. I saw some of it happen. I don’t think it affected us. We had our job to do.

In the Middle East, you mentioned that you heard the news of the Japanese over the radio, would you ever hear any of the German propaganda

07:01 **over the radio?**

No, not so very much. But by jove, we heard a lot of it in England. When we went there. The old songs and that were played at a regular ‘bat’, over the radio in England, all hours of the day and night.

What sort of songs?

Well, that song ‘Marlane’. Do you know that song?

07:30 Well, that was the greatest song that was ever brought out in the war, by the Germans. ‘Lilly Marlene’. That became a hit song, both in Germany and amongst our troops, too. But also there were other songs they used to sing about the ‘Siegfried Line’ [German defensive fortifications], and the ‘Maginot Line’ [French fortifications], and all that sort of thing, but that was from our side. So we did the

08:00 same as what they did, over the air. We had pot shots at them.…What was his name? ‘Lord Haw Haw’ [‘Axis’ propaganda personality]? We heard all about him, but we never heard about them in England.

What did he sound like?

A real posh tongue, well-spoken English, ‘Eton’ accent sort of thing. Gave the news and told us we were, ‘mad to continue on with the war’.

08:30 Nobody took any notice of him.

Did he make any references to Australians in particular?

Not that I know of. Whenever we heard him, we turned him off. The same with ‘Lilly Marlene’. That song reached the Middle East, Lilly Marlene, it was sung over ‘Lady Ocean’ and things like that. You’d hear it sung in the bar, quite a lot, when they got a few drinks on board.

09:03 **How does it go?**

Sorry, I can’t remember that… “Underneath the lamp light. By a garden gate,” or something or other. That was some of the words to it. A real heart-rending song, for the troops. We had that English singer…

09:32 and she was belting them out by the dozens. But she was an English singer who did exactly the same thing. Whether they listened to her or not, I don’t know. But the troops used to listen to her songs.…She’s still alive, that woman.

10:00 I saw her not that long ago. She still knocks out a tune, but she’s a bit ‘wavery’ now. She was ‘top of the pops’ [popular], and top of the charts.…And most of it was songs about the war.

You talked about advancing and retreating. Tell me about that final retreat

10:31 **when you were at El Alamein, what was your base like there?**

Actually we had no base there at all. We retreated to a position where we were dictated to by the army, and told where to go. “There is where you go…” Cairo was there, ‘Alex’ [Alexandria] was there

11:00 and there was a road between the two. That was the main highway. El Alamein was about halfway up that road, but into the desert quite a few miles. So, it was in that area.…Sorry, on that side, going up the desert. On that side of the road is where ‘Montgomery’[Field Marshal, Bernard Law Montgomery] dug in and also slowed

11:30 the Germans down, because they came right from up in Algeria and places like that. And they’d run out of petrol and run out of ammunition and stuff. So when they got down to El Alamein, they couldn’t go any further. So they dug in there, too. But behind us here, over that line there, back of us, was the Suez Canal and all the towns and all the ships coming in there, bringing in reinforcements and stuff, so they

12:00 all built up behind that road between Cairo and ‘Alex’. So when we came down, they let us through and crossed the road, and we were told to park over here, about three miles beyond the road. Now, we got clustered in. We weren’t a fighting unit. We just had to get where we were told. Others come around us, with tanks and all that stuff, packed around us like sardines. Well,

12:32 that kept going until we were so full of reinforcements at the back of us there, there wasn't anywhere to drop a pin. And right up to the front line itself, where they had actually stopped. Now you couldn't go inland, because of 'the depression' was there. Anybody who went up there sunk in the sand, bogged down, 'kaput', finished. This way, at Alexandria, you were up against the sea. They couldn't come around the sea.

13:00 They had no boats, they had no aircraft. We had complete control of the air, at that stage. So, the days went by and we knew it was building up to a tension, because they were still shooting at each other, out on the front there, but not over to us. We were far enough away not to be in that, but where we were at night-time you could see the flash of the guns and the bombs going off and shells and that. At night-time the flashes were like lightning,

13:30 lighting the sky up altogether. Well, the day did come when, 'zip', this was 'it', righto. They blew the whistle and everybody from here moved over the road, and those that were on that side of the road moved towards the enemy. Armoured cars first, tanks, got stuck into him straight away. And the preponderance of armour and guns and that that we had, we just pushed him aside.

14:02 And he just had to back out. And the next thing it was a rout, he was going for his life, running for cover. And he never stopped. We chased him right back to Benghazi. Now that was quite some hundreds of miles, and that was where I stopped. They stopped our unit, they stopped us there, and they told us we could go back and we went right back to base. And

14:30 that's as far as I went. That was long enough.

And what were you doing during the days that you spent at El Alamein?

Practically nothing. Just looking after our equipment, that's all. And stocking up on food and essentials, because we knew once it started, you would be on the road for days and days. I've got photos showing what we looked like, after a whole week on the road. We looked like

15:00 the greatest bunch of thugs you ever saw in your life. We had beards and we had great overcoats on, because at night-time it was very cold, freezing. And we just parked on the side of the road, waiting for our turn to go forward. Waiting for our turn to get in the line to keep moving up, as we went. But we had practically no work to do as far as picking aeroplanes up.

15:31 Very few. Because only ours were flying. So wherever they came down, they had a drome to drop down on, somewhere or other. Very few we had to go out and pick up on that place. So we kept going; past Tobruk, and Tobruk was relieved again and we just kept following the army up and doing our job, being there if we were needed,

16:00 until we got up to Benghazi and then they stopped us. The army kept going, but we stopped. And then we made our way back.

And you mentioned that on some of these days you didn't have terribly much to do. What sort of things would you do amongst your group to entertain yourselves? To relax?

We used to go out into the desert and shoot tin cans and bottles. We fired off thousands of rounds of ammunition, really wasted ammunition, because

16:30 when planes came back, they….We did a lot of shooting, just to amuse ourselves. We were shooting ammunition that was discarded from the planes. When they came back, if they hadn't used the whole belt of ammunition that

17:00 was in the box, the armourers would just take the guns out, then they would take the box out, and what was in the box left over, they would just pick it up and threw it in the sand. They didn't want it. Then they would layer back, layer by layer by layer, into this tin box, fresh bullets, in clips, until they filled up the box, and what was left over was then run into

17:30 the gun, and that was ready for when they took off. So we used to go around and pick up all those bullets, including all sorts, armour piercing, incendiary bullets, then go out into the desert, miles away from the camp, and shoot at tins and bottles and that. There was nothing else to do. Write letters, I wrote hundreds of letters.

Who did you write letters to?

My wife, for a start, and my

18:00 mother, my brothers, a lot of friends that I had. You know I kept up a pretty good correspondence. Sometimes they got them, sometimes I got theirs, sometimes they missed them.…But you could go down to the mess at night-time and have a drink if you wanted to. That was about all there was to do. Not much else.

18:30 The 'Brits' [British] were mad on football. There was always…Look, it doesn't matter where you stopped, I guarantee you could see a football game in progress. They played football all hours of the day. Any break that they had, they'd be kicking the football around. Sometimes we got a cricket bat out and played cricket, but no football for me.

Did you get to have any interaction with other Australian troops when you were at El Alamein?

19:06 No, but I did get to know different ones. I got to know very closely a sergeant from Rhodesia. He was up there fighting with the Free South African Brigade [1st South African Division]. I had a very good friend, and he wasn't a fighting man, he was

19:30 a pathologist or something of that nature, and he worked in the local South African hospital. He came from Johannesburg, and when we were in close enough together, we got together and I made a few trips, quite a few miles, borrowed a truck and away I went. They were easy to come by. And he used to work in a laboratory, you know. And every time I went down there I knew I was in for a

20:00 feed of ice-cream, because they used to make home made ice-cream and keep it in the fridge in the laboratory. My first leave was eighteen months before I got off the desert. But after that, it came a little bit more naturally, when you could get it, when things were quiet. We'd just get

20:30 out onto the side road, if we could, and just thumb a lift down to either Alexandria or Cairo. One or the other. And I used to make for Cairo a lot of the times, because that mate of mine, he was stationed in Cairo. I knew when I went down there, there was always a bed for me, because he would take me into the sergeants' quarters, and there was always a spare bed in the sergeants' quarters, so it never cost me anything on leave. I got a bed for nothing.

21:00 Then we'd go out. The first thing we ever did when we went on leave was to go and have a complete do over. Go either in to the barber's or the hairdresser's and say, "Righto, Joe" or whatever his name might have been, they were all 'wogs', all 'gypos', Egyptians. "I want the works." So toenails, fingernails, hair done straight,

21:30 shampoo. Just to get the dirt out, just to feel as though you got the dirt out of your system. Then we'd go out and have a real slap up dinner, in Heliopolis. Which was sort of an upmarket part of Cairo. All the flash houses. You'd go to some really nice restaurants there, and you could sit down and be waited on, by waiters, in their

22:00 big long 'gallibers' [jellabies] we used to call them, like a night dress sort of thing, with a fez on his head and tassles and so forth. And he would treat you like a 'Mister', sort of thing. Do you know what a 'damask' tablecloth was like? You know what pure linen is like? Well, 'damask' was like pure linen, and

22:30 they were as starched as stiff as a board, and when they put them over the table, they stood out like this. You'd sit down at a table, and they'd have a damask tablecloth, and they had starched napkins on your plates, rolled up or whatever. And all the china and silver. And we'd order….We'd have 'money galore', because half the time we never took our pay, because there was nowhere to spend it up there.

23:00 And we would leave it on our passbooks. The passbook became your bank book. So when you went on leave, you'd just say to the officer that you wanted so much money and you put your passbook in and they gave you whatever you wanted. So you had money for when….And if you wanted, you could go to Barclays Bank and get it from there. So money was no object, as far as that goes, so we used to let our….We'd get 'the works', as we called it. And

23:30 after that was all over, we'd go to a show. And there were some services clubs and that, in those places, and they turned on good meals and they turned on shows. There was usually somewhere to go. And then other times we went on down to Alexandria. Well, Alexandria was on the coast, and it was like a big bay. If you've been watching television lately, there has been a lot about Alexandria and all the ancient cities of

24:00 Rome and that, that fell into the harbour, [Cleopatra's palace] they're trying to dig them up now. We used to swim right out into the harbour, right out as far as you could go. About a mile, we swam out. We never thought of whether there were sharks there. It was beautiful water. And they used to have those bathing boxes on the beach, like they do in England.

24:31 You could hire them and you could get undressed in there. But when I went to Tel Aviv in Palestine, on leave, they've got a beach there of course, and we stayed at a private motel, right on the beach front. Nude bathing there, no topless or anything, nothing else, and women and children, they just came down and undressed on the beach and nobody thought a thing about it.

25:03 It was just a common thing that was done every day. Nice water. There were some nice girls there. I got to know….In Tel Aviv, there was a services club there run by the 'Tok H'. Do you know what 'Tok H' is? Well, very few people do. I don't think it's in existence now, but it was during the war. And they used to set up, like the Red Shield huts,

25:30 for the army, for the Salvation Army? They used to run these services clubs and they used to provide beds and that for chaps on leave. We missed this out before….There was a 'Tok H' padre on the boat going over to…On the Queen Elizabeth. He was going over to start one of these clubs in Palestine. And we started a concert party on board

26:00 the boat. And we used to give concerts on the way over to the Middle East. Anyhow, he started up this club there. He got lots of ladies, locally and that, to come in. They served meals. You'd get a bed. Also

he used to provide tickets to go to the cinemas or theatres or restaurants and so forth, free tickets. And I got to know this 'chappie' very well. And he was a married man with a daughter of about eight…

26:36 And he was one of the most brilliant, educated men, you ever came across. He was a German Jew, but he was hounded out of Germany at the time Hitler was trying to gain power. But any of the Jews, if they had any brains at all, they got out. So he got out and he managed to get to Palestine.

27:00 And he was….not a philosopher, something like that, a lawyer type bloke, 'brains galore'. And they invited me to their home, and we talked for hours. He would have loved to come to Australia, and he wanted to know all about Australia and all about the kangaroos and things like that. And I used to tell the little girl

27:30 all about these things. And they took me out to dinner, quite a lot of times. And he used to make a living teaching English. He couldn't get a job as a lawyer…That's not the right word, but I think he did some of that sort of work. Anyhow, he couldn't get a job because he was a German. The Jews wouldn't have anything to do with him in Palestine.

28:01 So the only thing he could do was run a photographic shop and sell films and do photos and that sort of stuff. That's how he made a living…and teach English. He used to teach English. I kept in contact with him for years after the war and then all of a sudden, 'bang', not another word. I don't know what happened to them. I would have loved them to have come out here. He

28:30 would have been an asset to the place. But anyhow, different things and that, they put on dances at this 'Tok H' club and that, and it filled in the time and so forth. That was in the latter part of the war and we were able to get a bit of leave. But at the first part, we never saw leave. We never saw an Egyptian woman.

29:01 All we saw were the Bedouins, the 'black' fellows. It wasn't until we went on leave, and came back to civilisation again. But from Egypt, we were able to get to Palestine, reasonably easy. There used to be a train that ran up through the Sinai Desert and up into Palestine. And then on the way home, we used to go to the aerodrome and thumb a ride.

29:30 There were always planes flying out of Tel Aviv, back to Egypt. You could always get a ride.

Tell me about when you heard the news that you would be heading to the UK [United Kingdom]?

We were very down-hearted, because we thought….We had a feeling that the RAAF,

30:01 to them, we were the 'forgotten legion'. We never heard a word from them, we never had any promotion from them. Everything was done through the RAF. They paid us, they fed us, they housed us and so forth. But we never saw an Australian Airforce officer come to the unit, to see how we were progressing, or anything at all like that. Not a sign. Then when word came

30:30 that we were moving out, "Oh, we're going home. We're going home." We weren't going home. The thought of even going home….We went down to the embarkation depot and we were greeted by the fact that three hundred of us were going to England….Those ones who were in the Middle East were going to England, to finish the war over there. Which seemed to me a silly thing. Anyway, we did, we went there. We were let down a lot, I reckon,

31:00 by the Australian government. Maybe not so much by the government but the airforce itself. We eventually got our promotions, that we did get, came from internally. That means by the RAF, and they were only 'temporary corporal' and 'temporary sergeant'. But the queerest thing of all, when Australia did get around to seeing

31:30 about promotions for us, I was a corporal one day, in Australia, and I was a sergeant the next day. And about five weeks later I became a flight sergeant. I mean now, I could have had the advantages of the pay and the privileges that it might have given me. But so we didn't take kindly to going over, but after we got underway, things changed a bit. We

32:00 got into the 'swing' of England a bit, and we had a chance to look around. I spent a lot of time in Norfolk, where Kings Lynn was, and Sandringham, where the Queen's country home was. We were only seventeen miles from it there, and we used to ride around it on our push bikes, after work. Because they had very late twilights over there. You could go to the cinema at six or seven o'clock, and come out

32:30 at eleven o'clock and it was still daylight.

Did your unit stay together when you went to the UK? The repair and salvage unit…

No, no. They stayed there. They would have had to get other men to take their place.

So why do you think it was that they moved you?

Well, they said we were wanted in England, and also, on the 'grapevine', as we called it,

33:02 we had word that they were going to form Australian squadrons in England, and they wanted Australian

ground crew. There were thousands of Australian air crew in England. Thousands of them. And they were going to use the air crew from there. And you don't need as many air crew, as you need ground crew. So they were going to pick the air crew, and the three hundred of us were to go to make up the squadrons.

33:30 But I can only think of one case, and that was when I was posted to a squadron in Scotland, straight away, 459 Squadron, which was an Australian squadron, but they had been in action there for some time. But I did actually get to an Australian squadron for a while, and that's when they sent us right up, to the north of Scotland, up amongst the ice and snow.

And what were your

34:00 **first impressions about how the war was affecting life in England?**

Yeah, there again see,…I got to know a lot of private people in England. And they invited us home and gave us a meal. They had nothing very much, and what we did, when we went on leave, the unit gave us ration tickets and we'd take them with us. And if we went to

34:30 a meal at anybody's place, we'd give them the ration tickets to help them out with their rations. They got a ration of bacon a week. Just like that, it was absolutely unbelievable. But they managed. Every time we went on leave, we got a number of ration tickets according to how many days we went on leave. I got to know a very nice family

35:00 in London, on the outskirts of London, at a place called Royston. I got to know them through another person who introduced me to them. They had a beautiful Tudor home. Oh, lovely place. Two story 'Tudor' with all the gables and that on it. And he was an inspector of meat, in the meat industry

35:30 in London. And the only job he'd done was inspecting the meat that came from Australia. So he had a lot to do with Australians and Australian meat. So when I got invited to his house, of course, we got on like a 'house on fire'. Plus the fact that the lady of the house played a beautiful grand piano, and she had a grand piano in the house as well, and we had beautiful sing-songs and

36:00 she invited all sorts of soldiers, Americans, anybody at all. She'd make up an evening of music, any time we were down on leave. And I could stay at the house overnight and go back the next day. I wrote to them for some years after the war, and then all of a sudden the letters stopped and I never heard from them since. Anyhow, they were some of the people, and you got to know these people. I got to know others, too.

36:30 We were having dinner at one place, and the 'buzz' bombs [V-1 flying bomb] were flying overhead. And they said, "We'll stay here for this one." "No, we'll go downstairs for the next one." That was their attitude, they took it in their stride. If it was going to bomb their house, well fine. Maybe if they rushed down into cellars and got under the stairs and under the tables and things like that. But they had a different

37:00 attitude. They accepted it. And I think they were very, very pleased when we started hammering Germany, like we did, a thousand bombers a night, and a thousand bombers in the daytime. We flattened a few places.

How much evidence did you see, just walking around a city like London, of what the bombing had done?

Oh, terrible. Terrible. Absolutely

37:30 terrible. Places were just flattened, whole streets. Unfortunately, I suppose, the way London was built… It was built like one street, the house, the end house, at the end of that street, and houses, houses, houses, then the wall at the other end of the street. So if you knock one over, they fall over like cards. So they did an enormous amount of damage like that. When a bomb fell the whole

38:00 street fell down. A lot of them went to the country, took their children to the country. A lot of them sent their kids to America. A lot of them faced it and lost people, lost relations, all sorts, in these bombing raids. I was only in London a number of times

38:30 on leave, and the bombing raids were on, but I don't think they were anywhere near as intense as the earlier raids in the beginning of the war, when they really went for it. I was there mostly during the time when they had what they called the 'flying bomb', or the 'buzz bomb', and the 'V2'. The 'V2 rockets'. And that was a nightmare on its own, because you never heard it coming. They

39:00 fired it in France, it went straight up and came down and landed somewhere, just anywhere. No aiming it at all. It just went straight up and it came straight down. The 'buzz bombs', they did aim them, and it all depended how much petrol they had in the tank, how far they went. And they stopped hundreds of them, on the way over, the fighter planes and that. And the balloon barrages they put up, saved London from

39:30 lots and lots of bombing. The fighter planes used to fly alongside of them, they used to play a game with them. This is a fact. They used to match their speed with them, and fly alongside of them until their wing came underneath this side, and then he'd do a roll and he'd turn it, and

40:00 it would go straight down and land in the fields. It didn't land on London. They played games with them.

We'll just pause there.

Tape 8

00:38 **We were just talking about your work in the UK. Originally you were in Norfolk. What exactly was the job you were doing there?**

Well, it was a big peace time unit,

01:00 in Norfolk, at a place called Bircham Newton, and they took the planes as they come from the production lines, from the factories, because when they put them on the production line they had the original plans, and they built them from the original plans, and they weren't allowed to alter them, otherwise it would have fouled up the production line. When they came off there, they were then sent to this place in Norfolk, at Bircham Newton and they

01:30 called it 'The Echelon'. But it was an old peace time Airforce station. Huge hangars and proper living quarters for the staff and so forth. And there we had to modify those planes up to operational standards. So when they came off and they went into service, if they went straight off the production line, they'd probably find that the compass is not reading right,

02:00 or that this control wasn't right. There was many things that they planned modifications. We had to modify the planes from those modifications. We might have to change the position of the compass from there over to there, because it was in the bloke's knee or something like that. Other instruments had to be moved from here to there. I had to put clocks in all of the planes.

02:32 We outfitted them with everything that was for equipped to go on operations. When they left that place, they'd send for a pilot and he would fly it away and he could go on 'ops' that night. It was completely operational when we had finished with it. We might do a dozen modifications on it. It could be done to the tail plane, it could be done to the props…Anywhere at all. And we had all the different trades and I had stuff, as I say….

03:02 Compasses and that, they were all my line of business and so were the instruments on the board, all had to be brought up to date…For some reason or another, they didn't work where they first planned them. When they got into operations they found out it was bad. So we re-modified them, and we did them by the hundreds. Hundreds of them. The main drome we were on,

03:30 the planes could land and bring them to us, then they came and took off from that. When we were finished with them, we moved to them to satellite aerodromes, around and about the main aerodrome. And there were five satellite aerodromes around and about. You can imagine the area that they covered. What they must have taken over to fix up, and the only way we could get to these satellite dromes was either by truck or by push bike.

04:02 That, we had to do every day. Once around the satellite dromes, to do what they called the daily inspections. To make sure they were right up to date.

The preparations for 'D Day'?

Yes, I can give you a little bit on that.

04:30 I was up in Lucas Junction in Scotland at that time, on 459 Squadron, which had 'Beaufighters'. And we knew a week before it came, we knew, you hear these rumours. They get around somehow. Pilots talk in the mess and so forth. Anyway, we heard that things were building

05:00 up, and we knew by the amount of flying that we were doing that we were holding back. The planes were being serviced and brought right up to tip-top condition. All the inspections were brought forward so they wouldn't fall due during that certain period. A lot of things went in, and of course the army and the navy were stockpiling boats and equipment

05:30 all along the coast of England. All the way down along the channel, ports, and all the way right down to Dover and around the bottom end. And that was all being done in secrecy, supposedly. And it turned out, so they didn't know a thing about it, when 'D Day' came. Probably the first incident we had….June the 6th, and for three days before that we were

06:00 flat-out camouflaging….Not so much camouflaging, but putting stripes on the planes so that they were easily recognised as our planes. And they were done in four stripes. I think it was black and white, black and white. They were stripes about that wide, and they covered an area, on the main plane, about that wide, and around the fuselage, and on the tail plane, so they could be seen from behind.

06:31 And we painted for three days and three nights. Painting our own aircraft with all these stripes on them, and we had probably twenty or thirty aircraft to do, and we knew….They also told us they had to be

done by a certain time. They didn't put a date on it, but they said they've got to be ready. So that

07:00 was our squadron's participation in it, up to that point. But we had done a lot of work, prior to that, in the 'Beaufighters', because they belonged to what they called coastal command. They were sent out to fly and down the French coast, up and down, and they told the blokes, "Keep your nose down. Keep your heads down. Don't look out across the channel, you might see something going on." And

07:30 so they were going up and down there, shooting up anything that we could see that moved on the other side. And that was part of our job. And any boats that were moving they shot up. They sunk them if they could, or chased them away from where they were going. And then the day came for the painting. We did our job. We knew something was going to happen, and then it did, on June the 6th, at three o'clock in the morning, we heard

08:00 the planes going over. Now the first ones to go over were the planes towing the gliders, with the troops on board, and the small tanks on board, guns and things. And troops. They started about three o'clock in the morning, like a shuttle service. They were just going and going and going. Some landed over there, some didn't. Some came down

08:30 on their own 'bat' [own power], when they cast free from the planes. The planes came back and got another one. Then of course, by that time, the boats had moved out from the English coast, loaded with troops and ammunition and guns and were crossing the channel, heading in the direction of Calais, where they were going to land.

What was your job

09:00 **once the planes were gone? Once you finished the painting, what were you doing?**

Oh well, once 'D Day started and all those big fellows and that, we waited that day until all that stuff went over. There was only one day of that, and then of course, we then started our normal bombing run, and also covering the troops that were landing from boats on the beaches. We were flying up and down, keeping the 'Jerry' [German] planes away.

09:31 But we virtually had control of the air. They didn't see that many 'Jerry' planes. They certainly didn't continue with any bombing while that was on. They were trying to fight off the planes that were flying up and down the channel, protecting the fellows that were landing there. And then of course, after that, they started their full

10:00 daylight bombing and night bombing again. A thousand in the daytime and a thousand at night.

Were you really busy yourself doing repairs during this period?

Only when something went wrong.

Was there a lot going wrong?

No, not that bad. But there was always duties to do. When the planes came in, you'd be out there leading them in, hanging onto their tails, guiding them into the parking lot. There was always something to do.

10:30 You couldn't say you were standing around doing nothing. And then you'd get the report from the pilot. You'd ask him for his report. And if he gave you a report, you'd read it up and see if there was anything on it that concerned instruments. And if there was, you got to work. And you'd have him ready for the next time he wanted to go out.

During your period, because you started so early in the war, and

11:00 **towards this later stage, what were you noticing about improvements to the instruments over that period?**

The instruments didn't change that much. One of the major improvements was the British bomb sight. It changed quite a bit, and they even brought in an automatic bomb sight, run by like a computer. That was the first thing to do with a computer, I saw in my life.

11:30 And that came on board one of our planes and these people came to set it up. And it actually guided the bomb sight. That was the first time that we saw that. And then after that, we had to do the checking of it to keep it running.

How did it work exactly?

It was like a 'port'.

12:02 And about that deep, and it was a maze of working parts. It had about three motors in it. It was all run by batteries of course, connected to the system, and dials all over the front of it. You could pre-set the dials on it. You would pre-set your wind speeds, and you'd pre-set your bombs, the weight of your bombs,

12:30 pre-set the atmosphere, what it was, what the atmosphere was. About four different settings, you could set into this thing. And when you turned it on, all these motors started oscillating like this. And it had a

round wheel, with a rubber tyre on it, and that used to rub against a disc, and that disc would move in and out, and as it moved in and out, it would increase the speed and so forth,

13:00 and that worked something else, and something else. It was a maze of rubber discs. That was our main problem. It used to wear the rubber discs out, and we were forever changing the rubber discs on this little wheel. I really couldn't say that against the plain old bomb sight that we used to have and used to operate it and used to set a few knobs and that and twist it

13:30 and so forth….Manually operated. But I don't think it was a tremendous success, from what I could gather from it, and it wasn't that much longer when the Americans came out with a fully automatic bomb sight. You didn't need a bomb aimer at all. There were some changes in instruments. They

14:00 changed from pressure gauges to electronic gauges, that was coming in at the latter part of the war. And that was one of the things I was chosen for, in the governor general's, they had fitted on it what they had fitted on the Lancaster bombers, the first of the remote control compasses. And it was a unit up in the back that had a gyroscope in it, and they hung it

14:30 up inside, and it was electronic and it operated just like a gyroscope, so it kept a steady speed. Then it was through wires right down to the control on the board, and it read like a compass on the board. And I had to service that on that plane. And on the 'York' plane, you used to have to go up all through the dining

15:00 salon and the lounge and the bedroom, it was right up behind the luggage department, right up in the tail unit. Had to go all the way up there. And also back up there, they put all the oxygen bottles. That plane was fully equipped with oxygen to fly above ten thousand feet, and not once did they ever fly above ten thousand feet. But they had full equipment in there. They had about twenty four oxygen bottles in racks….

15:30 And every time the pressures went down, I had to go and get them filled up at the oxygen machine. That was a part of my job. I did a pretty good….one thing or the other. It helped me as I went into my trade, when I went back into the watch making and I set up a business on my own, a year or two after I went back. I put a sign up, 'Watchmaker & Instrument Maker'.

16:00 And I did a lot of cameras, I did a lot of compasses, I did a lot of bits and pieces of things like that for people. Aneroid barometers and things like that that went 'crook'.

Talking about the 'York' plane, how had you been given this job?

Because I had the experience, above probably,

16:30 maybe, a dozen or two others. That didn't come to me until I had been in England. But most of the planes I had worked on in the Middle East, and the Lancaster bombers in England. The 'York' was almost a replica of the bomber, except it was a different

17:00 shape. It had all the same instruments and the same engines and the same bits and pieces. When the fellow interviewed me, when I went down to the Air Ministry, and he grilled me for two hours about what I knew and what I didn't know. And at the end of it, he said, "I suppose you're wondering what this is all about?" And I said "Yeah. " And I realised that he had, on his table, all my papers and he must have known all the units that I had worked on.

17:30 And he went through all this rubbish, of what I had done and where I had worked, and all the instruments, all the 'jazz'. And he said "I suppose you're wondering what this is all about?" Then he went ahead and said, "We're forming a unit here in England, to look after a plane that has been specially designed and sent to Australia to fly the governor general around."

What was it like, the design of it? What was it like inside the plane?

18:00 Well, the quickest way to explain it that way, it was a Lancaster bomber in every spec' [specification] except the shape of the fuselage. They were actually going to turn it into a transport plane. Whereby they could even carry a small tank on board. It had a very bulbous body, square. This was round at the corners,

18:30 straight down, and straight across the bottom. And it was designed to carry transport and to carry troops. But they took one of those off the production line and converted it into this plane to carry the governor general around, and added to the inside, and furnished it inside like a 'blooming lounge' in a hotel. They had seats covered in

19:00 rugs and things, that you couldn't have afforded to buy the jolly things. All with the royal crest and everything. Even the crockery came in the plane. Everywhere we went, we had full sets of crockery and every plate had the circles of gold on them, and the 'GR' [George Rex] branded on them in gold. And they were guarded day and night. A guard was given the job

19:31 of watching over that, kept in a special room. When they were flying the plane, it all came out that day, about an hour or two before they got on the plane, together with the liquor and the blankets and the rugs and everything they brought from Kirribilli House. Everything all came out in the station wagons, and at eight o'clock they arrived and we took off.

20:00 **Tell us about your job on the plane? You mentioned before that you were in electrics?**

Well, yes, I 'copped' that job. There must have been a foul up somewhere, because they couldn't find an electrician in the airforce, when they were over there in England at the time. When I got to the factory, they said, "Well here are, here's the plans.

20:30 You're the electrician." So I had to study the electrical layouts as well my own instrument layouts. I can tell you, I was a busy boy. But fortunately, we didn't have many problems at all. She was a good plane, she flew like a charm. There were a few small things, like the oxygen, one or two others.

21:01 We had to test fly it everyday, before they flew in it.

Was there any specific things about the blueprints that you had to get on top of, that you had to learn?

You had to learn, on the blueprints, your particular line of instruments or trade, whatever it was, to know exactly where they were on the wall, inside the plane, or whether on

21:30 the floor or up in the ceiling, or where they were. Because they covered the inside of the plane up with furniture, like carpet, around the walls. It was a soft stuff, but it covered everything. I don't know whether they glued it on or what they did, but they fastened it to the wall. And the fellow said, "Don't you come and say you want to get behind there to a junction box, or a pipe, or we will kill you.

22:00 We'll have to rip half the plane out." So I had to know where every junction box and every pipeline was, and every join in the pipe, I had to know where it was. And that takes a lot of doing.

And what did you think of the Duke and the Duchess?

Can I put it into print?

Absolutely.

Oh well, okay. He was not nobody I'd like to 'link up'

22:30 with at all. He was a 'pig' of a man, that's putting it lightly. She was a beautiful…A lovely lady. She was a lady. And she would talk to you and ask you how you were and how your family was. But he wouldn't. He plain ignored you. And he was 'shot' half the time. He was a real whiskey drinker. And so was his mate, Brigadier Shriver, who was his aide-de-camp.

23:01 He was a 'boozer', too, and he had a nose that he could find his way home with, it was that red. But fortunately, our contact with them was minimal. All our work was done when they actually arrived to get into the plane. They drove right up to the door, got out, stepped into the plane and

23:30 our job was over. It was over until next time. So when all the crew got on board, the flying crew, and us, we had to go with it, because if it landed anywhere, the people on there wouldn't know what

24:00 to do with it. So we all got on, too. We took off from where we were, Richmond, and we headed for Brisbane. That was as far as we were going. But the weather was bad, really bad, so they had to fly low, I mean low, low. They were under a hundred feet. Now that great plane under a hundred feet? One of the waves would come up and lick its bottom. But she….

24:32 got airsick. She got airsick. So they had to fly, in a lot of places we had to stay down low, to get away from turbulence and that. This time we flew from Sydney to Brisbane at about fifty feet up. We came in and we were landing at Archerfield Aerodrome. Now, we couldn't land at Eagle Farm because the Americans took it over, and they wouldn't let us land there. But they had hard

25:00 runways, and hard standings, so they made us land at Archerfield, which was all turf, all grass, no 'hard standings', the runway was all grass. And we put that huge monster of a plane down there, on this grass runway, and run it over to what they called 'the hard standing', that was somewhere close to the hangars. No, first of all we had to stay on the other side of the drome, because she was so sick,

25:30 she couldn't face the public. So we waited for half an hour on the other side of the drome until she got better, and then we crossed over and came to the hard standing, and they all got out, and we went about our job, tying her down and so forth. And then we went into town to a….And it was raining, too, at this time. We were staying at a hotel in town, the crew. Anyhow, halfway through the night, we got a ring

26:00 from the drome, "You better come and get your plane. She's sinking." So we hopped in cabs and we roared out to Archerfield Aerodrome, which was probably a good half an hour drive, and tore out there, and sure enough she was sinking. The weight of that, on what they called hard standing, would have held a 'Tiger Moth' up but it didn't hold what we had. And so, the big confrontation there, "What can we do?"

26:31 They must have got onto Eagle Farm and said, "Look, we're in dire straits here, we've got to get this plane off the ground. Can you take us?" So they must have worked out something. So when the boss got on board, the wing commander, he was the chief pilot, when he got on board and we piled on board, and

he said, “Righto, it’s ‘on’ from the word go. We’re not worrying about any runways. We’re

27:00 straight off across the drome. As fast as we can go.” And he did, too. He just opened those four mighty engines and off we tore, across the drome, and she’s splashing water and bouncing around. Anyhow, we got off before we got to the far side of the drome, and off and across the drome, and down to Eagle Farm, and we landed at Eagle Farm, and they allowed us to put her on hard standing down there.

27:33 They were kind enough. It was getting early morning then, so they gave us breakfast. We got up in the mess line, and they gave us a tray with all those compartments in, and as you went past they dobbed this and that in. They finished their official business and that and then we went back there and put them on board there and flew away from Eagle Farm and back to Canberra. So that was just one incident…

28:00 It could have been a real bad time. If she had gone down in one wheel, she would have slewed around.

Would you have to go everywhere that the governor general would?

In Australia, and up to New Guinea, yes.

Did it ever strike you as strange, that this man was head of state of Australia?

Yes. It was. But I think there was

28:30 a lot of diplomacy went into it. He was given the job to placate somebody or other. He wasn’t really a good man for the job at all. He was never liked. And I was down there when VJ Day came, Victory Against Japan. And they turned on a

29:00 huge parade. In Canberra. He was to take the salute at the Shrine of Remembrance and the troops were going to file past. We were all up there, we stood up there, behind the mobs and the officials and so forth. And

29:31 she turned up, not him. And we found out afterwards, he was drunk, and he ‘run into a door’. That was his excuse. He ran into a door and bashed his face. She took the salute. That’s the type of fellow he was.

How did it feel being part of VJ Day?

Well, of course for us,

30:00 that was the end of the war. The next day, on the white board, there was, ‘Anybody with five years Service and over can apply for immediate discharge.’ And my name was first on the list, because I had over five years Service. And I was out in a fortnight. So that was the end.

How did it feel to finally be finished with….

Oh great. Great. Never looked back. My job was there when I came home.

30:30 I worked for that gentleman for twenty one years, then I went out on my own, and for another twenty nine years I run my own business.

Now you mentioned your wife was with you in Canberra. How did you meet her in the first place?

That’s a long story. But going back, I met my wife when she was thirteen years of age, at a youth camp down here, run by the church, the young peoples’ department.

31:01 We used to run a camp every year. In the main street, in Marang Street, there used to be a big house there, like an old Queenslander, right there opposite the hospital. The church owned that and that’s where we used to congregate there. The girls had the upstairs, top. And we used to go down the road to the Presbyterian Hall and sleep down there. That’s where I met her. She was thirteen

31:31 I was sixteen. And I married her in 1945, ten days after coming home from overseas. So we had a long courtship, really. We’ve been married for fifty nine years, now.

How did you manage to keep a romance through all those years, through war?

32:00 Well, I think we adopted an attitude in the very beginning, that when the time came for me to go, we decided not to get married. And I said, “Righto, we won’t do this. Because if I get bowled over or maimed or come home with half a leg, I don’t want you to be tied to me….” So we didn’t get married. I think that strengthened us. And we kept a running correspondence

32:31 for the whole of those five years. I’ve got some of the letters left, and it’s all in my diaries, every letter that I wrote. We couldn’t get married quick enough, when I got home, and then I took her down to Canberra. And she was down with me for about six or seven months, until the war was over.

And how did her contact and her being there, help you through all those years of the war?

33:04 Well, it did help me through that. We remained loyal to each other all that time. I don’t say we never went out with anybody else, that’s not what I meant. Because while she was home in Brisbane, the place

was running wild with Americans. And she made a lot of friends with Americans, and particularly American nurses. And we still have contact with them, to this day.

33:33 It all worked out in the end.

Looking back at all your time in the war, what do you think were your best times in the Service?

I don't know. You would not put the Middle East as the best part of it, because it was a shocking place to live, for so many years.

34:05 I loved England. I saw some of England, but not a lot, because we didn't get that much leave. We were fighting the war, really. But I liked England and that. That was one place that you look forward to a bit more than the others. I've never tried to put.…

34:31 the two together. We were there to do a job, it was war. That was what it amounted to. We were there to do a job.

Thinking of it as war, what are your worst memories?

35:02 That I'd find hard to put into words, really, the worst part. We had a lot of really traumatic times. What could be worse than being in a hangar with the thing being shot up and bombed, and everything falling down around your ears? What's worse than that? Only the fact that you come out alive. It's better, isn't it? There were times, there were moments

35:30 when things were pretty close, and you thought that it was going to be your last. Fortunately for me it didn't. We had our times, and we came through. You look on those as your best moments. You came through the lot without a great deal of harm. But I've had problems ever since the war.

What kind of problems?

It goes right back to what we were saying.

36:00 Our rations for water in the desert was one pint of water, per man, per day. And when I came home, the first thing that I had.…I came out from almost day one, I didn't have any major things wrong, except a few minor scrapes and things like that, and I started to get kidney stones. And I've had kidney stones ever since. And it was caused by dehydration, lack of fluid.

36:32 I could do nothing about it, and neither could anybody else. That's how our position was.

Did you ever suffer from bad dreams or stress?

Oh, I did when I first came home. Many, many times I got up in the middle of the night, and I walked for miles. Just walked. Until I sort of cleared my mind and went back to bed again.

37:00 That was the major thing, apart from the kidney stones, which plagued me. Last year I had four operations, in one year. You never know when you're going to get them, and it doesn't matter how much water I drink now, it doesn't make any difference. And it all started from there.

And looking back over your service time,

37:30 **what kind of things do you think you learned from it?**

No more wars, stay away from wars. Wars don't get you anywhere. Particularly the one we've just been though. They were mad to go into that one. When I saw the dust and that flying up from, when the tanks were going through, when they go through the dust goes up by the mile.

38:01 We put up with that for three and a half years. Now who would want to go and…I always said, "Give the place back to the 'wogs'. Give it back to the 'blacks'." We don't want it. It's not worth having. And they're going to find out exactly the same. There's going to be more strikes than 'Jessy Elephant' and it won't be worth having. I can only say "No more wars." Stay away, and do

38:31 everything you can to possibly avoid them, but don't go looking for one.

We'll finish up with a final question, which is; do you have any final words that you would like to add to the record?

Well, I think I learned a lot. I was a

39:00 very raw person, an innocent person going overseas. It taught me a lot about human nature, and living with people, and getting along with people. I had to learn to do that, in very close quarters. So if anything, I learnt a great deal, and to my advantage. As I say, I learnt a lot as

39:30 far as experience was concerned, as far as the trade was concerned. At some cost, but I did learn a lot. I'm very happy. I'm not happy that I went to the war, but I came home again and everything settled down, and we had a wonderful married life. But I certainly wouldn't go looking around for another war. And if I got any grandchildren or any kids, there's no way…I would throttle them first.

40:02 “Don’t be so stupid.” Wars are for the ‘mugs’. They are, really they are.

Thank you.

Well, thank you.