Australians at War Film Archive

John Wright - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 4th February 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1513

Tape 1

00:30 **So, John if you could: that brief condensed version of your life that we just explained?**

Well I was born in Northam in Perth 1914 and we stayed there two or three years and then my parents shifted over to South Australia, and at that time the war was [World War1] on and my father enlisted in Adelaide

01:00 at that time and did his training and then he was posted over to Europe, to France. And then spent sixteen months in the trenches, got badly wounded, shipped back home and I met him on the Adelaide Railway station, that was my first memory, following that we went onto a settler's block on the River Murray, where he grew cows and where I learnt a lot of things. That didn't work

01:30 so he came back to Adelaide with us and went into sales. I was at school then the Belair School and qualified for high school, went to Adelaide High School until I was about eighteen and then I went to university for two years doing dentistry, which I didn't like. I got my blues in tennis and football and I joined the Mounted Police out of there.

02:00 I spent five years in the Adelaide [South Australian] Police Force, felt there were better things to do and saw an opportunity in the Royal Australian Air Force, applied for it and seven months later in 1939 I was accepted and enlisted. Seven years in the services including four years POW [Prisoner of War] saw me discharged in 1946, October 1946. I then went on to a farm, a

02:30 poultry farm in the hills. Built that up for three years, decided that it had done its job. I had recovered physically and I went into sales in the life assurance field. That went on until I had a very bad attack of PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] in '52 and I messed around for five years. I got better from that, went back into life assurance and became

03:00 agency manager for the Guardian Assurance Company in Adelaide. I was there for twelve years, had to retire because of problems from the war and retired at fifty-eight. I then took up flying, which I always wanted to, and as a result of that I did about ten years of ferrying light aircraft around Australia. And at the end of that I did an aerobatics course and a night flying course

03:30 and finished up with 500 hours of flying at age sixty-eight, and then I went up to my shack on the River Murray and very much enjoyed periods up there. Then I built a houseboat, because I was going to sell the shack, and I now have to houseboat down at Mannum and that's my sole recreation. And I have had that

04:00 for ten years now. And that brings me to this present moment, I am waiting to go out on the houseboat again.

That was excellent, thank you John. Let's start with that earliest moment of yours, meeting your father on that platform?

I have memories of the Adelaide Railway Station with huge ceilings in it, full of smoke and puffing engines and steam hissing. I was in my mother's arms,

04:30 I had an Australian British flag to wave. I really didn't know what it was all about, but I saw the train come in and of course there were hundreds of people there welcoming their people back. I didn't recognise my father because it had been two years since I had saw him. But it didn't take long to recognise him, I waved my flag and we were

05:00 all rejoined, that is a very happy memory.

Do you remember your mother's reaction at that time?

Not really no I can't remember that. I can only remember my feelings. Seeing so much it was beyond me to really comprehend it at that stage.

Can you tell me about your family John, what kind of a family was it?

05:30 Dad, there were three boys and a girl, I was the eldest for five years. My sister was born at Murray Bridge and we were on the settlement at Ponde. Early in the morning pains began and my father put her [mother] in the spring dray and drove her 20 miles along the limestone roads to Murray Bridge to have her baby. My next two brothers were born in Adelaide and

06:00 they both joined the air force following me. One of them was seriously injured over Germany in Lancaster bombers and was invalided back to Australia. And the other brother joined in Adelaide, trained in Canada and was posted to a Kittyhawk squadron in the Pacific and the war finished. So he came back a very disconsolate fellow. About

06:30 ten months later he was driving home from a musical event with some of his friends, got into trouble with the car, hit a tree and broke his neck and died. So that was a bit of a blow after surviving all of the war experiences. And my brother went ahead, badly injured, one hundred per cent disability, incapacitated, but he survived his life until seventy-eight.

07:00 My father, a life assurance man himself all of his life. And my mother was very active in Red Cross activities during the war, no family could have done more for us than they did for us at that time when we had to get through the problems.

In your early years – after your sister was born and possibly your brothers as well – could you tell me about

07:30 **your relationship with your parents? The family life you had?**

Yes it was in the Depression years. We lived at Belair next to the railway line going past the national park, and I, being the eldest and my father being away a lot on his insurance business in the country, I was the mainstay of the family. The man of the family. We had no electric light,

08:00 we had no water laid on. We had water tanks and a kerosene stove and ordinary kerosene lamps, and we had the famous dunny down the bank with the redback spider under the seat. Which I was obliged to service all of the time. We lived three-quarter of a mile from the railway station. So I always had to walk or run to get to school, to catch the train.

08:30 Mostly I ran and mostly I got on the train just before it got into the station on the back platform as it went along the railway line. We were very poor then. My mother had a very difficult job handling all of the washing problems, because the rainwater, it was a line with two props alongside our house in the paddock amongst the hills and on windy wet days

09:00 she had a difficult time. But as a family we became socially involved in the Belair community, and that meant building a Methodist church for the area, which we, with several other families had fetes, raised money and we built our church and it is still there. Holidays away were rare because of my father's absence.

09:30 But as a family we got through all of the difficulties and we never went short of the things that we really needed.

What did servicing the dunny involve? You said the redback spider under the seat was your [problem]…?

Oh.

10:00 Well that was the time when the [Adelaide] Advertiser, the local newspaper got split up into squares and a wire pushed through one corner and hung in the dunny. So you had print in lots of places as a result of that. And the it was just a four-gallon drum set under the seat. And when it got full I had to dig a hole in the ground which was pretty stony, and I had to dispose of it and wash everything out and put it back. And I remember

10:30 my grandmother with long skirts to the floor one day when I was nearby, I heard her scream and the door flew open and there she was with her whatever they wore underneath in those days and her skirt. She had seen a spider in the toilet. And so I laughed, I shouldn't have laughed because she was very cross with me. But I can remember that to this day, that was the sort of place that we had. And you had to walk a cricket pitch at night to get down to it,

11:00 down below the house. So on a mid-winter's night if you needed to go to the toilet it was a pretty interesting trip.

What kind of injuries had your father sustained during the war?

He was in the big battle of Billancourt of France and halfway through it he was hit by a large piece of shrapnel in the inner thigh. He dressed it himself, and he had to. Somehow

11:30 the advance got ahead of him then and he had to somehow them move back to the stretcher-bearer base. And he said fate provided him with a walking stick in the shape of a bough off a tree nearby which the shells had splintered on to the ground. He picked that up and he was able to get to the stretcher-

bearers' base and then he went back to hospital, which in those days had fairly primitive methods of removing shrapnel

12:00 from inner thighs. He always said he always had his luck in the lottery then because it was very close to me not arriving and not family not arriving, but it missed. And he was invalided back to Australia because of that injury.

Did he still have problems with that injury later in life?

No he had no further problems, it all [worked] out fairly well. Even the khaki

12:30 uniform that went into the wound, it all came out and he didn't get an infection, he was very fortunate,

Did your father discuss his wartime experiences with you?

No. Very little. He would discuss the conditions they were in but he would not discuss the fighting, he wouldn't have anything to do with that at all.

What did he tell you?

13:00 As we have read in the books, he told us of the extreme cold, the hunger. The wet putties, they had putties around their legs in those days and boots, they got wet. Food was difficult to handle. And the worst part was what he called the 'duckboards', which is what made progress across the muddy areas possible. And if you fell off a duckboard the odds were you wouldn't get back, it could be fatal

13:30 if you fell off the duck boards in the very deep mud. He describes a dreadful, cold explosive environment that destroyed the soul. It was so cold, so chilling. And then to have to go 'over the top' as they called it, on an attack on the enemy lines and to see his mates fall on the edge of the parapet from the fire of the enemy and

14:00 then to have to charge through and breach the wire that was across the no man's land. He said they were the most difficult parts of his life, to have to do all of those things in those conditions.

Did your father show signs of being affected emotionally by the war?

He didn't show signs of that,

14:30 which was rather surprising because one would have expected that he would have shown something like that but he never did.

Was it a loving relationship between you and your parents?

Yes very.

Can you illustrate that?

Yes. Being the eldest, I suppose, my

15:00 mother always had something for me if I needed it. even though I could ill afford it. I used to shoot rabbits – to keep us in food – in the national park in Belair, and when I ran out of bullets she always had one shilling and nine pence for another packet of bullets so I could continue supplying the house with meat. And my father, he followed me and backed me through my later years.

15:30 In all of sporting activities he was always there, he always took me there, he took me back. He took my mother and the family and at all times their concerns were for us.

It sounds like it was a faithful family, if they had helped build a church. How did that play a part in your life?

16:00 I think it was probably because my great grandfather was a primitive Methodist minister in the mines in Wales and in England. He came out from England and my grandfather was born on the ship on the way out. And they got to Australia and my grandfather joined the ministry as well. And this, at the very earliest age when I was in my ninth tenth year probably,

16:30 a church was started in the schoolroom where I used to do my schooling. Well this went on for a while until it was finally thought we must have a church. Well my family was right behind that. So with other church-minded people that's how we got started off with the basic things, a block of land and then an architect and plans and a builder,

17:00 and fetes all of the time to raise the money. And finally it got built, a very nice little church. And my memories at that stage of my life, from about ten to eighteen was church twice and Sunday school in the afternoon. Walk all of the way, a mile and a half. I think that probably was the great influence in my later life, the values I learnt in that church in my early days.

17:30 **What values?**

I think mainly identifying right from wrong. Moral values, relationships and those would be the main values that helped

18:00 me along later.

Was your family quite devout?

Well yes, I think my father was maybe quite devout. My mother was more devout, I was as a teenager I was not too bad, I think my brothers and sister were about the same as myself.

18:30 But I had a tendency not to let it affect me too much if there was something I wanted to that I thought probably wasn't quite the right thing. I found reasons to rationalise the situation so that I could do what I wanted to do. I remember very clearly a very rough time, I was about eleven or twelve, thirteen and I badly wanted a pushbike,

19:00 all of my friends had bikes and I just ran alongside their bikes hoping for them to give me a ride. And this upset me considerably, over quite a period of time that there were no bikes. So next door there was a man with a bike in a shed, now my devoutness did not extend to stopping me from borrowing his bike at night and going for illicit rides up the footpath. Until I learnt to ride

19:30 a bike. But one night he caught me and so my father thought that perhaps I should have a bike and I got one. Little things like that, my religion was pretty tolerant.

You said that even though these were tough times you didn't do too badly, your family tried to help as much as they could?

Yes.

Did you always have shoes for school?

20:00 I had hobnail boots. We always had shoes and clothes. My mother made our clothes, made my clothes out of her uncle's stationmaster's uniforms. He used to pass them on to her when they were being changed and she made me trousers and little jackets out of those sorts of things, so I was always well dressed. I think I had two pairs of socks in total,

20:30 the hobnail boots lasted a long time. And my sister and my brothers also were always neatly dressed, looking quite nice, we never suffered from that.

Were rabbits a real problem? You went out shooting?

Yes there were a lot of rabbits around then and the national park was right across the railway line.

21:00 And we lived alongside the railway line and there were a lot of rabbits. I used to get up in the morning of a Saturday and take my dog, a fox terrier, with me, and I would be out for five hours, hiking through the national park and all of the environment there shooting rabbits and I would come back with half a dozen rabbits hanging from my belt dripping a bit of blood,

21:30 my slacks were wet with blood. And I thought that was wonderful because this was real Deerfoot [American Indian hero of literature] and the Indian stuff, bringing back the game. That was shooting for thee, [sort of] thing. And then I had to clean the rabbit, skin and clean them and set them all up and mother put them in a cold safe, we didn't have fridges, we had cold safes. And she would put them in there for two or three days,

22:00 and then she would pre-cook them. So I got very used to rabbit stews and roast rabbit with stuffing in them. And I think 50 per cent of our meet was like that, was free meat. But I learnt a lot about the bush.

I bet you did. How did they try to keep rabbit numbers down?

Well they didn't in those days, they didn't worry much about them in those days

22:30 because it wasn't a plague. I think I helped keep them down and there were rabbit-ohs trapping all around the state doing that. And once a week a rabbit-oh would come in his horse and cart with rabbits hanging all around it, calling out, "Rabbit-oh! Rabbit-oh!" and when I hadn't got any rabbits my mother would buy one from him. They were being culled and sold because the skin was worth money for felt [clothing, linings]

23:00 and the meat was worth money, and I think that was one of the things that controlled the rabbit population.

What were you doing with the pelts?

Well I put them on a wire, you put the pelt off in a certain way and you stretch it over a long U-shaped wire and stretch it tight and then I would hang them along the back wall for them to dry. And then when the time came I would take them into the depot where you could get a

23:30 few pence for each pelt, so I also got a bit of pocket money.

What was your primary school education?

That was at Belair Primary School. The environment was one stone building and a separate building

where we had classes in the

24:00 fine weather and where we sang all of our Christmas carols. That was in the days of ‘once two is two, two twos is four’ and so on, the whole class recited the tables until they knew them backwards. The ground in the area was ironstone, rough brown ironstone and we were on the top of a railway cutting that was right against the Bellair railway station, and the

24:30 toilets were against the fence and if you dropped a rock you waited a couple of minutes until it hit the bottom. They were very windy but nevertheless very necessary. Water was unknown in those toilets at the time, dry toilets. And it was a very small school, single building with seven classes in it.

25:00 In the qualifying year, the twelfth year in those days the qualifying year to go to high school, I somehow fluked dux of the school. I don’t know how that happened but it did and I went off the high school, everybody with high hopes in me but when I got to high school there were so many temptations. Football and cricket, tennis and rifle shooting, my studies lagged a bit.

25:30 **Was there one teacher for the seven classes?**

No two teachers, headmaster and a women assistant. The headmaster taught the top classes and the assistant taught one, two, three.

To go from such a small school and get your qualifying certificate and

26:00 **move into Adelaide High School, which was one of the best places to go to do your high school, you must have had some good tutelage from the headmaster. Did your family at all?**

You mean at the primary school? Yes they were very good and they were members of the church and we used to have lots of musical evenings in the headmaster’s home which was adjacent to the school

26:30 and the environment was very very good there. He was an import from Tasmania where he taught down there, and he was very good with his classes, they caused me to miss grade three, they said I was too far ahead for grade three so I missed grade three and went to grade four. It didn’t seem to make any difference,

27:00 I suppose I could have used it for an excuse for my later tardiness, but no, it didn’t make any difference. At age twelve I had passed my twelfth year entry examination into high school so that was good.

Did your parents ever assist you with studies?

My mother couldn’t because she hadn’t had schooling that took her up as far as I was going and my father was hopeless at the mathematics area.

27:30 And languages he wasn’t too good up there, so didn’t get much help from them. My father could help me write a good letter, he was very good at that, but beyond that I was on my own and I had to rely on my teachers for some after-school coaching, which I had a lot of.

Can you tell me about high school?

Yes high school was quite a shock for me, one little building and a few of us up there, I turned up at the big Adelaide High School

28:00 and I was completely lost. I dint know where to go, eventually I heard people and I got a message and found my way over to a certain area and that was the right area, I belonged there. And we went into a larger class there, about thirty in a class and we started really studying things at that stage and the teachers down there were quite disciplinarian too. You couldn’t fool

28:30 about, you had to work and you had to learn. It was a very good school, and very substantial school with lots of the activities for the students to do. I spent a year at Adelaide High School. I nearly got killed going to school, one day very narrowly missed it.

29:00 And I went off then because it was so far from Belair in the hills they decided Unley High School which was at the bottom of the hills would be easier to get to, well less time. So I changed high schools after first year and went to Unley High School.

You’re going to have to tell me know why you nearly got killed?

Well at that age I was twelve and a half and in the train we did a few silly things going to school by

29:30 the train. We had the suburban type carriage with the platforms each end and you could walk across between the carriages. And going into the Adelaide Railway Stations we always used to be very clever. We would walk up between the carriages to get to the front carriage to get out before the others. And on this particular morning, as I was walking across with my kit bag in my hand, I went to step from one carriage to the other and we went through a set of points which moved the carriage and my foot missed the step

30:00 that I was to go on to and I went straight down between two carriages. Fortunately I had a good left hand and I grabbed a tube above as I went down, one hand. And it held me with my feet just trailing

along the sleepers. And I managed the throw my kit bag and the other hand on to the next platform and reached up with my other free hand and grabbed another stanchion

30:30 and with a mighty effort I pulled myself up from between the carriages and on to the platform. But it was very close, I only had to miss that stanchion and I was under the carriage and gone. So I never did that again. Only once.

What did your parents think of that?

I didn't tell them.

So Unley High School: what was the difference from your perspective

31:00 **apart from the proximity to Belair?**

The difference at Unley High School was that I was a year older and as each year went by [and] I developed all sorts of possibilities opened up to me for sport. And I took part in football, tennis, cricket and rifle shooting.

31:30 Took up the four sports and that created a really big interest for me in that school as well as the education. Whereas in Adelaide High School, it was a bit of a small frog in a rather large pond. When I got to Unley High School I was a bit older, I was bigger than most, and I tended to become a larger frog in a slightly smaller school. Therefore I had more interest and more activity,

32:00 more relations with the teachers with me, because of the sporting factors. Generally the atmosphere was I think a little less urbanised because it was out near the foothills. Less urbanised. It was very comfortable, the teachers were very good.

You were doing all right at this point in your family, at least compared to other people

32:30 **were there kids struggling that you could see at school?**

Yes. There were.

Can you tell me how you noticed that? What stood them apart?

I think it was noticeable because of their lunches, their clothes and their general attitude

33:00 to things. They were the main signs of that sort of thing.

And what were their lunches and clothes and attitude?

Well lunches were very simple, bread and jam sandwich and cheese sandwich, a lot of cheese sandwiches. In fact on one occasion I heard one of the young people,

33:30 Geoff, come and open his lunch and he said, "Jesus Christ, what does she think I bloody am? A mouse?" He had so much cheese, always cheese. But we had a canteen in that camp and a local baker brought in some very nice goodies and I would notice that these sort of people didn't buy them, they just had their lunch and they didn't

34:00 have any activities, they were just sort of there. But it wasn't rampant, it was I would think to be seen but not to be an outstanding or glaring factor in the school.

Why weren't they doing activities?

I think because they had been brought up in

34:30 circumstances and families who didn't have interest in activities, in sports and things. If that's what it was. Or maybe they felt that they weren't suited for this particular environment. I was because living at Belair you either walked uphill or downhill, it was hardly level, and when I got a bike you were riding uphill or riding downhill, so I had to walk a lot, carry my kit bag. I had to run a lot, there was no transport.

35:00 Every day was a four-mile walk, four mile all told. And I did that for years, carried my gear in the hills and I think that one developed a physique that was much better than the ones living down on the plains catching trams to school. or riding a bike to school. we had an entirely different environment built up and I think it showed in the people coming down

35:30 from the hills.

What were your aspiration as you were getting closer to finishing your school year?

Nil. I was enjoying my life so much that I just didn't seem to have any room for what should I do next. Or what is coming up. And it was my father who directed me into dentistry because at

36:00 the time he had paid dentist bills for me and they were very very costly. And he felt that money lay in dentistry and therefore I should go in there, and after his experiences in the depression without money and the struggles he felt it very important that I had a calling that would bring in a good income. But I got to university, and I liked the university but after two years of it I didn't like the work at all.

36:30 It wasn't for me, not dentistry. So I still had no aspiration. It was suggested I go up on the River Murray on a fruit block with a friend of my fathers from the First War, he was settled up there. And I nearly did that but then I thought, "No, I don't want to do that really, I will be away from all of the things I know down here, isolated up there."

37:00 So I knocked that back. So then he got a bit firm with me and said, "You need a discipline, you need discipline so they are looking for police officers in the police force and I have made an appointment for you to go and have it." And so I went and had an appointment, I did a test and I was in the next day, in the police force.

Did you have nay say in it?

No. I didn't really. And also behind my mind I knew this was probably right, this was what I

37:30 needed something like that. And so I joined the Mounted Police of South Australia at the age of twenty.

Was there pressure on you to bring money into the family?

No. It would have been difficult because I only got two pounds thirteen and eight a fortnight when I started. So there wouldn't have been much money going into the family, but no, that's wasn't asked for.

So after two years of university you joined the police force, what was your training like there?

38:00 Very severe. It would be probably some of the best training in Australia, because we had in charge a British Army sergeant major, and they are the top and he ran the police training depot just like a top sergeant major. And I remember arriving at the barracks with

38:30 two other fellows and they had their hands in their pockets and I happened to have my hands out of my pockets, and a huge bull-like roar came from the gate telling us to, "Get those hands out of those B--- pockets," or else. Well it scared the life out of the three of us. And we found that this was the start of a disciplinary period which was hard to take,

39:00 but it really worked.

Where were you living?

Living in barracks. Yes. Two in a room, long hut with a veranda out front, two beds in the room and a cupboard and a wardrobe. Inspections every week by the inspector in charge of the system. And if we had one little bit of cotton wool or one little bit of flock that comes out of a mattress, if there

39:30 was one little bit on the floor or anywhere at all we lost a night's leave confined to barracks. Pillows, your bed had to be absolutely uncriticised-able – that's a big word isn't it? – but one slip and you lost a night's leave and confined to barracks. Now that was very difficult to take: losing a night's leave and therefore we became

40:00 extremely good housekeepers, extremely good housekeepers at making our beds and keeping the place as it ought to be. That's part of the discipline.

What were the other young men like on your course?

There were a lot of countrymen from farms and country because things were pretty poor in those days. That was 1934, right at the middle of it. so there were a lot of farmer boys in there, tough

40:30 strong, independent and just a few of us, what would you call us?

Softies?

Yeah softies. And I learnt after, it was interesting. At the university I played top football and got my blue, I played top tennis, I was number two in the tennis. And living in the hills, six feet, I was extremely fit and I was told by a fellow in the barracks afterwards that they had heard that there was a fellow coming down from the university,

41:00 he wore glasses and they were going to give me a very rough time, because they had been there two or three weeks you see, I was late, they were going to give me a rough time. And when I arrived down there I didn't wear glasses, I was as tall and as well built of any of them and also at my primary school in later years at

41:30 the age of seventeen, I was taught boxing by our headmaster.

Well just stop the tape there ,sorry we're about to run out.

41:39 **End of tape**

Tape 2

00:30 **We can pick up the story of the boxing that you mentioned with the tape break?**

Yes I had the opportunity of... our teacher at the primary school who was the ex-heavy weight champion of Tasmania. And he offered

01:00 friends of mine and myself to teach us boxing. We were about, seventeen, sixteen, eighteen. And so he took us through a very good course of self-defence. Now that's not fighting. Self-defence is a lot different from fighting, but it keeps you out of a lot of trouble, and it allows you to defend yourself, especially in those conditions, and to survive and attack what you might not otherwise survive.

01:30 So we did this for quite a period and became very efficient at this particular system, and as I was a tennis player left hand, I had a very strong arm and therefore I had a very strong left glove. And I joined the police force as I said before and they were going to play games with me. And on our first gym day we had a

02:00 British [fellow], Lantern Jord, five foot five, sergeant. He won the Military Medal in the Second World War in the Middle East. He was afraid of nothing and he thought we should be afraid of nothing also. He used to pick two of our troupe to box on and he wanted to fight every time. He had some of them lined up with their toe to the white line, and you just had to belt each other and whoever

02:30 went away from the white line first got beaten. But there was no instruction in self-defence or how to handle yourself in an emergency with somebody. That I didn't like after my training, I didn't like at all. And he put me in with another fellow from a farm, and this fellow just charged in at me this day. And there were only, I just

03:00 did my training. And the result of it was he was staggering back amongst the others and it was over. And I didn't like it, he [Wright's opponent] knew nothing about boxing, nothing at all. And because I dropped my hands and walked away the sergeant was very hostile. So he got another man

03:30 to face me and said, "Now, I want a bloody fight." And the same thing happened again. There couldn't be a fight in those conditions, couldn't be a fight. And so he hated me from thereafter, the sergeant absolutely hated me. But then I was, subsequently I was, told that they had changed their minds about what they were going to do with me, coming down from university with glasses. So I won the day in one way.

04:00 **Can you tell me about your first interest or early interest in flying, how did you become interested?**

I was in the police force and there was an advertisement in the Adelaide newspaper about a flying competition scholarship and I thought, "Oh, I must go out. That's a free flight." So I went out to Parafield

04:30 was put into a Tiger Moth, told a few things, taken into the air and the pilot then did some manoeuvres that really brought my stomach up. And I very quickly was petrified of flying; all I wanted was to get back on the ground. I didn't want to fly at all, and if he would only get back to the ground quickly I would bless him, I would be very happy. He didn't, he made life uncomfortable for me a little longer, and as

05:00 a result I decided that flying wasn't really for me. That was my first experience of flying, scared stiff. I found out he did it to everybody at the very beginning.

What inspired you? What other air events were taking place at the time?

Yes well when I was in the mounted police I was detailed to go out to Parafield from the barracks, with

05:30 another officer to control the traffic at a flying display at Parafield. The air force was there , all of the local flying clubs were there, all of the private owners were there, it was a huge day. And I was able to move around the whole system, had lunch out there watching everything out there, got to walk through the planes. All of a sudden I got the desire to fly, because there were air force planes there you see, fighters. Biggles [fictional British flyer invented by WE Johns] and all of that sort of thing

06:00 came through. And on the way to the barracks me and my mate were talking all of the way, "How would it be to be in the air force? Flying those Hawker Demons look at them, magnificent aircraft, biplanes. Fabric wings and all." And we both finished up in the service, he in the Middle East in fighters and bombers, and myself in the

06:30 supply section. He was young enough to be a pilot and I wasn't, and I was married so they wouldn't take me.

When did you get married?

1937.

How did you meet your wife?

At a fundraising function for our church in Belair, I met her there. And it turned out that

07:00 the convener had asked my [future] wife to come to it because she had newly arrived in Belair and she [the convenor] had invited her there to meet me. I didn't know this until afterwards. And so I met her and we danced and did all sorts of things, had lovely suppers. Afterwards of course I said, "Well can I walk you home?" and she said, "Yes I will walk with you home." And so we walked her home about three-quarters of a mile to her home and when I got there I did not quite know what to do.

07:30 I was not one, with girls I liked them but you know I hadn't, I had too many other things to do I think. Anyway we stopped outside the gate and I remember this so clearly, I looked down at her and thought, "Should I kiss her goodnight or not? Is she the sort that does." And I took a chance and I did and that was that, we have been together sixty-eight years now.

That's great. Did you have any kids

08:00 **before you joined up?**

No we didn't have any children, we had a twelve-year problem having children. That was finally solved and we got our three.

So can you tell me what you knew of the rising tensions in Europe?

08:30 To the Second World War?

Yes in the middle of the 30s and Hitler coming to power?

I even knew about the threat that Russia posed to Australia, and of course in those days with a friend of mine I used to stand at Belair and look out over Adelaide over the sea wondering when we would see the first Russian warship come in. That never happened of course.

09:00 But they made a lot of preparations to happen down around Fort Largs in South Australia, they put big guns there and established a bastion of defence. But building to the Second World War… I can remember when I was in the police force in

09:30 1938 I was reading the paper and I was noting then things happening over in Europe that looked as though there could be trouble and I watched it closely all along the line as things developed. And when I joined the air force in 1939 things were simmering. And I realise now from reading since with perspective, I realise now things that

10:00 were happening there we weren't getting reported properly in Australia. Of course there was no TV or satellite dishes in those days. We were fed what they wanted to feed us, but we knew something was coming. And I joined the air force and went to Laverton in February and I trained and we could feel the thing getting closer as we were

10:30 training, and I became part of the air force system. One began to get the sense or the feeling that we were heading for something in the way they were planning things. And in September '39 I was with friends at my house, my wife and we heard Chamberlain declare war on Germany, and that was the real start of it.

11:00 But we didn't at that stage, I don't think any of us really imagined accurately which way it was going to go and what was going to be done. And when the war started so suddenly, we sensed an immediate increase in action, and I was part of that.

11:30 **I know it is obvious now but if you can cast your mind back to that time, why did you think you would be involved in a war between England in Germany? You were in Adelaide in South Australia?**

When I joined the air force I must admit I didn't join it to fight a war, I joined the air force because the very thought of an air force attracted me.

12:00 I think romantic was a big factor, join the air force that was a very romantic thing. All of my reading had been of Biggles and flying and all of the things they did in the First World War. I remember my First World War picture Hell's Angels, and that was so corny in later years that it was hard to believe, it was all British stuff. And I

12:30 remember seeing those pictures and I think it formed in my mind a very strong effect of, "I want to be in that, I want to be a apart of that." I don't know that I wanted to be a part of flying bombers or flying fighters or shooting people down, I don't know that I really thought about that part of it. In fact, when I got in the

13:00 air force and was posted to a squadron of Hawker Demons, biplanes, and I got friendly with the pilots, I wasn't a pilot, but I got friendly with the pilots and they would take me up flying. And I can remember trying to overcome this thing I had before, and one day after work a sergeant pilot came in

13:30 and said, "Would you like to go for a flight with me?" "Oh," I said, "Yes sir." He was a Hawker Demon pilot, "What are you going to do?" He said, "I am going to do dive bombing practice." I said, "Oh." But there was no retreat at that stage. I couldn't say that I don't think I will come. So I went and I got completely cured of my fear of flying in that half an hour after we took off from there. I

14:00 nearly died because we did inverted turns, upside down on this bombing target and then we pulled out with about seven or eight g-s which I had never experienced and I was petrified right through it, but it cured me of all of my problems and from then on I wanted to fly. That was when I really got the urge to fly and at Parafield they taught me to fly unofficially.

How were disappointed were you that you were not accepted to be a pilot?

14:30 Well they wouldn't accept me for pilot because I was beyond the age they were interested in, and in fact I was married. They had plenty of younger, like my two brothers, plenty of youngsters wanting to become pilots. And I had already joined in the supply branch when they weren't calling for crew. I got into the air force on a, I may have been able

15:00 to get into the flying branch if at the time they had been recruiting, I don't know. But I would say looking back, it was hard to say. Once I was in equipment branch, they were short of people, there was no chance of a change.

How aware of you were the history of the RAAF in the First War?

15:30 Well I had read a lot of the operations but I think yes a lot of it came through books on the operations and actions. I was very interested in it, I got to know a lot about the aeroplanes they used in those days and I had a very good mechanical

16:00 understanding of things so that I could appreciate what they were doing in those days. And I think this whole environment, the whole thing of how aeroplanes flew, what you could do with them and what they did appealed to me very much.

But you could have stayed in the police. Was there a sort of desire, were you getting frustrated in the police force and that's why you?

Yes, I think the turning point

16:30 in the police force came when I had come in from all night motor traffic duty. Miserable night, drizzling rain, sitting on an open motorbike with a sidecar and my mate under the cover and just an ordinary hat on, although I had a flying helmet I used. And I came in from cruising around the outskirts of the city in bitter cold, drizzle, wet roads, just like my

17:00 father in the trenches, I used to think. And when I came in at seven o'clock knock off to our headquarters to the mess room, nice fire and a cup of tea. And the Advertiser was there and I thought to myself there must be something better than motor traffic. And I just happened to turn up the situations vacant and there was an air force advertisement for straight in to commission in the equipment branch.

17:30 and my qualifications seem to fit what they were asking for, so that night I went home and wrote a letter and sent it over to Ambon. And about a month or two later I was written to for an appointment over at out Cassock Barracks, which I went to, and after the conference they said, "Very good, that's very nice thank you." And seven months later I got a

18:00 letter of acceptance on a permanent commission, which was a bit unreal to me, I didn't really know what it was then at that stage, a commission in the air force I had no idea.

What were you commissioned as?

A pilot officer.

Even though you weren't flying?

Yes that's right. You had the same ranks as flying ranks but you didn't have the wings. That's the difference, the wings meant a lot to the girls.

18:30 **What did your wife think about you going into the air force?**

She was very happy about it. And to go over to join the air force I had purchased a very large police motorbike, when they purchased back for new ones, and I had purchased a very large motorbike for myself. And so we set off for Melbourne to join the air force on this motorbike with sidecar. It took us three days to get there,

19:00 choofing along limestone roads in the country, it was quite a trip, quite a long trip. Three days. And we got to Melbourne okay and stayed with relatives and then a couple of days later I reported out to Laverton on my big 1000cc type police type bike.

What sort of bike was it?

AJS four speed, Harley Davidson configuration

19:30 and a sidecar you could lie down in of course and a very comfortable bike. My wife sat in that sidecar for three days with the screen up in front and the exhaust choofing in her ears and I think when we got to Melbourne she was completely fed up with motorbikes but it was a good experience to do a trip like that, three days and three nights going over.

20:00 **How did things change for you in the air force when war was declared?**

Well number one the pay was half as much again, number two there was such a new environment to work in and study. It was all to do with aeroplanes it was all to do with flying,

20:30 although I was in the supply part I was looking after the aeroplanes by keeping them supplied and in the air all of the time. And of course in that environment you're mixed up with the whole operation of the squadron, you can't avoid it, you're mixed up with the air crews, and in doing so you are with a pretty

21:00 special bunch. You know people chosen specially. And it was a challenge to be with these people, keep up with these people, match them in things. And the other thing, which I liked of course with my wife there, was that they had developed a very good social life in peacetime. She enjoyed the fortnightly meetings of the wives that was established at Laverton. And we had

21:30 tennis matches and tennis things and I was good at that, so that gave me a little bit of status over there too. And a local Williamstown Football Club recruited me to play football for them in the winter. So I had a very full life, footy in the winter, tennis in the summer, the social life of the air force, the mess. I got into a situation where it was officers' mess and the others' mess. I was never very keen on that

22:00 partition between people but it had to be in those circumstances. And our monthly dinners in the mess when you passed the port always in the correct direction, if you made a mistake you were fined. And these big officers' dinners in full dress were something that I really enjoyed. There was a taste about it, a refinement, there was something

22:30 nice about the whole environment. In the police force it wasn't. Goodness me, in the police force I had to go out as a member of the licensing branch, I had to go out at night and somehow find a sly grog place, and having found a sly grog place through various mean methods I would have to go back and tell my controlling detective that I had found this place,

23:00 and we would go back and I would go in and pinch it. But the scenes that emanated from that, the things that happened after that with prosecutions, court actions, cross-examination, skilled lawyers. That environment was a miserable one to me.

Can you tell us about that sly grog operation and how it worked?

23:30 Yes well I will tell you one instance. I had a mate with me and we decided that we would dress up as swags, just arrived in Adelaide from out bush somewhere, arrived in trucks, and dressed up like that. We went to a certain place, I forget where it was but we had heard about it. There were people there. We acted

24:00 the part of swags just arrived, didn't know anything. "Where can we get some beer?" This is after hours you see. "Where can we get some beer? What is the place?" Well they were a bit suspicious but they gave us the places and led us to where we made our enquiries and finally we got to our sly grog outfit. And having got into the sly grog outfit and bought a couple of bottles of beer we went away and we came back with

24:30 the detectives and we arrested them. And of course they hated our guts, they really hated us these people. And I sensed this hate at one sly grog place that we pinched. The man that owned it had served in prison for manslaughter, and he had a big supply of bottles of beer there and things weren't too bad, he

25:00 accepted the arrest and so on, but when the detective said, "We're taking your supply." Then he went berserk. He went berserk, he was going to go for me for being responsible, and when you're dealing with a man who has been in prison for manslaughter it can be a bit dicey. And so I stood up to him and I think I looked him in the eye

25:30 and he didn't like what he saw because he backed off and we arrested him. He had a very eminent solicitor in court to defend him. and I had to stand up to all of the cross examination in the world you can think of, every chance to contradict myself, and these sort of experiences eventually went against my grain, I just didn't like doing that sort of work any more.

26:00 **In the wartime air force, how was the air force preparing for?**

For war?

Yes.

Well at that time they weren't. They were just flying, doing exercises, training, but nothing specifically for war.

Were you adequately equipped, do you think, from the supply side?

No they weren't adequately equipped at all.

26:30 We were equipped with fabric-winged two-seat biplanes. Gun out the back, machine guns out the front firing between wooden props. Very low performance factors, against what was being prepared in Japan and in Europe. We were miles and miles behind. The first advancement they made while I was there was when

27:00 was where Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation manufactured the Wirraway, and that was based on a model overseas, they manufactured the Wirraway to replace the Hawker Demon as our fighter. Now the Wirraway was a nicely made aeroplane, as strong as you could build a plane, but its general performance was very inadequate for what it was to finally come up against which was

27:30 the Japanese Zero, and hardly a Wirraway survived. They were all shot down eventually in the war in Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. Every one was destroyed, might have been one or two got out of it. They were quite unsuitable, and we couldn't get any from anywhere else

28:00 because the moment the war started all aircraft development was concentrated on Britain and France, everything went there. They were not equipped at all.

You were sent out of Melbourne to Darwin is that right?

Well I went to Adelaide first, this is when things accelerated in 1940, all of a sudden things were accelerated.

28:30 They established the elementary flying training school at Parafield to train pilots in elementary flying so they could be posted to the operation unit to be trained there for actual combat, and also they went ahead with training the maintenance staff, the engineers, fitter, turners and all of those sorts of people. And so I came to Adelaide to establish a school of technical training in the old Exhibition Building on North Terrace.

29:00 And a lot of men were recruited and were billeted in there and started their training in the School of Mines Technical High School at North Terrace. That was when the surge started at that particular time. Equipment started to pour in for troops. All of the accessories, that sort of thing, greatcoats, the suits, the shoes, all of those things started to pour into these depots where they were training men. And of course there was big acceleration

29:30 in the flying training area. From that school of technical training school I was posted to Parafield which was an elementary flying training school, and there was great activity going on there. They were recruiting very solidly for pilots to start training. I was well involved in the development of that place at the time. They just processed the people through and straight off to operational training.

30:00 My brother trained in Canada because they didn't have enough room in Australia to train some of the people, so they shifted them to Canada for their elementary training and operational training too. But that was the first sign of big effort to suddenly increase air crews to handle the aeroplanes, because they were going to supply these crews to Britain to handle the

30:30 manufacturing production in Britain.

Was there any thought that Australia itself might have to defend itself over here or was the focus on helping England?

Well the general thought was that Australia, we didn't have much to worry about. I was posted to Darwin from Parafield in 1941,

31:00 March 1941. Now we went quietly ahead up there we had Lockheed Hudson bombers and Wirraway fighters, that was the type of aircraft on the station. And the supply position as far as I was concerned was nice and steady but nothing going up in anticipation of anything. Subsequently, reading

31:30 how they did or what they did with the aircraft when they got them, but at that time no, there was lots of thing being planned and thought of, where the aircraft should be, where they could come from, priorities and things like that, were all being planned and looked at rather late in the piece as it turned out. And it wasn't until the Pearl Harbor

32:00 opening that Australia woke up to the fact hat it really had to move fast. And from the air force point of view I was short of staff and they started to pour material in by shipload from the south, into an establishment that was organised for almost a peacetime operation. We were overwhelmed

32:30 with things, supplies, bombs, things like that. It was an extremely difficult time. I was given the job of aerodrome defence officer at that time. And I had to establish trenches, sandbagging, defence of the aerodrome. Now I was a supply officer, so what did I do about it? They had some Vickers guns and some Lewis guns [machine guns]

33:00 that was how prepared they were for action in Darwin in March 1941.

Where was your wife?

She went with me to Darwin and because I was a staff officer. She had a house with me on the station, a new house on the station, we were very comfortable. It was a very enjoyable period in Darwin. This was all of the real

33:30 thing, they were doing exercises, bombing exercises. We were establishing advance operational bases around the coast, the north coast at Milingimbi, Groote Eylandt, Derby, Wyndham and Broome. We were establishing advanced bases with stores of fuel and stores of bombs and I was doing all of that sort of work.

Did you travel out to those places?

34:00 Yes I had an aircraft allocated to me to travel around to these places to supervise their establishment.

What kind of aircraft were you flying around in?

I had a Moth Minor. That was a miniature Spitfire, but it was a Moth, Tiger Moth, one wing, lovely little aeroplane, two seater. You couldn't do a loop in it with two people in it but it made a very nice transport around these places with me. One some of these trips it was arranged that the fighters, the Wirraways, would carry out an exercise

34:30 at the same time [as] conveying me to the destination. They would carry out exercises in the same operation. So we would have three or four Wirraways going on the trip to fit into the whole thing. That was interesting, except on one occasion we were coming over Adelaide River and the pilot suddenly left the formation and dived straight down to the deck,

35:00 and I am sitting in the back seat wondering what he is doing, straight down to the deck, we did a steep turn around the airfield and he went straight in to land and stopped and I said, "What happened?" He said, "I nearly had a blackout up there, I had to come straight down I don't know what happened I nearly blacked out." I thought well that was nice, that was good. Thereafter I learnt to fly a Wirraway.

35:30 Just in case it happened again, because you had to pull the stick out of some clips, put it in the socket down the bottom, and do your throttle there and take over the stick and fly the aeroplane, which at that stage I could have flown it all right because I had been trained at Parafield for solo in Tiger Moths so I had enough experience to fly the aeroplane through the air. Landing, well who knows?

36:00 **You mentioned accelerating, can you take us through what happened to you and what led to your departure for Singapore?**

I went on leave my first leave down south from Darwin on the 6th of December

36:30 and on the 8th of December the attack took place, I was recalled immediately so I went back, left my wife down south. Went back to Darwin, all of the women have been evacuated, and we were immediately getting on to a war footing, a war state. And we had a conference with our CO [Commanding Officer] of Darwin station about preparations for what was expected.

37:00 He predicted that the Japs would arrive in three months. And they did arrive almost to the day of three months. We were attacked. I wasn't in Darwin then. Because about four days after my allocation to the trench development aerodrome defence, one of my branch got killed in Malaya, and head office posted me straight from

37:30 Darwin to Singapore to replace him. And so the next day I took off in a flight of three Hudsons Koda which were going up to replace the aircraft damaged at the opening of the war on the 8th of December at Beru, right up on the Malaya Peninsula where they were based. That was 1 Squadron, Lockheed Hudsons. And they had been in action on that day overnight defending the

38:00 beaches at Kota Bahru and some of them got lost and so they had to be replaced, flown up from the south. And I went as a passenger on one of those to Singapore. We arrived at Singapore and were doing our approach when we saw a huge cloud of smoke just outside the 'drome. And it was another Lockheed Hudson coming in from

38:30 England to support the RAF [Royal Air Force], had flown all of the way from England and something went wrong with his controls and he lost control of his aircraft at about three or four hundred feet and that was it: he went straight in. We flew in just as that happened.

What did Singapore look like from the air? What could you see from the battleships in the sea?

Oh the airport was quite plain: it was a great big round ground just on the outskirts of Singapore.

What battleships could you see in the harbour?

39:00 You could see everything in the harbour when you flew over the top, the whole thing laid out like a chess board, there was nothing, no the only thing about Sambawag aerodrome was at night it had a bit of a fog over it and they couldn't see it to bomb it. So shortly after I got there – the bombing had been going on when I got there, the 15th of December I got there – daytime the bombers would go over,

39:30 twenty-seven bombers and they would bomb the naval base, the fighter bases but they could never get us in the night time, they were too busy demolishing those places. But one day they came over in the daytime and we were all blasé about it and I was sitting in a slit trench in front of headquarters by the end of the aerodrome and we heard these aircraft coming over and I looked up and there were twenty-

seven of them

40:00 coming across at about 15,000 feet and they were coming straight along our main runway. And I was sitting on the edge of a trench with the accountant whom I had been talking pay matters with. And all of a sudden in the distance, on the end of the runway we saw the earth spurting up, coming straight towards us. And suddenly we realised what was happening. So we both dropped to the bottom of the trench. I can't describe what

40:30 happened in the next few minutes, it is indescribable. The earth came to an end, everything blew up, I blacked out, I was knocked out, concussed, knocked out. So was the other fellow. And gradually I came back to the sound of the aircraft going away. And I was of course shell-shocked then. But

41:00 I stood up and looked around and there was a big crater on the right, there a big crater on the right there another one on the end 15 metres away, three of them. Two straddled and one at the end. And the next slit trench to us had been covered in by a bomb exploding about ten feet away. Covered them all in the trench, and they were frantically digging each other out with the dirt, and they all survived it, but they were frantically digging away at the dirt to get at the fellow underneath so they could save them.

41:30 And this went on in other trenches too, but that was a salutary experience for me. And from there I went,

Sorry I will just pull you up there, we will continue that story

41:43 **End of tape**

Tape 3

00:30 **John so you just finished talking about the men digging each other out of the dirt, the slit trenches, the men were digging each other out of the slit trenches? You were just coming to**

01:00 **after the bombers had come over. Can you talk about the impact that had on you?**

Yes it, I got out of the trench and trotted away, walked away for a start, I didn't want to look frightened, because just alongside there was a hangar going up,

01:30 aircraft in it burning, ammunition going everywhere, men running around. And I had a little section out in the rubber, 'Uroo' we called it, the rubber trees, I had a tent with some equipment in it out there and I wanted to get back there. And so I walked for a start to the end of an aerodrome where I perceived a lot of Indians who had been working there had sheltered in galvanised iron sheds.

02:00 And the consequences of that was a lot of dead Indians in these sheds, heaped up inside these sheds. I passed that and then I passed a concrete open drain that people had sheltered in and a bomb had landed just down below them on the concrete and they had all been blasted up against the end of the drain like sardines, all dead. None injured, no, just all shot [killed by the blast] dead every one of them.

02:30 Shot dead. I continued out from there and I got to my tent, my headquarters as we called them because at that time I was handling things for an RAF fighter squadron, and I got to my tent and it looked rather damaged, I had a chair and a telephone in my tent, and a desk. And a bomb had gone straight down the middle, past my chair and hadn't exploded.

03:00 So I thought, "Well, just as well I wasn't there, and lucky it didn't explode." And I heard voices, and I went out of my tent and traced these voices, where another bomb had exploded, the ground was soft and it went into the ground and blew up, like it blew a cork out of the ground. And an Indonesian and his wife sitting in the remains of a slit trench near the top of the hole, sitting there,

03:30 right on the side of the hole and bomb went down through and exploded up. And they weren't injured but they couldn't get out of their hole it was too dangerous. I marvelled then at how close these things can come to you and you can get away with it. And I found that for the next two weeks, [when] we were bombed again. But I found that

04:00 from breakfast time in the morning I was not capable of doing anything constructive. I was disorientated. I walked around trying to put on a good show, and when 11 o'clock came and the time for the bombers passed and they weren't coming all of a sudden I was all right, I functioned perfectly

04:30 for the afternoon. Every day for a fortnight I was like that, every day in the morning, waiting for the raids, hopeless. And so the doctor said, "Well, you have been shell shocked, don't worry about it it will pass, it will go away." It did, it went away. I got over it and carried on then with just the ordinary life of the station. I did get to a slit [trench]

05:00 a lot earlier after that, I wasn't late ever getting to a slit trench when I heard the siren go.

Had any of the RAAF been killed? Had any of your men been killed?

Yes they were killed, we had casualties. Interesting enough one trench, one lot of fellows in one trench, it was an L shaped trench, they always made them L shaped so that if you were being strafed you could get around the other side and miss the strafing.

05:30 But on this occasion the bomb landed fair in the middle of the trench and we lost three fellows, literally lost them. There were casualties down in the workshops, they were caught in the workshops, killed there. Our casualties were relatively small that day, relatively small. Our kitchen was a casualty too unfortunately. Where we had our food, which

06:00 was very important.

What was done about burial?

I don't know. I wasn't mixed up with that.

You didn't attend any funerals?

No.

Had this been a shocking incident for you, the amount of death you had seen. Was it shocking to you?

Yes it was. I thought of these people living in Singapore, nothing to do with the war, no

06:30 arguments with the Japanese and here they were being indiscriminately destroyed by the Japanese in this sort of fashion. Casualties of the war. Haven't we got that today, at this moment [2004], innocent civilians? And it seemed to me to be such a terrible thing. These people are present on a

07:00 target such as we were and were getting killed in far greater numbers than we were getting killed, as civilians on the station.

Did life return to normal at the station?

Yes pretty quickly. It returned to normal with a few qualifications there I think. Everybody became more alert, more everything. They were really active

07:30 after that. Before they had been lulled into a sense of we're not going to cop it. And when they did, it certainly changed their attitudes tremendously.

So what were your days consisting of?

In those days I was doing whatever it was that I could do because there had been disorganisation of the

08:00 supply system. And so instead of running along on a steady laid-down basis, all of a sudden decisions had to be made ad hoc, the whole pattern of our work changed. But the aircraft area section, the aircrews and things like that,

08:30 they carried on with their work much as they did before. They still had aircraft in service, being damaged out in action, coming back being repaired, flight crews being briefed, very much like war as we know it. Flying out along the peninsula to bomb the Japs. Returning back to Singapore and in the mess that night talking about it. Next morning go out again searching for convoys in the straits and so on, so with

09:00 them the routine because a very tight service reconnaissance, attacking and survival against the fighters because we didn't have any real fighter support. And the Lockheed Hudsons were constantly being attacked by the Zeros which were so superior, so they were have a very active time right the way through, it didn't change.

09:30 **Why were your own planes not being used to counter the strikes that the Japanese were doing at 11 o'clock?**

Well we were very restricted to defence aircraft like fighters, we had obsolete fighters in those days, they were obsolete, although they did the best they could. When a fighter came over in

10:00 those days a Brewster Buffalo, which were obsolete aircraft, would go out to meet them. But it would be three or four to twenty-seven bombers. And on occasion they would shoot a bomber down if they could catch up with it or come up underneath it, they would shoot it down. But by and large the fighter support was just not there to cover the attacking forces, it was not sufficient. And of course at night, they couldn't do anything about night

10:30 defence at all, they couldn't fly by night. So it was only daytime periods that the fighters we had were able to act at all.

What about anti-aircraft artillery?

Yes there was anti-aircraft artillery 4.7 [mm] artillery but at the beginning of the operation it was apparent that the fuses which times the explosion of the shell

11:00 operated before the shell got to the height of the aircraft. In other words the control system on the shell worked too soon to get up to the aircraft height and we had no luck with those, they were only nuisance value, and the Japs seemed to know it and stayed above that height. But later, and it is only a matter of weeks later, a type of fuse became available which would not explode the shell until it

11:30 got up to the altitude of the aircraft. And that was when we started to hit our first bomber aircraft, was when we got those fuses, we had a certain amount of success in shooting them down and that made them more careful, much more careful.

Did you retrieve any POWs from hitting down the bombers?

Japs?

Were there any survivors?

No when they came down they were killed. Dead.

12:00 Crashed. I never heard of a capture of Japanese crews out of an aircraft that was destroyed, never heard of it.

How much longer were you at the station?

I was there in Singapore until approximately the end of January,

12:30 approximately. I was evacuated from Singapore. Things had got to the stage then when the Japanese were down towards the causeway [linking Singapore Island with Malaya] on the north part of the island. They were approaching down there. They were bombing the island. We were undergoing heavy fighter attacks, bomber attacks, everything. And we had nothing to throw back at them to speak of.

13:00 And so it was recognised that the island could not be defended much longer and so we were evacuated out as a group on ships. Most of them went down from Singapore to Palembang where we were based on a secret aerodrome. Because it was out in the country and there was nothing to identify it as an aerodrome.

And how did you make it there?

13:30 I made it by ship. Small ship, about 500 tons. Posted to ship at the docks, so I went down to the docks and here was this little 500 ton ship, little alongside the ones going overseas evacuating people.

What was the scene at the dock?

Chaotic. An ordinary person could never have found where they wanted to go,

14:00 but our system of course, the military system, was working in a different way. But our whole group was directed by military police to where we had to go. At that time there was a huge scramble, civilians were trying to get out and it really caused so much trouble because they were trying to load these people in order of priority,

14:30 what sort of people, wives, parents, whatever. And then you had your civilian people, men, all of these sorts of people, trying to get them on the right boat to the right destination, so it was all very chaotic at that time. And all subject to bombing attack, you never quite knew when they were going to come and bomb the docks, it was a popular place. But I found my boat all right, loaded to the hilt, full of

15:00 Chinese, Indonesian families evacuating.

So was this a military boat?

No. It wasn't a military boat just a coastal transport, coastal boat.

How many of you were on the boat?

Well hundreds. Couldn't have counted them, they were downstairs most of them and they were packed in like a football match or more, or worse.

Men from the station?

15:30 We lived on deck, the whole of the deck of the boat was taken up by our people evacuating, the foredeck, the bridge, the quarterdeck. And on the foredeck a group of British Tommies [soldiers, manned an] anti-aircraft Bofors gun which fires rounds rapidly against low flying and attacking aircraft.

16:00 It was lashed down on the foredeck to defend us against attacking aircraft. And these British Tommies were on the foredeck with it, sleeping with all of their gear, and that was our defence, all of the way down to Sumatra.

What had you been able to take with you?

Only my kit bag and my clothes, toiletries, that's all.

16:30 **Do you know what happened to the rest of the equipment at the station?**

It stayed there I think.

Did the planes get flown?

Yes the planes were operating from there against the Japs and they all evacuated out of there to Sumatra. Sumatra was our first evacuation point to the secret aerodrome. But planes were going back from that aerodrome, back to Singapore when Singapore was under

17:00 shelling by the Japs and our aerodrome was under attack, they still flew Lockheed Hudsons back to the aerodrome and picked up the VIP [Very Important Persons] people who had had to stay behind and flew them out again and they didn't take a casualty, even though they were under shellfire. Not one casualty, just ferrying them out backwards and forwards, an incredible experience.

Were you afraid at any point on your boat

17:30 **on the way to Sumatra?**

Yes I was afraid when we were travelling through the Malacca Straits heading for Sumatra because a number of Japanese bombers appeared at the rear to attack our convoy and they did the attack, because we only had a destroyer as escort for the large ships and our small one. We were in the rear, and I couldn't see how we could get out of it if we got hit. It was just like shelling an

18:00 egg, no way home. And as the bombers came over they went over the top of us, and didn't drop a bomb on us. I worked out afterwards that they were after the big ships, they wouldn't waste a bomb on us we were too small, and I was pleased about that. They dropped the bombs on the big ships up the front that were going to Ceylon and places like that. They bombed them but they missed them by a few feet down the side and they didn't score a hit,

18:30 so we sailed on safely with our destroyer escort, and our little ship turned off at the River Musi into Sumatra. We were now in Sumatra by ourselves while the others sailed away, and we had to travel overnight into Sumatra. And I will never forget the scene, it was a clear moonlit night, huge river,

19:00 not a big wide river but a very strong river a couple of hundred yards wide going up into the interior of Sumatra, and it was a clear still bright moonlit night, and there was jungle right down to the water each side and this little boat was cruising up the river, everything dead quiet, all you could hear was the beating of the motor nothing else. The stars you could reach up and pull them out of the sky, tropical

19:30 night. It was a magic night. And I was seeking around the bridge area looking for protective screening in case we were strafed in the morning going into Palembang, which was very likely. I thought, "Now, where can one get over here, where can you dodge the bullets, what can you do about it?" So I did a reccie [reconnaissance] right around the bridge

20:00 and found what I thought might be suitable, at least it was the best I could find and made up my mind that's where I would be when necessary. But half way through the night all of a sudden these Tommies on the foredeck with their gun broke into song, started singing and there must have been some Welsh people amongst them because they sing beautifully, and we listened for a good hour

20:30 or more to all of the good harmony songs, all of the old war songs, all of the things you can think of. Sung in harmony by these toms, it was like listening to a show in Adelaide on TV. It was absolutely unreal, the whole thing. My thoughts were, 'Where is the war?' All of the civilians in the hold there if we get attacked tomorrow, they're all gone, all finished, I will be too. And

21:00 floating through this dreamland of peace, beauty, music…

What music do you remember them singing?

All of Vera Lynn's songs, 'Lilly Marlene', all of those sort of songs. Everything from that war period, I can't specifically name them but I can think of the singers. Even Bing Crosby was in it.

21:30 Nice harmony. And that was a very touching period in the middle of everything. We had left such chaos and we were coming through this amazing experience to go to the next stage, whatever it was going to be. We did arrive in the morning at Palembang unscathed. We were sitting there waiting to disembark and we heard aircraft engines

22:00 and we saw coming across the field very low, three aeroplanes, fighters. And we thought this is it, they're going to strafe us. They went straight over the top and they were Hurricanes from Singapore, so great relief. They had come down to Palembang to fight on from there. A frightening five seconds. We disembarked there at Palembang, a

22:30 very big oil centre Palembang was. And we stayed there a couple of days, and we were then put on a train, cattle trucks, closed in. And we sat on the edge of the carriage with our legs dangling over the side after dark and we travelled 40 kilometres into the centre of Sumatra.

23:00 My memories of that were hungry and very hot but alleviated by the magic display all of the way along the railway line of hundreds of bushes alive with fireflies. Absolutely fairyland, all bushes fireflies in them, hundreds of them as we went along the track. Well that's just another, "Where's the war?" With

things

23:30 like that around you. Later in the night we arrived at our secret aerodrome in Palembang and we disembarked there and we went and lived in some huts and the next day we started the usual sorting out, the aeroplanes that arrived, a certain amount of equipment that arrived. The aeroplanes were already organised and were bombing the Japs in

24:00 Singapore, looking for convoys in the straits, engaged in seek and search. We were very blessed from that aerodrome. Very secret, the Japs never found it.

What efforts have been made to ensure the secrecy of the aerodrome?

Nothing, they did nothing to it, so therefore it didn't look like an aerodrome. It never was an aerodrome.

24:30 Never was an airfield, it was just a spot that they found and decided that it would be a very good base to work from because it wasn't ever known as an airfield. We christened it 'Wonderful'. The Japs were bombing the town 40 kilometres away but they didn't come to us. So that was a good thing.

And you had a hut now instead of a tent?

Just a hut and we lived on gold fish, tinned fish…

25:00 **In tomato sauce?**

They were prepared in every conceivable fashion to disguise them from being what they were. But the mess was not too bad there, we were able to get our main food from the main town. As a matter of fact my occupation in that area was driving a truck carrying supplies from the town

25:30 out to where we were, to keep us going. That's what I did most of., I had been a station staff officer and here I am driving a truck to keep supplies up.

Can you tell me about the town?

Palembang, was a big oil town, a lot of Dutch people there. Very modern, a modern hotel. Very nice town, as a matter of fact. I went into the hotel and had a steak,

26:00 couldn't believe it, after what we had been going through. I went into that hotel and had a steak. And it had a proper airfield which the Japs wanted to take, that was very important that had a proper airfield. And our aircraft were based at that airfield for servicing. And they spent, as soon as they were serviced, they flew up to where we were 40 kilometres away and they took off for action from that aerodrome.

26:30 And if they had to be serviced they went back to the town, and they refuelled in the town too, they did refuelling there.

How did the locals feel about you being there?

At that particular time I think they quite accepted us, because they were being attacked by the Japs too. And I think they accepted the fact that we were defending them.

27:00 I am not sure about the real acceptance of the Indonesians in, say, Java because at that time there was a lot of feeling among the Indonesians that they would like their independence, which was just beginning to spread in that particular period. But Palembang they seemed to be quite happy with us. We brought a lot of money to the

27:30 place and a lot of improved conditions, so they accepted those things. A lot of work.

Were you able to write to your wife from Palembang?

Yes I wrote from Palembang, I wrote from everywhere, about a letter every two days she got. They stopped all of a sudden, I didn't realise that they stopped as quickly as they did, but she received several from me. I even packed a trunk with some beautiful Chinese silk clothing, beautiful stuff.

28:00 I packed a trunk and sent it off to her but I think somebody lifted it on the way. We never received it in Australia. And it was ultra stuff, exotic, she would have looked like the empress of China in it but she never got it.

Were you keeping a journal?

No I didn't keep a journal, I really put it in my letters,

28:30 that was the thing that I was doing. And besides that there didn't seem to be a lot of time to keep a journal by the time you finished in the afternoon, late in the afternoon, had your meal and we had to walk back to our hut, about a mile to your hut, get out there. And by the time you got out there it was hot and sticky, terrible atmosphere out there. So you got there hot and sticky and you got water

29:00 over yourself and you couldn't sit down and write a journal, I couldn't.

Were you getting any news from home?

No. Nothing, absolute blank. One-way news then. The reason I wasn't getting anything from home because I was never in the same place for more than a week or two, we were shifting all of the time. That made it difficult, they didn't know where to address the letter to,

29:30 so it was a blank.

So how long were you at the secret aerodrome for?

We were there for about another fortnight and the Japanese had started attacking the town airfield, our aircraft from where we were were bombing the landing parties in the River Musi which we came up. They were attacking those and trying to sink all of the barges and

30:00 transports, they were very busy at that. And of course the Japs wanted to take the aerodrome in Palembang to stop this activity and so they dropped paratroopers in Palembang. One of my friends, there were no defence factors in Palembang and so they used anybody, no matter what you were, engineer,

30:30 fitter, clerk, you had a rifle and you had to help repel the invader. And I had a friend there who was a very good rifle shot. And he was behind sandbagged embankments at the headquarter area. And the paratroopers were landing and rushing up to our Bofor gun placements, which were there to repel aircraft. And these Japs were rushing over these embankments, and my friend with his

31:00 .303 [rifle] picked off sixteen of them before he had to get out of the place. He reckoned he had a good kill record of the Japanese and he was an engineer. But that was good. And he got out of there and up to our aerodrome with us at that stage. The powers that be decided that the next paratrooper attack would be where we were

31:30 because by now they had landed and they had information and they would know about the aerodrome. We had no defence at the aerodrome at all. So they did the same thing as in Palembang, they detailed any staff at all that were there. And I was given two leading aircraftsmen, who I don't think had ever used a bayonet, much less fired a rifle.

32:00 And I was given a spot in the jungle on the perimeter with them, two rifles, two bayonets, about half a dozen clips of ammunition, I had a revolver and a few boxes of ammunition. I was given that situation to defend in the jungle. And the paratroopers were expected the next morning. And so I thought, "What do you do when the leading Japanese paratroopers land in this jungle?" And I am a land man,

32:30 I could use a rifle and a bayonet, I was trained in it, but I wasn't trained in the army. In the skills of ground warfare. And I wrote myself off and the two fellows with me, I said, "We have had it, that's it. When these fellows land in the morning there is nothing we can do to stop them. We might shoot a couple but that will be it. They will get us and surround us."

Can you remember that night how that felt to you?

33:00 Yes it is a funny thing. I wasn't really frightened about being written off, I was more frightened about the experience before it. I was worried about, "Would I do the right thing? What was the right thing to do?" I was very uncertain. But as to the outcome, I was not afraid of the outcome

33:30 because I knew if it happened that would be it. I was much more worried about how I would handle the situation because I really had no idea. And that's a nasty feeling to be given. And we had no protection, we weren't behind sandbags or anything like that where you could fire at the enemy and we had nowhere to go in the jungle that we could survive against paratroopers. There was just no

34:00 future. And you just had to say, "Well that's it, no future, wait and see." And – Ho! – they didn't come, which they didn't. And the next day we were evacuated. So I thought to myself, 'Very lucky John, very lucky." Had to pack up and go right down through Sumatra. Get into Java. So that was our secret aerodrome experience.

34:30 We lost people there, aeroplanes trying to take off crashed into trees. One aeroplane took off with kerosene flares and misjudged his height when he took his wheels up, Lockheed Hudson, he dropped down and took six inches off each of his propellers, in the ground, just broke off like that, and he flew on not knowing. And when he had done his operation he came back and

35:00 landed at the city aerodrome. Got out of the place, he knew he damaged his aircraft and couldn't get off, he got out of the place by truck. Another aircraft badly damaged came into land, saw this one there and thought, "We'll take that one to get back to our secret 'drome." Well, they got into it, started up and they got half way across the field and they knew they were not going to fly off because of the tips gone off the propellers.

35:30 So they stopped it, and they were over near the where the Japs were, they got out of it and they went straight into jungle, and it took them two days through the jungle to find their way back to where we were 40 kilometres away. So they got away with that one. Left the damaged aeroplane there. They

36:00 were very lucky. And the Japs were right around them when the aircraft stopped. So they had to get into the jungle and dodge the Japs, which they did, and came back to work again.

How did you leave Sumatra, how did you leave your secret aerodrome?

We had to form a truck convoy to truck all of the way down to eastern Java, about 300 odd miles.

36:30 And I had to destroy all of the stores there before we went. I loaded up the utility with canned food and things like that to support us. We travelled about four miles to Arao Head and the CO saw a British Army motorcycle standing abandoned. And he said, “I have got a good idea. You take that motorbike and you be the convoy marshal.”

37:00 Three hundred and fifty miles convoy marshal. And I said, “Well you’re not serious, sir?” and he said, “Yes, I am very serious.” So I had to abandon my utility comfort and get on this motorbike, lucky I had been in the motor traffic police, and I rode that motorbike in front of the convoy, all hooded lights, blackout lights on everything, I had to lead the convoy, find the bridge entries over the big ravines. Make sure they were accessible and passable,

37:30 go back and tell the convoy leader and I did that all night, all the next morning, down to East Haven about midday. And I had had motorbikes up to my ears by that time. I drove through a tropical rainstorm in it, such as you don’t see here for about an hour. I was amazed at all of the beautiful sedans,

38:00 motorcars, lovely vehicles, doors left open abandoned along the highway and we led into East Haven for the evacuation. Million of dollars worth of motorcars just abandoned by the people getting out. And went on to the ship. We weren’t allowed to take any transport on the ferry across the straits to Java. And I settled down on the foredeck

38:30 of the boat, I had a bit of food from the galley of the ship. I settled down about 3 or 4 o’clock in the afternoon for a snooze. And I woke up and I couldn’t understand where I was. I could see monkeys flying through the trees. We were at Java, I had slept the rest of the afternoon, the whole night right through to the next morning into Java. So that was my crossing of the Sunda Straits.

39:00 **What stores had you had to destroy before you left?**

Anything that was in a building, any stores at all, food, fuel, we didn’t have much fuel stored at all. And any other accessories such as any, well we didn’t have any aircraft or stores of that kind there, they were in

39:30 Palembang, what they had they out in trucks. What was left we had to destroy: all of the buildings, and I had a little building with lots of stores of food I had trucked up, couldn’t carry that so that had to be destroyed and anything to do with the operation of the place was destroyed.

How do you destroy fuel?

I didn’t do that. I left that to the aircraft people. I took the other side of supplies

40:00 with me. Fuel wasn’t my line.

So you had arrived in Java and your first impression is monkeys?

Yes flying through the tops of the trees you could see them waving like anything, it was fascinating to watch them. That was the first impression.

And where did you land?

We landed at a place called Merak. M E R A K.

40:30 And we were put on a train there, there was a train waiting for us. And we travelled from there to Batavia as it was then, now Jakarta, we travelled to Batavia on the train. And it was a lovely sight to see as the train pulled up, dozens of Dutch women with food and drinks for us, the new evacuees. To see something that civilised after where we had come through.

41:00 It was a wonderful experience. A nice introduction to Java too.

That’s we will stop there John.

41:09 **End of tape**

Tape 4

00:30 **We’re coming into Batavia we can pick the story there if you can continue if you like?**

Well we went by train to Batavia and they were expecting us there so they had billeting arranged.

01:00 We set ourselves up for a short time and then we were shifted out to an aerodrome on the edge of Batavia and we were billeted in a Dutch barracks at a place called Buitenzorg.

Do you know roughly the date then more or less? Roughly?

01:30 About February the 26th or 27th.

Had you heard of the fate of the 8th Division and what had happened in Singapore?

Oh yes. We were there when they came to Singapore, we had been in Singapore.

But did you know that they had all been taken prisoner?

Not the ultimate outcome, because we had evacuated. They were there

02:00 just before we left and we knew there were all sorts of troubles because they were not trained. They had landed a division of greenies and that had very serious effects on them.

How broken up were your forces at this stage, were you still within your squadron?

No I was not, our forces were broken up, they were flying from different operations,

02:30 we had lost a lot of aircraft and it was at Batavia that the last blow fell. Because we were on an aerodrome called Semplak based out there and it had a one-way runway and I reported out there every morning for whatever I had to do. And I turned up one morning and I just got there, 9 o'clock,

03:00 at the end of the aerodrome where you came in and I heard aircraft up above and I looked up and saw nine Japanese silver fighting types going around in circles. And I was fascinated, one of them peeled off and came right down to the runway to my left. I was beside a tree and he came down at below tree height

03:30 straight past me, I could see his helmet, his face, his eyes, everything, 40 yards away. And he went along the runway, I watched him go through the runway and he just simply blew everything up. Now nine aircraft did that, one after the other. And when they finished we had lost most of our aircraft, that we had brought all of the way from Singapore, and from Sumatra, gone, transports, everything destroyed on the ground.

04:00 And so we had three Hudsons left, three Lockheed Hudsons which happened to be parked in a different fashion. And so immediately evacuation orders were given to go from there up to a place near middle Java called Katijati. It was a large Dutch training aerodrome, much like the secret aerodrome in Sumatra. But it had a full

04:30 Dutch complement air force there. It had headquarter buildings, mess, barracks everything, maintenance place, the whole lot. And so we all formed up in Batavia this morning and this would have been about the beginning of March.

05:00 We motored over half the day in our convoy up to Katijati way up in the country and when we got there in the evening time, dusk, we found an aerodrome with the headquarters all lit up, mess facilities were all alight, everything was alight and not a soul there, vacated, evacuated, gone. The Dutch had cleared out.

05:30 And so we had to settle ourselves in, there was food in the refrigerator, food in the kitchen, everything was there. So we settled ourselves in, had our food, got organised, got the troops into barracks and then surplus of us, some officers had to go about six miles into a place called Subang.

Who are you with at this stage? Who are you in charge of? Is it all Australian troops or a mixture?

No I was just another body with the Australia

06:00 group, Australian air force, three aircraft made up from 1 Squadron, 2 Squadron. That's all that was left, three Hudsons, and I was part of this little remnant that had got Katijati.

Do you knew the pilots that were with you at that time?

Yes I do. May I go back a moment? While we were in Semplak

06:30 and this last thing happened our commanding officer, Group Captain I can't think of his name. He called a conference. As a result of the conference they selected out individuals who were to be shipped out straight away, individuals who were to stay to provide a last delaying action to the landing of the Japs in Java and also looking

07:00 for convoys, Japanese transports. And at this conference the separate groups, "You're going home maybe via Ceylon, anywhere but you're going home." By the big ships, like the Orcades was one of the big ships that they used. I, of course, rolling up there late, was elected to be left behind with the little last hope group.

07:30 That was all right. So we separated, I went down to the docks, saw them all off, found my miserable way back up to what was left at Semplak and then next day we evacuated out to Katijati. That's filled in the gap there.

And did that group make it home?

Yeah, they all made it to their destinations, every one of them. Mind you via Bombay and Ceylon, they went a long way getting home. But they made it.

And that's quite a turning point really ?

08:00 Yeah it was great. They made the ground. And we were left at Katijati. We arrived there in the dusk and found this place as I described it. I went with the officers back down to this town called Subang, six miles away, to sleep the night, to be billeted. Now Subang was on the way to a place called Cirebon on the coast of Java.

08:30 We went to bed that night and I had acquired a dreadful headache the day before coming from Batavia, dreadful headache and I slept reasonably well, but at daybreak, 5 o'clock in the morning, someone hit me on the soles of my feet and nearly flipped my head off. "We have got to get out, got to evacuate, the Japs have landed at Cirebon and they're on the way with armoured cars and tanks!"

09:00 Twenty miles away, so we evacuated quickly. My head was worse than ever. Never mind, I got my utility and I drove back to Subang, we had an RAF squadron of Blenheim bombers on that aerodrome and our three Lockheed Hudsons. And we got to the, and all of our men, troops and trucks were on that aerodrome.

09:30 We got back there at 8 o'clock and the commanding officer of the RAF Blenheims, sorry the station commander at that team was a British group captain and he had a squadron leader in charge of this squadron of Blenheims. And a lot of milling around, no one knew what to do, completely disorganised. But we decided to

10:00 instruct our convoy to face away from where this attack would come from. So they could make an escape which they did. I got very concerned about the time elapsed, I was worried about the time elapsed. And the group captain addressed his squadron

10:30 leader in my presence and in another flight lieutenant's presence saying that he was going back to Subang and he was taking a British pilot officer pilot with him for something personal. Which he did. About an hour later, I and another

11:00 flight commander conferred about the situation and I said, "Well we can't stay here, we have to go. It is getting too late, we won't be able to go soon." He said, "I agree with you." But the group captain had gone off saying, "Nothing is to be done until I return." We went and spoke to the squadron leader, RAF, told him of our concerns

11:30 and that we desired to move out, the three aircraft. And he said, "Well, I have no authority over you, you can move out," he said. "You both understand my position?" We both said, "Yes, we do." So he said, "Good luck." I was asked to take a crew in my utility half a mile across this free country to where our aircraft was parked in a big U bank,

12:00 a big revetment [defence walls], protections against bombing. We got down there and there is the aircraft which had been bombing the Japanese the night before turned around, but one wing, it was on an angle, and when the pilot started the engine up and tried to taxi out of it one wing went straight across and jammed against the higher bank. So it had to be got out. And I was the biggest and strongest of the group

12:30 although my head was just about lifting off, and there was another fellow from Western Australia, we had to climb up the earth embankment, about eight or nine feet high. I was on the inside near the propeller going, and it was an earthen bank, I had to fix my feet in the dirt with my shoulders under the wing and he stood on the outside with his feet fixed on the wingtip. And at the sound of "Lift" we both lifted and the thing moved forward under the power of the motor and we couldn't move our feet so it would drop again.

13:00 And we continued this process about eight times and finally the swing slid off the bank and the aircraft was free. We were standing looking at the aircraft, which was filled up with mud right through the aileron system. It had skidded across the back and picked up all of this terrible stuff. So we said, "Well we have got to get that out." And that moment, we came under fire. Oh, while we were lifting the wings we heard explosions and gunfire

13:30 up from where we had left, the Japs had arrived. And so in the process of getting it off, they had seen us and they opened fire on us. There were lots of noises going past very fast and we took cover in a creek that we could get down below. And the firing stopped, so we came out from the creek, down over the embankment, down up the other embankment and the pilot is looking at us saying, "What's the matter?"

14:00 He didn't know we were under fire, he is sitting there with engine running, "What's the matter with you fellows? Come on." So we had to clean the dirt out of the ailerons. And I said to my mate, "Well, if they start firing again they can see us, we had better hurry. I think we had better get that out." And so we worked with our fingers very fast and we got all of the mud out until the pilot indicated he had full control.

14:30 And then it was a case of everybody boarding the Lockheed Hudson which we all did, I was running a bit late because things were going a bit fuzzy with me. I was outside the plane and all of a sudden the friend who had help me lift the wings up said, “Come on, what are you doing out there?” and I remember saying, “Do you think it’s safe?” and he said, “I don’t care about it being bloody safe, you can’t stay here, come aboard.” And two of them dragged me into the plane

15:00 and I set myself up on a parachute on the floor. And we couldn’t get on to the aerodrome we had to take off cross-country with little trees and things like that. So the pilot opened the Hudson through the gate, dropped his flaps and away we went for a cross-country trip, leaves and things were flying everywhere off the propellers, we were doing a nice cut on all of the low trees. But the thing got up in the air and was wavering around like this

15:30 like a very dangerous thing. And the next thing there was chaos in the fuselage, there was a hell of a noise, something went off bang in the cabin. One fellow had aluminium dust over his hair, he was standing up and the doorway the air gunner who was sitting back a bit further, he said, “They have just shot us up.” I said, “They have?” he said, “Yeah.”

16:00 They shot us up and we crossed over a tank and an armoured car a hundred feet above, straight across and they let us have the lot. So 20 minutes later we made Bandong. Over the mountain to Bandong. Now after you have been through that, you don’t know what is going to happen on landing. But the pilot took it down and we made a perfect landing in the middle of an air raid warning, red,

16:30 the Japs. And we got out of the aeroplane, and we looked underneath, the wings were riddled with holes and the fuselage was riddled with holes and nobody got hit and no vital link got hit in the aeroplane, made the flight safely over there. And we walked across the aerodrome to report to the Air Chief Marshal Far East, Britain, where his headquarters were.

17:00 And we reported to the recent action. And we said, “There is a squadron of Blenheims on the aerodrome [that has] been captured by the Japs,” and he refused to believe us. “Couldn’t be.” The group captain was never heard of again, his pilot was never heard of again, so we presumed they met the Japs and they wrote them off, that’s what happened there.

Do you know what he was going to do?

17:30 We could never understand it, and we could never follow what he did and nobody knows why somebody thought he had a very valuable set of stamps or something he left there and he wanted to get them. That was the story, he disappeared into the action. We got up there and I was sitting in the Air Chief Marshal’s office talking about what happened

18:00 and all of a sudden I felt a bit very much off, swaying and his secretary went and got me some drinks to help me. And it kept getting worse and I thought what the hell is happening to me? And all of a sudden it got very worse and I collapsed. From then on was a haze, I remember actions and I remember being slid into an ambulance and that’s my last memory of all of that. Five days later I woke up after a coma in ‘Weary’ [Edward P] Dunlop’s hospital

18:30 in Bandong. I had cerebral malaria I found out. They told me that had I not got on that plane I would never have survived. Twenty-four hours to two days later I would have died without treatment. So that was my experience at that stage. We wrote off another aeroplane in that action.

What happened to that plane?

It was written off.

19:00 They had two more, while we were evacuating our thing off the bank one Hudson went off, we could hear the firing following him as they went off and they waved to us. The pilot of one was Jack O’Brien. The pilot of the other was Peter Gibbs, a famous airman in the air force and Guinea Airways, ANA, and subsequently ferrying aircraft

19:30 across from America. Peter Gibbs, he died recently, and there was a big eulogy in the paper about him. He was a wonderful airman. And these two – this is written up of course in the various histories – Peter Gibbs had to run to his aircraft in the hangar and start it up in the hangar and take straight off, and as he was running to the hangar a Jap on a motorbike

20:00 with a Tommy gun fired at him and hit him in the knee but it was a spent bullet. [It] knocked him over, he got up again, got up into the aircraft, started it up, started off lying on the floor, taxied it straight out on cold engine and took off. Then he did a circle and he found this Jap that had the motorbike that had shot him, so he dived down and machine-gunned him to pieces, killed him. And machine-gunned other

20:30 sections while he was in action too. He flew to Bandong as well. The other pilot was Jack O’Brien who I had spoke to the English CO about getting away. He got the other aircraft out as well. They subsequently returned to Australia in one of the Hudsons but they had petrol cans in the cabin and they had enough fuel to get to Broome or nearby. They landed in station country,

21:00 they landed all over the place apparently when they came home, because their navigation wasn’t too good. Being true airmen they made it back to Australia.

You didn't of course, you were sick in hospital? So did you meet Weary Dunlop at this stage?

No I didn't meet him because I was only there two more days and another member of the squadron who had been left behind and had just recovered from malaria, not the cerebral,

21:30 the other [thyphoid] kind, came into hospital this day. He said to me, "Look, there is an escape attempt going on with an old B18 bomber. We have been invited to join it." I said, "Yeah, what's it all about?" he said, "Well it is fairly damaged." It had been damaged by bomb splinters, one of the pilot's windows is starred but his was all right. "All of the windows behind are blown out, and

22:00 the aileron cable to the right wing was severed and that's been spliced up and it is pretty slack and the right wing tank is been holed and can't be fixed, so only one tank on the left hand side, port side. But," he said, "they have done a good job, they have lashed a couple of forty-four drums of petrol onto the floor of the aeroplane." It was a transport and it was all open. "And they have lashed these drums down and they put a hose right through the wing into the tanks on the left hand side. And they have got a little rotary pump they stick down there and pump

22:30 when we run out of petrol. And the port engine is only making seventeen hundred revs instead of two and a half thousand. But apart from that it is all right." I said, "Well, I am just out of hospital, they had to take me in an ambulance, I couldn't walk. " So he said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Yes I am going."

23:00 This is the night before the capitulation of the Dutch, the last night of the war. "Yes, I am going." So they took me up in the ambulance and it was half past eleven at night, all lights out and there is this bomber on the aerodrome. And I went and had a look at it and thought, "Jesus this is dangerous. Very dangerous." But the pilot was a Westpoint [military college] graduate, major, American, US,

23:30 Westpoint graduate, had just been through the Philippines flying fortresses [bombers] so he was very experienced, but he had never flown one of these things . So we all got aboard, started up the motors and they put the lights on once for us to get out [to the aircraft in darkness], because the Japs were only about three or four miles away at this time. And as we started to taxi a car came out from the headquarters building with hooded lights. Down went one of our crew who had a wooden leg, he was an American civilian, wooden leg. Down the ladder he went,

24:00 went over came back and he said, "This driver of that car is a pilot and they are going out in a Glenn Martin shortly, VIPs. And he wants us to wait while we both go out together on the one lighting up so we don't get too much attention from anybody." And the major, who hadn't had much sleep in the last twenty-four hours said, "Tell him to get out of the road or I will run him down!" So down to the ladder, passed the

24:30 message out and the car backed quickly away and we taxied onto the runway. Proceeded to take off and as we went down the runaway the right motor would skew the aeroplane so he would put the brakes on the straighten it and it kept on doing this, slowing down, all they way the runway, with his lights. And I am sitting right behind the pilot with no windows, and I could hear everything and see everything and finally we lifted off the ground

25:00 and he reached forward to release the undercarriage, and nothing happened, so we got no lift over the trees that were just ahead of us and that looked like curtains for a few moments. But somehow or other with undercarriage, the thing lifted and we could see the leaves under us but we missed them. We got over them. And what had happened these aircraft had the safety locking pins on the outside, and in the haste or the hurry someone forgot to pull the pins out.

25:30 So we are left with an aeroplane, 30 mile an hour or less flying speed, therefore our distance is limited. We couldn't get to Broome in the first place on what we had in limited fuel. We had to go past Bali with fighters on it, at night, and we had to get down to an island called Sumba by daybreak, pick up fuel – the Japs weren't there – to pick up fuel and an American Kittyhawk captain who had been shot down.

26:00 He was waiting for us, and then we would get enough fuel to get across to Broome from that island. That was the flight plan, so we were not going to make Sumba Island anyway, we couldn't go back to Bandong, we dare not go past Bali in the daylight because of the fighters, so we had, sort of, not many options to play with. And when you're landing somewhere with a plane like that,

26:30 like in the sea with the wheels down, it wasn't a promising prognosis at all. So we had to fly around all night until daybreak., that was about seven hours, we just flew around all night and then daybreak came.

When you say 'fly around', what do you mean?

Well we flew down the coast, we were only going slowly, they weren't a fast aircraft, we were probably cruising at a 120 miles per hour. Three hours flight only took us down the east coast but we had to stop before Bali.

27:00 They got lost, they had no navigation factors for the area, and at daybreak we decided we had better get to the north coast of Java, so we flew across at tree height, we were camouflaged, we flew across at tree height so we wouldn't be detected. Got to the north coast, and we thought we will make Surabaya, so we flew west to meet Surabaya but no Surabaya. So we turned around and came back over

27:30 our tracks trying to find Surabaya and about that time the gauges showed empty, run out and we are 15 feet over the water, going over the bay, with engines missing and I am sitting on the back seat with a broken window, working out hatches and what opens the hatches., what happens when you go over in the sea in an aeroplane, just out of hospital in an ambulance. And I was working out my odds of survival, which was, “How would I get out of the plane?”

28:00 But at the last moment there were rocks down to the shore all of the way along, rocky shore, and in the distance across the shore we saw a little white area and thought that might be a beach and with engines missing, 15 feet we continued across the bay and sure enough it was a little white beach, three hundred yards long and the rest was unlandable. And somehow he put that blooming aircraft down with the tail wheels down right at the beginning of this beach

28:30 and then the next wheels came down and they had forgotten to pump the brakes up. So, hell to pay, second pilot suddenly woke up and pumped the brakes like the devil. That slackened the aircraft but we ran forward right to the end of what we had, it was a great big mud embankment going up in the air. And we finished

29:00 up sliding up the bank on a bit of an angle. That’s when it stopped. We survived it., got out of the aeroplane, I got out of the aeroplane first and the others, we were on the beach at the sea. And the captain got out, the major and he came over to me, there were tears in his eyes and he said, “We had it in our hands, we had freedom in our hands and we lost it.” I will never forget that.

29:30 Lost, everything that we went for, lost, and not only that, nobody knew where we were, home no information for eight months.

Why did you think you had lost freedom though, well you were still trying to get away, you’re not captured yet?

Well if we had pulled the underpins out, if they had been taken out we would have gotten home. Just one simple thing. We had freedom in our hands, we had a plane that would do the distance, the flight plan, everything was right.

30:00 Except, the pins didn’t come out so we had freedom and we lost it because we missed it.

Whose job was it to pull the pins out?

Well it is the captain’s job to ensure that all of this is done, it is the captain’s job to do that and an aircrew goes around and pulls them out and says, “They’re clear.” That’s how it happens.

Did he have a full crew to actually do that?

30:30 No he had a second pilot, he is the one that should really have checked the aircraft out, the second pilot. But they didn’t have any books on the aeroplane and they hadn’t flown the aeroplane before, it was a strange one and I suppose there is a little bit, you expected an inside control to automatically or whatever free the thing, it should lock from the inside, with the controls it should lock, you see? But this didn’t , this was very safe.

A little thing?

31:00 I quoted that, I was a member of the Cessna Flying Club for a number of years and I quote that in one of their magazines, ‘How important are your last checks before a flight?’ and I quoted this experience I had and it cost me four years in gaol, prison camp. So don’t forget to check your undercarriage.

At the time did you know what he was talking about?

Who?

The pilot?

31:30 Yes he was many years experienced. He was thirty-two years of age, he had been in twelve years. He had been through the Philippines action, all of that business, very experienced pilot and a major.

What happened to him?

He was in prison camp for a while with us and then they were drafted off and I never heard of them again. I don’t know where they went to, the American group. In prison camp they had an artillery section and they had this air force section and they had merchant marine

32:00 prisoner of war prisoners of war from ships they sunk, they all went away on a move together.

But you weren’t captured yet, you’re on this beach. What happens next? How many of you are there?

There were six of us, two Australians and four Americans. One with a wooden leg, which incidentally had a secret radio in it. Later on in prison camp we took a secret radio and the Japs

32:30 never woke up to it. Carved a hole in the wood and put a radio in it so we could listen to the news.

He had that with him when you crashed on the beach?

No that was made in prison camp, the radio.

Can you take us through what happened next, you crawled out of the aeroplane?

Well he could walk quite well, we stepped out of the aeroplane. We had no rations, I think we had a couple of chocolates, no water, nothing, because we had been going to get it Sumba.

33:00 Everything was so hurried that there wasn't any organisation you see? Everything was absolutely desperate at that moment, and some decisions had to be made. We slept the first night in the aircraft safety raft, we blew that up and we had a couple of parachutes so we rigged them up on a bow from a bush and made a tent over the raft and slept in that the first night and it rained and the parachute leaked, they are not watertight, we all

33:30 got wet the first night. But it was tropical so it wasn't cold. In the morning at daybreak we were woken by a rowdy sort of a noise and looked over the side of our raft to see thousands of crabs rushing up the beach to us, thousands, to us and they made this funny noise, quite loud, all running up the beach. And we shooed at them and they all turned around and went back. It was a real pantomime with these crabs on the beach, in the middle of these thousands

34:00 of crabs coming up and going back when we shooed them back.

Were they trying to get at you or…?

I don't know. I think they probably came up to go into the foliage that was on the top of the beach. I think they were going up there perhaps to feed a bit. I don't know what they would have done if they, they would have gone after us, I am sure. I was glad I was in a raft.

Were you floating in the raft?

No on the beach, by the aeroplane.

Did you collect some water?

34:30 Yes it rained over night and we collected water and that saw us through for this period because we only stayed there the next day and the next night, and we noticed Indonesian prahus P R A H U , fishing prahus, going across the bay and into what appeared to be a little port around the bay. And so we decided that, this American had about 4000 guilders [Dutch East Indies currency] in money, we decided if we could buy a prahu we could sail back to Australia.

35:00 Get the prahu and navigate back to Australia, no problems. We set out, three of us, set out the next morning, we left the wooden legged bloke and two others behind, with the camp, meanwhile the major had started the engines up, he had enough fuel left in them to start them up and taxi the plane into the sea as far as it would go so it couldn't be

35:30 used by the Japs, and we left the fellows there with the parachutes and the raft and went off down the coast. We forded a couple of deltas of rivers that came in.

Before you get there, did you eat the crabs?

No we couldn't have cooked them anyway, and I don't think we were more concerned then about getting to some destination, some definite point that we could proceed from.

36:00 Rather than surviving on that particular spot we intended to go forward. We finally got to the village and we spoke to one of the ship prahu men, he either didn't speak our language and he didn't want to sell his boat under any circumstances. But he did go up and call the village chief down who lived nearby. He came down, thorough gentleman, Indonesian chief of the village,

36:30 and he took us inside and gave us food and talked to us about what was what. The natives were not allowed, the natives were given a year's pay if they dobbed us in, so if you tried to escape, two white men six foot high, one five foot eleven, the other two five foot nine, how could you survive amongst seventy million blacks looking for you for a year's pay?

37:00 I was unfit to try and escape, I was not able to do it. One had a wooden leg so that would have been difficult. So the chief said, "I will take you into the local government resident officer." So they brought him around with his little donkey and his little cart, with iron wheels on and his little shelter over the top. Three of us got into this, toppi, toppi, toppi, toppi along the bitumen road with lovely rows of coconut palms, it was

37:30 really romantic. He took us into the town called Kendal. To the official officer's residence. He accepted us very nicely and pointed out the dangers of trying to escape now, nobody could help us, and put us up for a couple of nights there while we made up our minds. We had a big conference and we said, "There is no way we can think of escaping, we can't plan, we don't know anything, we haven't got supplies,

38:00 we're handicapped, so we have no option but to surrender." And we had heard from the resident, the Japs had already said, "Surrender and you will be the guest of Nippon. If you do not surrender you will be taken and executed." So we thought about surrender and execution and things like this and

38:30 trying to survive and we couldn't see a way out of it, it was a shut door. So we accepted surrender, and the next day a car came from Semarang, and picked us up, Dutch officers driving it. The Japs were short of troops then, things were happening too quickly, they didn't have anyone in the area much. Only a platoon, so the Japs had put the Dutch in charge of the situation,

39:00 honour system and we were taken to a mansion on higher ground overlooking Semarang and spent three weeks there in great comfort, no Japs, no mucking around. And the families of the Dutch people there brought all of our food to us, plenty of food, lovely food. I picked up tremendously there, regained control of myself.

39:30 For three weeks we were in those conditions.

Were you able to take any drugs, did you get an quinine or?

No didn't have any.

You were lucky to survive.

Very lucky, it wasn't until I got into prison camp that I came by that sort of stuff, I got malaria again and they sent me out to a hospital again by ambulance. And they had the right treatment.

And were you under guard during that time?

40:00 Not at the house no, not under guard. Under guard of the police that's all, not the Japs.

And the police were Dutch?

Well mainly Dutch Eurasians, sort of half and half or Indonesians. They were no trouble they were all right.

We will stop there and change the tape.

40:23 **End of tape**

Tape 5

00:30 **John you were just telling us about spending a couple of weeks under the care of the police before you were going to be taken prisoner,**

01:00 **what discussions were you and the other men having at this time anticipating your handover?**

Well this was, as I say, this was a free and easy place, a big mansion with showers, it was like being at home for three weeks. And the social life was good, the Dutch families and wives bringing the food up to us was good, and then one morning we woke up to a hell of a lot of noise

01:30 down the base and the noise was Japanese trucks, Japanese with rifles and fixed bayonets, the real McCoy and we all looked at each other and said, "Well this looks like it is it." and sure enough it was. We got pushed around, shoved around, shouted at, shoved into the trucks standing up with the guards all around us in the trucks. This was our first indignity, was to be carted to the

02:00 town standing up in trucks with Japanese guards with fixed bayonets all around you. I will never forget that day, my initial introduction to the Japanese soldier. And guards. They took us to a small barracks in Marang which is based between two large extinct volcanoes which in the morning and evening were very spectacular.

02:30 It was a small Dutch barrack and there were only maybe a hundred or so of us in there, we were the little bits being picked up from the outlying places. There were Dutch and Australian and American in that place, and the CO was a Jap soldier, a lieutenant, and he had been through the Chinese War, wounded, he had a big scar across his face,

03:00 and he had a rapport with soldiers because he was an active service wounded solider. And he had a rapport with soldiers, so it is strange to say we got on quite well in those conditions. And when we found out that the food being prepared for us was much too spicy, much too strong for us. I had

03:30 the temerity to ask the Jap commanding officer about this. I said, "Could we have less spicy food?" And immediately he called for the Dutch commander and ordered that our food be prepared separately. This was one of the rare moments in prison camp, and it was from there on we had a separate kitchen which prepared food more our style, less spicy and it was great.

04:00 And when I developed malaria again, they sent me straight out in an ambulance to a local hospital. They hadn't any hospital camp in that barracks, so they sent me straight out to the local hospital, and I spent a very good fortnight in that hospital in first-class care, where a

04:30 Dutch doctor who understood the disease pulled me back from where I had got down to, and a fortnight later I was returned to the barracks.

Can you tell me about these barracks? Describe them to me?

High wire all around the barracks, big double gate of high wire to let you in. And the fencing was open to the public, there were no high walls, it was open to the public.

05:00 So we could buy odd things from the peddlers who came around there with the idea of selling us something. The Japs tolerated that. So we had a bit of money left over at this stage, left over from before, so we were able to buy little bits of special food, a few drinks and things like that that made you feel as though you were still some part of a community.

05:30 And it was a tolerable beginning.

What other nationalities, who else was in the barracks?

We had Australians, Americans and Dutch, a mixture, maybe a hundred plus in the barracks, that was the starting point. We weren't there long. Oh, while I was in hospital I was alongside a Dutch doctor, broken leg

06:00 in a motor bike and sidecar accident and he was a prisoner of war too, of course, and he had a visitor, his wife came in, a delightful person about nineteen years of age, really lovely person. She couldn't speak English so her husband helped her [if] he could, and she asked me, "Was there anything [I] needed?" and I said, "Yes, I want a sewing kit

06:30 needles, thread, anything you can get." So sure enough the next night she brought me in a complete sewing box with all of the repair gear to look after what clothes I had. I was very thankful for that and there was a sequel to that which we will arrive at, at the end of the business, but I formed a very deep friendship with that particular couple. And the matron was marvellous; when it was time to go

07:00 she gave me a mattress ticking – remember the old style white and grey stripes ticking? They call it "ticking," she gave me one of those and a pillowslip, she said, "I think you might be able to use these and later they proved very important." But the treatment was very good. I used to wake up at night, going off at night I would have terrific headaches and they would give me tablets, and I

07:30 would get to sleep and 3 o'clock in the morning I would come to, literally saturated. Bedclothes saturated, me saturated but no headache, clear as a bell. And so they would clean me, up change the sheets, this is in prison camp, settle me down and I would sleep then until about 6 o'clock. Well, then of all things to do they came along then and woke you up at 6 o'clock just when you were enjoying your best sleep.

08:00 Six o'clock, "Come on, got to be bathed, got to be this and that." And so I went through that stage, the food was good and that fortnight got me out of a hole in that hospital. Back to camp again. We were only there a short time and they shipped us all down by train to Surabaya, that's on the eastern end of Java, a big town, second biggest town.

The whole barracks?

No this

08:30 was a showground, a big old showground.

They shipped the whole barracks though?

Yes the whole lot. They shifted us all by train, and others from the area, they shifted us all, there was a general gathering of them to Surabaya, getting them all in. And we had a good train trip down on that occasion and arrived at Surabaya after dark, raining, our few belongings that we had, which was very little.

09:00 And we had to march about a mile and a half from the station to our new barracks. That was a very depressing time as I remember, the beginning of the whole thing. And when we came to the huge gates of this ex-showground. There, spread-eagled across the big trunk of a tree, crucifixion-wise, roped to the tree.

09:30 Severely injured.

Sorry? Was he on the inside or the outside of the gates?

Inside the gate, severely injured from being beaten up and as we found out, on no rations for two days, restricted water. And that was our first indication of the bestial side of the Japanese, that was a real shock to see that. We got into camp, we were sorted into our

10:00 atap leaf roofed and palm-leaved sides built on to a bamboo frame right around the whole thing. And our quarters were bamboo bench six feet long right along the whole of the hut with a passageway down the middle and a couple of doors in the middle going out the side. And each prisoner of war had

10:30 three feet of space on all of those bunks. And so we had probably sixty, thirty each side, sixty men in a hut of that nature. And suspended over each bed was a mosquito net, a tent type mosquito net suspended from the ceiling. And the first thing you noticed about these mosquito nets was that they were very black around the bottom and we discovered that this blackness was due

11:00 to the bed bugs, big bed bugs that were living in the bamboo and at night would come out and slip a bite out of your toes and go back into their crevices in the bamboo for the day. And with the bamboos, you tucked them under the bed so that your feet were on them and it tended to stop the bugs from climbing up and getting through.

You tucked what underneath?

11:30 We tucked the mosquito nets in under our feet on top of them to keep them out a bit. But it didn't make a lot of difference. In the morning you would have to kill all of the bugs that were in the mosquito net, caught in it. And so when the blood dried they were black and all of the mosquito nets along the bottom were black bottoms for killing bugs in the net.

You said you only had three foot per man to sleep in?

Three foot of your living space.

12:00 **And how long was that space?**

Six foot, six by three. Just the right six for a six-foot man.

Without shoes on?

That's right. And everything was at the head of your bed. Your sandals or whatever you walked around in were at the foot of your bed on the ground and at the back you had your pack for a pillow and perhaps a pair of shorts or maybe a shirt, just a few items that you maybe could

12:30 carry with you, that's all you had. That was our living area. And at night when all of the mosquito nets were down and with sixty people living in these huts with two doors it got a bit close inside your mosquito net. So it was very difficult. You lay there in this humid perspiring heat, trying to go to sleep. It took a while to get into the habit of doing this.

13:00 But it also taught us a tolerance of our mates, close living. And that was the start of our incarceration at this stage.

How were you getting along with the men in your hut?

I got along pretty well because they were all officers. We had officers' huts and the other men had their huts.

13:30 And I was put second in charge of one of the other ranks' huts. I was put second in charge with an RAF squadron leader, the two of us, and our job was the interests of the POWs in that hut, we had to look after them as it were. And the hut I was allotted to was a mixture of English soldiers. And as

14:00 everybody knows there are so many dialects in England it took me six weeks before I could say I understood them all, what they were saying. And my relationship with those fellows in the tent was very good. I had no problems with them. You had to check through, find out who was sick, who got sick. And any problems in there,

14:30 any arguments, which there were plenty of. You had to sort these out all of the time and keep them straight and try to keep their morale up too.

What were the men arguing about?

Well there was a bit of thieving went on when somebody wasn't looking which you expected. They thieved from the Japanese as well when they weren't looking. There was a little bit of this that went on which caused some friction.

15:00 And discipline such as we knew it, was taken away from us, by the Japanese. We couldn't discipline any of the other ranks, we could only reason with them and persuade and try and convince them of the right thing to do, that what we had to do all of the time.

Did you find that sufficient?

Yes. They responded very well to it. They responded

15:30 better to persuasion than they did to dictation. In other words if you said, "You are going to do this!" you would get resistance. If you showed them why they should do this and how it could benefit them and everybody, you got co-operation. So there was a fair bit if that went on.

Can you take me through your daily routine when you first arrived there?

16:00 When we arrived at this big camp our daily routine was daily routine was 'Reveille', the bugle at seven or half past seven and that was called tenko, T E N K O. and that was counting time. So you would have so many hundreds, it was a big camp with hundreds of prisoners and it would have all of them on

parade, and they would all have to be counted by the guards in their sections and of course they would make a mistake

16:30 half way through and have to go back and start again. So it was usually a fairly long procedure and there were certain troops who were not well enough to come out who were allowed to stay in the barracks but they had to be counted as well and accounted for by our people. And at the end of the parade if everything checked out we had to salute the sun,

17:00 what they call kioski, come to attention, "Kioski!" and keiri was to bow to the sun, what the Japanese do, bow to the east. And there was a much spitting and what have you as they bowed down, refusing to do the bowing, but it was noticeably more silent

17:30 up where the COs and the Jap commanders were with their troops, it was much quieter there than further back where they really let go in derision.

What would they say?

They weren't saying, they were spitting, bending to Nippon, they were trying to destroy it. And I was always what would happen if they got caught at it, I think they would have been in much trouble. But that was that and

18:00 then we would be dismissed. Get our food, our ration which was rice boiled to a pap. Ever used Clag [an Australian trademark glue]? Sticking papers Clag? It was like that. With little tiny lumps in it, just like Clag. Rice pap and a cup of tea: that was your morning. A billy full of ordinary tea and nothing else.

18:30 And then you would go about whatever you had to do for the day. If you were going on a working party you would form up for your working party, otherwise a day in a camp was talking to each other, talking to groups. Some took to studying things. My mate and myself thought we should pick ourselves up on bookkeeping, it might be a good idea.

19:00 And there was a Dutchman in there teaching bookkeeping, so we started classes with him in one end of our huts, and everything went well, he was teaching us the principles of bookkeeping, and at a certain stage he said, "Now I am going to test you?" and he asked us a question, "In our booking if we found an error or some balance or other of money, what do you do?" And my mate, who was a real joker said, "Call the police."

19:30 The Dutchman just looked at him, "I beg your pardon?" "Call the police, somebody has pinched our money." The Dutchman shook his head, "No I didn't mean it like that." But we didn't do any more bookkeeping after that, he didn't take on you see, it was a little spot of trying to improve ourselves and that's how it dissipated. Another time we were doing our bookkeeping and you always had to salute the

20:00 the guards would go around the camp and they would drop a guard off at a guard post and that guard would join the circuit and go back and rest. And they kept on dropping off guards and picking up other ones and one day this group came past and we didn't hear them, we didn't know they were there, and one of the sins of a prisoner of war was not to salute the guard where ever you saw him. Whenever you saw him, you had to salute him.

20:30 And this day the guards turned up and we didn't hear them coming and so we were in deep trouble, three of us standing up to attention, a guard haranguing us, in Japanese, we don't know what he was saying but had a fair idea. Haranguing us and I said in a bit of Indonesian, "We know we have to salute the guards. We always do salute the guards but sometimes

21:00 we don't know there are guards around, we don't hear them. You walk very quietly, we don't hear you coming. But we always salute guards. We know we have to do this." And so do you know what they did? They beat up the Dutchman that was with us because he didn't know, it was his responsibility to know it, we were Australians and we didn't know it, so we were excused.

21:30 Jap justice. And as they were in the middle of this my mate said, "If they touch me, I will job the bastards." And he was five foot one, about the same height as the Japs. I said, "You shut up and don't say a word. Don't you move." He grumbled about it but he did keep his silence and the guards finally went off and left us.

22:00 But that was the sudden death action if you didn't observe such a thing as saluting a guard, you got beaten up and you could have a broken jaw, busted eardrums, you could be kicked in the shins, knocked to the ground, kicked in the body and generally abused for a very small thing.

What happened to the Dutchman?

He survived it all right, he didn't get any severe injuries but he had a very sore jaw

22:30 for a week after that. And the indignity of seeing these little five footers do these things to six footers and being utterly unable to do a thing about it… You just didn't dare to move because the retaliation they would take on anyone who would do that was so severe. It could be lifelong injuries and so you had to stand there and do nothing.

23:00 I saw my friend John Thomas, who is a chief man at the big observatory over in Canberra, the large

telescope place. He is six foot seven, and he missed the point one time with a Jap, five feet, and the Jap could reach him to hit him in the face and so I stood there and watched him kick him [Thomas] in the shins until he brought him to his knees and

23:30 then he belted the hell out of him. Mr John Thomas, who could have picked that man up by his neck and held him and shaken him. He had to stand with his hands at his side and take the punishment, the indignity of the whole thing. Because if he didn't do that, the next punishment was unbearable. Unbearable. You could have anything happen to you at all. And so we had to accept these sort of continued indignities, continued bashings

24:00 with no chance of retaliation. Couldn't do anything about it at all. Just shut up and take it. That was one of the big problems of prison camp life, the fact that you were being – what's the word? Treated by something way below you and you had no recourse, no nothing.

24:30 **Were you ever punished?**

No. Only because I had eyes in the back of my head. I knew the risk of these things and I knew that eternal vigilance was the price of survival and that you couldn't afford to not do this. Incidentally, the day I became a prisoner of war in that Maharang camp, the first one,

25:00 I was hit by the realisation that I was now a prisoner of war of the Japanese. It was now a fact. And I knew that I had to do something about it. So I got away by myself and put my head in my hands and told myself that I was now a prisoner of war, it is a fact of your life, you are going to spend, you don't know how much time here, you don't know what the challenges of the future will be,

25:30 you cannot communicate with your wife and family, they cannot communicate with you, neither of you can help each other, you have to now adopt a complete change of life. The past is gone, you cannot associate yourself with it in any shape or form, you now have to live in this world. And learn how to survive in this world, to survive, to get home.

26:00 And I said to myself you have a goal and that goal is to return to your family sound. No matter what you strike you have got to have a goal to return to them sound and well. And you will only do that by working, keeping active, keeping alert and doing everything to avoid all of the things that can stop you doing that.

26:30 And I made myself a promise that I would do this. And it is a strange thing but when I had finished that promise to myself I got up and I was right, I was now in a new world and from then on I became completely a part of it. Shed a lot of the other, gone, I couldn't carry both of them no way, so I became a complete part of the new world, whatever it was to be.

27:00 And I am sure that having that goal in front of me every day, I am sure that is what kept me on the forward path. Had to have that promise and goal.

What work were you required to do on work details?

Surabaya, second camp in Surabaya, this was the [one where]

27:30 I was not very well because of the malaria I had had. And I needed to get out and purchase some supplies which I found out working parties could buy off the peddlers on the side of the road, they could buy bits of food and I decided if I could get out on a working party and buy some food I could probably pick myself up again. So I took the pillow slip that the Dutch matron gave me tucked inside my shirt and

28:00 and a few guilders, money I had left over and I joined this working party to go out wherever it was. It turned out to be in the streets of Surabaya pushing big semi trailer-sized jinkers with great sheets of steel in them around Surabaya in that climate. Pushing these things around the streets, about fifty men on each one like ants pushing and pulling.

28:30 It was a very difficult day after my experiences, but I survived it somehow, got through the day and got myself some condensed milk, some limes and some chocolate. And I put them in my pillow case, slung them over my shoulder and took them back to camp and I knew that if the camp guard caught you doing that you were in trouble, and yet the outside

29:00 work guards would let you get them. And so when I got to camp and got out of the truck I immediately dashed across and hid them behind a bit of a wall and back to ranks again before they saw me and we were dismissed and I went and picked up the goodies and took them into my hut and I rationed those goodies over three weeks with what I was getting in the camp, it took three weeks and in three weeks I was a new person on those extra bits of

29:30 food rationed out. So working parties were handy. There was a Dutch corporal in charge of the working party and he knew me and when I was standing on his working party he said, "You can't come, you're an officer, you're not coming." I said, "Yes, I am. I have taken my braids off, you shut up, I am a trooper. I have got to go on this working party." "Oh, no, no, capitaine, you can't come."

30:00 I said, "I am coming." And so I won the day, he was worried all day about an officer being in his ranks, but I survived, I got that food and that picked me up to the next stage. It is very hard work pushing jinkers around Surabaya. Full of steel.

What were you doing in the evenings?

Lights out 10 o'clock. Mostly talk. We were all so close

30:30 together. We had competitions, we had competitions in creating a menu. We were so short of food we created menus and then we had to vote on whose was the best menu, of course it was torturing our stomachs and our mouths would be watering about the roast pork with the crackling and the baked potatoes, the peas and the beans and the apple sauce. Oh. When you are so hungry like that and you talk about these things it gets difficult but

31:00 we had lots of laughs too. I won one competition on the menu stage and it took your mind off the circumstances you were in. Because in that climate that you were in, in those days, in that oppressive heat, it was very hard to get to sleep. And to get enough sleep to see you through to the next day was very difficult.

31:30 **What else can you remember about that camp?**

I had a worrying time at one stage. I was on parade – we were on parade first thing in the morning, it was finished – and I heard my name called out, "Flight Lieutenant Wright." Well when your name gets called out

32:00 in those conditions amongst a couple of thousand men the immediate reaction is what have you done wrong? What have they caught you out for? And I didn't move. I stayed still and was called out again from the commanding officer and the fellow next to me said, "Hey, that's you you had better go." So reluctantly I went up to the front and the Australian commanding officer I saluted both of them, him and the Jap commander and I was told that the Jap commander

32:30 decided he wanted the parade to do physical training, two thousand men, now. And I can't quite describe the fear, I was to take it, conduct it. Dutch Indonesian Army, English, American, Australian. There was a little water stand there three feet high with a triangular top and

33:00 the CO said, "You can stand on that." So I looked at it and thought, "How do I conduct physical training on a little thing two feet high eight inches around the top?" Anyway I climbed up on it and looked over a sea of faces, a couple of thousand men. And I went through a terrible time in those moments, because if you failed at something you got into real trouble with the Japs if you didn't get it. And I stood up there and looked over a sea of faces.

33:30 I turned to my CO and said, "What exercises should I do, sir?" and he said, "That's your prerogative." Back to me. I stood there completely at a loss, and presently my police training came back like that, I remembered every word of our physical training.

34:00 By the instructors. And from that moment on I took a 2000 man squad through the same procedures we did in the police barracks in Adelaide for PT [physical training]. When I, I would demonstrate it first and then they would do it with me. By the time we got through it I turned and saluted the CO and he said, he spoke to the Jap CO and he nodded, he said, "Bagus," which is 'good', and I was dismissed back to my place.

34:30 Shaking like a jelly, really upset and I had to do that every morning for about three months, up on the little stand for about three months. Every morning I woke up I had a crook stomach, knot in the solar plexus, didn't want to do it, had to do it. So I did that for three months there and got away with that.

35:00 Another thing that happened in that came was that the CO called me up and said, "We're making preparations for guerrilla warfare. If the Americans should land in Java, and I have appointed you as a platoon leader and we have got arms cached in the camp and I will show you where they are." And I said, "Sir I don't want to know where they are. If I have got that information and anything goes

35:30 wrong it wouldn't be good." He said, "It is pretty well safe." So we walked through the camp and he indicated where all of these weapons were concealed and I walked past. I said, "Right oh sir." He said, "Have you got the site?" I said, "Yes. What's down there?" "Tommy guns, rifles, bayonets, revolvers, ammunition, it will be dished out when it is wanted and you will know who your platoon is."

36:00 I said, "Very good sir. Okay." And I went back to my hut thinking to myself, "Well, I didn't volunteer for it anyway, but there it is possibility for the future." It didn't give me much confidence or happy feelings inside. Another thing that happened was, he called me up and said, "The Japs want to speak to somebody who spent time in Darwin."

36:30 And he said, "I think it would be better if an officer went up for interrogation by the kemeptai, secret police," the Japanese equivalent of the KGB whatever it was. And he said, "I think it is better for an officer to be interviewed by them." He said, "I can't direct you to do it, but I am offering you a volunteership."

37:00 And I said, "Well I have been in Darwin in twelve months I have established bases around Darwin I have established bases around the north coast, I knew about the whole system." And I thought, "This is awful, this is terrible, how do you handle such a thing and not get away with it?" He said he couldn't detail

37:30 me. I would have to volunteer so that meant I had no option but to volunteer, no option at all. So I said, “Okay sir, I will do that.” And he said, “Well you will be faced wit the kempetai, the secret police, they are the ones who will be interrogating you.” Well it was a bit like the jungle in Sumatra, how do I handle a kempetai when I have got no experience and no training?

38:00 As the days went by I worked out a talk that I, the start of it was true. I was in Adelaide on telemetry training school and I was posted to Singapore and I went via Darwin because that was the route, that was true.

38:30 And when in Darwin I moved around and then flew on to Singapore. And he had maps there, “What is this on the map?” And here is where I entered the dangerous area. Well I knew what it was it was part of my bombs supply, bomb cache in the cliffs, and I looked at it and thought, “What do I do about this?” And I looked at it and said

39:00 “I am not too sure what they are, because when I went through the war we had been bombed and security was very tight and I had restricted access to areas they wouldn’t let me go there. I don’t recognise that because that was a restricted area, I don’t recognise it. Well we went through several areas like this and I didn’t recognise them, restricted access,

39:30 here and there. Their photographs were perfect, they had everything in them. I said, “Yes that railway goes to Bridham. That goes to there” because they had the photographs and everything of it, so I confirmed the photographs of what they could see. One spot was where we had a big anti-aircraft gun on a point of the coast, and he said, “What’s that there?” and I said, “ I don’t know sir, what that was. I didn’t go past that spot.”

40:00 But they knew it was an anti-aircraft gun, of course they did, they had been fired on by it. And I gradually worked through this interview to the stage where he smiled, little Jap with glasses, dangerous types, he smiled and said, “That’s enough. Would you like a cup of coffee?” So I said, “Yes thanks” so I had a cup of coffee, I wasn’t proud enough as an Australian

40:30 to say, “No I don’t want your bloody coffee.” I had a cup of coffee because I thought I had survived it and,

We will just stop there thank you John.

40:38 **End of tape**

Tape 6

00:30 **From the time you were picked up, we will pick up the story but I would just like an arc of your time from when you were captured in ’42 to when you were released in ’45?**

Well I have just been through my first and second camps and I am going to my third

01:00 camp now.

Can you just give us a list of the names and places please?

That was Yeaarmarght, Y E A A R M A R G H T. That was the name of it,

And that was in April?

Yes that would have been April-May that period there right through for six or eight months.

And the next one?

The next camp was a small

01:30 high school that they converted. We lived in the high school in classrooms.

What was the name of that place?

Lycem L Y C E M high school.

And it is all on Java?

Yeah all on Java.

East or west coast?

That was actually in Surabaya: Yeaarmarght camp Surabaya.

And after that one?

After that one we went to Bandong,

02:00 **How long were you in Bandong?**

Up in the mountains for a short time up there. Then we came back to a place called Cycle camp in Batavia again Cycle camp and from Cycle camp we proceeded to a camp called Maka Sura. That was a work camp, out growing vegetables for the Japs.

02:30 **Where is Maka Sura?**

Maka Sura would be on the verges of Jakarta or Batavia on the outer skin of there. From that camp we went back to Bandong. And to three camps in Bandong and the last one was back to Cycle camp for the last six weeks of the war.

03:00 **That's great thank you, we have just got that down. Which was the worst camp by the way?**

The worst came was the reformatory we went to at the very end, big stalag type castle, big stone walls, stone guard houses, horrible place.

And what was the name of that place? Was that Cycle camp?

03:30 I have a photograph somewhere. I have a slide of it I got it went I went back in 74, it is the only picture I know of any prison camp that I know in Java that's in existence.

What was the name of it?

I can't think of it at the moment. I can find out what it is. It was a reformatory for 400 people and we had upwards of a thousand to 2000 in there.

04:00 **And that was the camp you were released from?**

No it was the one before. And that's where the incident in Vanderpost's book comes out.

We will come to that, thanks John, we will go back to the camp, the camp you were getting interrogated by the kemeptai was the second camp?

Yeah. Yeaarmarght, the big one that we have just been talking about.

04:30 Yes well we left there and went to a high school but not all of us left there, only a certain section. We went to a high school this time, I don't know where the others went to from the camp, but we went to the high school. They were mainly Australia and English and New Zealand in this camp. And it was a fairly uneventful camp, it was pretty quiet. There was only one eventful thing happened there,

05:00 and that was I made a little charcoal stove because I couldn't boil water to make some coffee and we didn't get any coffee from the camp. So I built this out of a little kerosene tin, a butter tin in there with charcoal in it and a trap door at the bottom to provide a draft and I had a lovely charcoal fire in there, I would open the thing and it would flare up, put my tin dixie on it, boil the water and make some coffee and it was lovely doing this. But in this camp there was a Japanese [who] took a shine to my watch,

05:30 Japanese guard and he wanted to buy my watch and I wouldn't sell it and he was pestering me for it. One day on the top of this tin, I found a square piece of wood about an inch and a half thick, nice and solid, sat on the tin it made a good seat, and when I wanted to light the fire I took it off so it would act as a chimney. And this day I had lit my fire with charcoal, fanned it up, got it working nicely, dixie on top which was below the level of the tin and it was just

06:00 boiling and I heard out on the veranda the calls of the guard coming, "Kioski kieri." So I knew a guard was coming along, so I put the board on top of the tin, my theory being it would dampen the fire down. And the blooming guard turned into my door of the classroom and it was the one who wanted my watch. He came straight up between the sleeping beds and things and what did he do? He sat down on my damn fire which was at full heat.

06:30 I just looked at him sitting there. "Watch, watch, watch." "Yes how much will you pay me for it?" It was the quickest sale that ever took place because I would have been belted to hell if he found that. I would have been in real trouble and he got the watch and went out and I lifted the lid, and it had, the fire had gone down. But the tin was still boiling under his bum. So I reckoned I was very fortunate to survive that one. I lost my watch.

07:00 **How much did you sell it to him for?**

That's a human story in prison camp. I think I got three guilders for it, it didn't buy me much.

Just going back before you mentioned a cache of arms?

Yes.

Can you tell us about that which camp it was and what?

That was in Maka Sura.

That was the second camp?

No, Yeaarmarght, that's where the cache of arms was, the big camp, Yeaarmarght.

07:30 **And what did you do with those arms, how did you get them?**

Well they came in from the Dutch, all secretly. It was all a very secret operation but there was a colonel mixed up in that while things that had had me worried, and someone dobbed him in. Someone around, natives probably, and they dobbed him in. And the kempetai found out about this and they hoisted him away and he was given the water treatment, which is upside down on the ladder tied to a ladder upside down and then they fill you with water until you

08:00 burst, keep filling you up with water, filling you up with water until your stomach just about busts. It is a terrible torture, and they tortured him to get the information about this guerrilla formation which I was mixed up with. He died of the treatment before they could get the information. When I heard this I didn't know what to do about it, what were the possibilities of this? But it wasn't long after that before we were shifted to another camp so

08:30 I sort of got out of that area.

What were you planning to do with these arms what was the idea?

Well if the Americans landed we were going to from our platoons and break out of the prison camp. We would have arms to kill all of the Jap guards, that was the policy, kill the guards and branch out in guerrilla actions towards the Americans, whatever we could do against the local Japs.

09:00 **And did you witness this water torture?**

No I didn't witness it no, that was carried out by the kempetai at their headquarters, I wasn't there.

How did you know about it or what happened?

It came back from my CO who was in touch with the whole circle, information direct from him. I remember him saying to me, "So keep your fingers crossed."

09:30 We're one of the group, better keep our fingers crossed in case they trace it back to us as well.

What sort of arms did you have?

Mainly Tommy guns and revolvers and some rifles and bayonets and ammunition. And some hand grenades tossed in.

And what became of those weapons?

I don't know what happened to them because I went out of that camp and never went back to it.

10:00 **One of the things that you said before, just to go off chronology onto broader transitions for a minute, you said you made an acceptance of your fate as a prisoner of war, what happened to those people who never made that transition who never accepted it?**

Some of them gave up and died, couldn't take it. There was one

10:30 RAF pilot got a card from his wife, a photograph and it was at a dance that the people put on in England for the Americans and he saw his wife on the arm of an American trooper, an officer, and he looked at that and read it and a month or two later he was gone, gave it up. It absolutely ruined his morale to see that his wife

11:00 was accompanying American troopers in England while he was here.

How important was it to accept your fate and not try to work against it, but work with it and survive because I am thinking if you don't accept it, it must in some ways (UNCLEAR) some of the reasons you survive if you accepted it?

That's right, there were. To refuse to accept your fate led you into

11:30 possible attempts to escape. Now attempts to escape in Java were hardly ever successful. There were six of our troops who really didn't attempt to escape, the camp hadn't been established and so they billeted themselves in the local village, and they were picked up there and accused of escaping from the camp.

12:00 They were lined up along a trench dug, they were lined up in front of the whole camp parade and shot. Fell into the trench shot, just like you read about in Germany and Europe, how they did that there. That convinced us that to try and escape in any way, shape or form was fatal. If you did and you got captured, that would be it. So it was a very severe deterrent to

12:30 trying to escape. Now refusing to accept the conditions brought on with some fellows those ideas and they tried to escape. Now they all got caught, they didn't all get executed, but they all got very severely punished and some were executed as that lot were. And the fact that if you didn't give in to it, you had

13:00 within you two things fighting each other. One was refusing to accept that, and the other was having to go with it because you couldn't do anything about it. There was only one alternative, severe punishment, internment in the hot boxes in the yard, hot tin boxes. All sorts of dangerous punishments and what did you do between the two, you couldn't accept being there and yet you had no option, you couldn't get out of it

13:30 you had to do all of these things. You had no option, you couldn't change it. and I think that sort of thing brought very delayed and serious complications later in life, this continual pull. And not being able to resolve it.

It was a momentous decision in many ways for you? Would you say it saved your life?

Well it was it was a momentous decision.

14:00 But I could not believe that you could divide your life there and give spiritual strength away to what you left behind. You couldn't afford it, you didn't have anything left after surviving for POW. You had nothing

14:30 left to give to the other side, they just had to put up with it, you only had once chance, one body, one mind, one heart and that was all you had. And you had nobody behind you, nobody was backing you up. Your back was to the wall and there was nobody there to help you, only yourself and you had to decide how to turn the most disastrous situation you could ever be in to

15:00 to some sort of an advantage. If you could turn it to an advantage you would have a chance of surviving, you could get out of it. But if you didn't do that it was nebulous you weren't doing anything and you were open any time to a consequence that you couldn't control. And I couldn't accept that. I didn't think that was any way to take on,

15:30 or to plan a track through life so unknown and so fraught with so many sorts of dangers that you couldn't at the moment foresee or prepare for. You couldn't plan for the future there, you just had to take it as it came, you couldn't plan anything there, Rob [interviewer]. In private life or anything outside, they're planning their lives, they have got routines but we couldn't

16:00 plan a thing . You could only take the routine, whatever it was, you had to do it, you had no option. And when you're placed in that situation and you strike situations like when I had wet beriberi which is a fatal condition if you are in the wrong place, which was there.

16:30 If you struck things like that what did you have left? Thinking of home and people like that didn't do any good then, so how did you challenge it? How did you face up to it? What did you do about it? And my idea was you did in those circumstances what would keep you going after that circumstance,

17:00 you just had to do that, I was lucky. I had dysentery, sulphur drugs had just arrived in the camp from an American Red Cross party late period of prison camp and they gave me this sulphur drug, eleven tablets. Now Rob it cured the dysentery but it ate up every bit of vitamin C in my body and so I wasn't peeing,

17:30 my renal systems weren't working. And I was blowing up, blowing up here, blowing up in my face, my thighs were clapping together. A mate of mine had already died from it and a Dutch friend of mine, who also played the guitar, that's how we got to know each other, I also learned to play the guitar in prison camp, and he came along one morning he said, "John I have got six vitamin C tablets, you can have half." He gave me three of his vitamin tablets and two days later,

18:00 pee, pee, pee, pee, pee. Five days after, all of the beriberi gone and I am safe out of it, safe through that particular thing. So it was a big lottery, real big lottery how your contacts worked it that sense.

In those early days who were you with? Was there any group that stayed together right through the camps or… ?

18:30 No I don't think so. Later in the war I became, see there were so few RAAF prisoners of war, there was so few of us that I became more or less as it were attached to the 2/ 3rd machine gunners. Because their complete unit was taken and when I came back to Australia and we had reunions or Anzac Day marches

19:00 I would always go to the 2/3rd machine gunners reunion because I knew them all, I went through camp with them, not through service with them, not through the war. I was a nothing unit, I was shifted from unit to unit, base to base doing all sorts of work and I never developed a unit philosophy with a certain group of men going

19:30 through all of the trials together, I didn't develop that, I couldn't. And so when Anzac Day parades came on, who did I walk with? I finished up with a small group of Malaya air force because we were first in the war and they were given their own pennant and everything, and although there were only 20 or 30 of us they decided to

20:00 give us the right to march as our own entity. So I did march with the air force but there was nobody I was there [with] in the war. Nobody there, they were all evacuated and they went on with their fighting for the next two or three years and we stayed up there, it was a complete break up of units as such.

Can I take you back to the chronological story,

20:30 **I forget which camp we're up to, I think it was the second camp?**

To the Maka Sura labour camp, they called for volunteers for that and I immediately volunteered for that because that was part of my philosophy, work, work, work. And I volunteered for that, and having learnt to play the guitar, the officials gave me a guitar they had there in the office and they gave me a lute and a violin.

21:00 And I took these out to the labour camp, to the volunteer camp where we were to grow vegetables for the Japanese on the outskirts of Java.

Where was this?

Again on the outskirts of Batavia.

This is after you have come through Bandong?

Yeah. That was a quick journey, very little took place up there,

21:30 just sort of a phase through, nothing to write about.

How were you travelling up the island at that stage?

By train, all by train. Train travel all of the way, never in truck incidentally, we always travelled in carriages. The toilets were always overfull, dysentery was rampant in the toilets, and so you travelled in hazardous circumstances all of the time, but it wasn't easy. Flies made it hard for you.

22:00 **How were you dealing with sick people? How were sick people dealt with?**

Well they stayed ill until we got to camp and they had to march the last bit to camp, helped along by the others. I almost completely [lost] my dysentery rotation when we were posted up to Bandong and I was very worried about getting through the day going by train and marching the last bit and

22:30 having problems. Fortunately again I was that far through that I got up to the destination without any problems.

Just out of interest there were six executed for their role in the possible uprising in the camp, did you witness those executions?

I didn't witness that, no. We had reports coming into our camp about it.

23:00 Our senior officers finally convinced the Japs to complete a complete court procedure, these men were to be tried, prosecuted, defended by defending counsel and the result would come out of that. But the result was execution by firing squad. That's how it came out, they wouldn't change it,

23:30 all they did was concede to our request for a trial instead of just summary execution. We felt that there were extenuating circumstances in that this camp had not yet officially been declared a closed camp. Because the accommodation wasn't ready, or right or what it should be, these fellows were just dropped in a place half a mile away. They weren't escapees,

24:00 they were there, they were available but they had left the camp and the Japs decided to make an example of it at that stage so that no more escapes would be effected.

This is before you got up to Bandong?

Yeah and then they brought in the final thing, if any prisoner of war escapes and is not recovered, the commanding officer of the camp will be executed. That stopped it dead. Commanding officers were very concerned , very worried

24:30 because there were some soldiers who just wanted to get out, under the fence, anything at all. They wouldn't care about the commanding officer getting killed because of that, but that stopped what was going on at that time. A lot of Dutch Eurasians were sneaking out under the wire at night to see their families. They were getting away with that because they were very

25:00 skilful at it and they were dark and fitted the community. They could do this, but a white man could never do this. There was a lot of that went on in those years and we knew about it too but we couldn't partake of it. No way we could do it.

So what about maltreatment, the mistreatment between yourself and the Japanese, do you think it was to do with racial hatred?

25:30 Well the Japanese were always looking for breaches of instructions and any time he found the slightest breach of instruction you got bashed up. Didn't matter what you did, if you did something wrong that you were told to do you got bashed up. You were constantly facing

26:00 this thing, week after week, month after month there was this hanging over your head. And they were

impossible to reason with, it didn't matter what communication you had, little or more, you could not communicate with these people, not possible and so it was a one-way conversation all of the time and then led to a bashing. And whenever you got those sort of things you

26:30 were subject to permanent injury. In the working camp I went to, Maka Sura.

This is just out of Batavia?

That's an edge of jungle camp that was, rice paddies, a bit more bush around us, no town. In that camp that was the best camp I was in.

27:00 We were working to produce vegetables for the Japs themselves and we were like a long line of men with shovels digging ground, trenches, quickly. The fertilising of the gardens was done from the big cesspool in the middle of the camp where all of the sewerage went. When you went to the toilet there at night you went out on a couple of planks

27:30 over the big cesspool and you could hear the hissing of the maggots, you could hear the noise, wshhh. As they turned over in this morass down below you. We had our secret radio hanging down on a plank and we used to go and sit on there and listen to the news. And if there was ever an emergency you cut the string and it fell in the ooze and you lost your set. And they had a big bamboo lever went right over

28:00 of the cesspool right in the middle of camp with a bucket on the end. And they would dip in under all of the ooze and tip it over the edge into a drain which ran right around our gardens we were making. The garden growth was just absolutely impossibly prolific, it just grew like a tree, like Jack and the beanstalk. And the

28:30 the whole thing seemed so grotesque to have this set up in the middle of the camp. But when I went to go to the toilet in the middle of the night I was always scared stiff I was going to step in the hole between the planks and finish up in the ooze down the bottom. But you had to use it. At one stage in that camp the Japs decided to have a big radio

29:00 broadcast from Batavia, all around the community, of morning PT. Get the people fit. It happened in Australia, back in South Australia when I was about twenty-five or thirty. They did it over on the radio stations, "Get up in the morning," the radio would start. "Say to yourself, I am in jolly good health. I will have a good day today.'" And away you go with all of your things to music, your aerobics. And the Japs

29:30 decided to do this in Java, around all of the camps around town. And it came out to camp and said, "Camp has got to do this." And my CO called for a volunteer, nobody volunteered, he called me up and he said, "You haven't volunteered to run this." And I said, "No sir, won't volunteer." He said, "Well you're detailed to run it." so I had to go out to the Japanese headquarters and charts of all of the exercises, all of the

30:00 numbering, all in Japanese. I had to study all of these exercises. And then I had to put the camp in groups, a couple of hundred through these exercises at certain times for a couple of weeks, three weeks. They built me a big platform as high as that curtain out of coconut planks and posts and a ladder. And there was a big opening day when this camp was to stand out there and do this PT to music out of Batavia out of big loud speakers.

30:30 And so I am up on the platform all of the troops are out in front of me down there, big sea of faces. And just before it starts the Japanese general for the area comes clanking with his sword behind him, clanking on the ground, he is about that high, and his sword's about that long. And he came with his entourage, the camp commandant, and all of those people, our CO and I am standing on this platform waiting for the music to start to do this PT.

31:00 Now if you made a mess of it, there was real trouble for you. And I had to learn it all in Japanese and I listened for the music and presently it started to come through and I brought the parade up, got them to attention and I said, "Exercises music begin." And away we went all doing our aerobics to the music from the big funnel. I went right through the

31:30 eight exercises, I put one in its wrong place and the whole crowd followed me exactly, they just followed me through every exercise and when it was all finished I turned around and saluted the Jap general first and I saluted the lieutenant commander of the camp second then I saluted his sergeant major third and then I saluted my wing commander fourth.

32:00 And he spoke to the camp commander, he spoke to the general everybody at attention you know, stiff at attention, not a movement. And yeah, nod , good, you know. They said, "Okay, that's right. Dismiss the parade." So I dismissed the parade off the perch and off they went on their various what-have-yous and I went back to my quarters. And I was stuffed for a whole day, absolutely stuffed. And I had to do that for three months every

32:30 morning, three months. And they put me in charge of physical welfare in this camp. This meant I had to have all of our troops out in varying degrees of health, those that could sit, because they would stay in their huts, and we wanted them out in the air every day, sitting under the trees, able to walk a bit, able to march and able to jog. And I had to

33:00 take these groups in succession and put them, through a certain amount of physical exercise according to their abilities, every day I had to do that. And then one day a 200 or 300 group came through from Ambon where they had been shipped up to Java, and they had had a terrible trip from Ambon, they had lost large numbers of their men, living in iron holds of iron ships on the slow trip from Ambon to Java, they lost about a third of their

33:30 complement from all of the diseases you can think of in the hold of a ship. They threw them over the side, when they were in the ports, there were their bodies floating around the ships, they could see their mates just floating around the ships. They moved on and finally the remainder got into our camp into Maka Sura and I had to rehabilitate this two or three hundred men. And it started off they couldn't

34:00 even stand up and do arms, they couldn't do that. Couldn't do arm stretching, when they came into camp every one of them was walking death. When they came in I couldn't believe it and it took me six weeks of gradually building exercises, a bit of food exercises, and I finally got them back to normal, these fellows I got them back to normal. And within three months of this there is

34:30 a big kerfuffle, complete parade on the ground and they started to from a draft to go overseas to Japan ship wise. And I was on the draft to go to Japan and half way through the Japanese commander called me back, I couldn't go on this draft because I was his toko shiso, his physical training officer. So he pulled me off three drafts that were sent away and were sunk by the American submarines.

35:00 So a close shave again. We had entertainment there. I formed a band with an American bandman who wrote music and played the saxophone and I had three Dutchmen playing the other equipment. We had a lovely concert, built a stage and had a lovely concert. "Waltzing Matilda" was acted. The Japs sat in the front seat and it went very well. And the other thing I had, I

35:30 managed to talk them into nightly singsongs in the huts. One hut at a time, the bloke would come into the hut, I would play the guitar and the Dutchman would play the violin and we would play all of the bawdy songs we could rake up and they would yell their heads off.

What was your favourite song?

'Cheer up my lads, love them all'.

Can you give us a rendition of it?

How did it go? Something like,

36:00 \n[Verse follows]\n You'll get no promotion this side of the ocean\n

So cheer up my lads love them all!\n [The long and] the short and tall…\n

it went through in a series of versus like that. But there was never anything really harmonious like we had on the front of that ship, on the River Musi, that was beautiful harmony. This was the roughest coarsest possible

36:30 exhibition of lyrics that you could possibly ever have in a prison camp. So I ran that for a couple of months and it really raised the morale of the prisoners.

This was when you were growing the vegetables out of Batavia? Which camp was this?

This was Maka Sura. Another occasion the Americans got in a Red Cross parcel, they had a lot of dried fruit, cheese and that. We never got one

37:00 but they did. And I had been put in charge of an alcohol still for the hospital, distil alcohol to get from fermented potato peelings and then distil it through glass systems and that alcohol went to the hospital. And while I was in charge of this the Yanks came down with their dried fruit and said, "Could you make any wine out of this?" And I said, "Yeah I

37:30 reckon I could." So they gave them all to me and I put them with a little bit of sugar and I boiled them all up, cooked them up and over the week period I distilled them and added, I got a tiny bit of yeast, proper sort yeast from the kitchen, dropped it in the mix and stirred it all up and it took seven days, and I was just having a spoon of it at a time. And the seventh day I thought that's as far as it had better go,

38:00 and that was the 4th of July, they wanted to celebrate it, the Americans. And it looked like washing water the way it was done, just like washing water and I had a taste at the end, and it was very nice, so I carried these buckets of brew up to their huts and about an hour later we had to restrain these damn Yanks, they were after the guards, it could have got very serious for a moment there. They hadn't had any alcohol for a long time.

38:30 And this brew really stirred them up, a lighter side of the camp.

What is the date now more or less in that camp?

This would have been about 1945 in the early, beginning of 1945,

Do you just want to pause there for a second, Soph?

39:00 **John how were you keeping track of time, when you made that decision to accept your fate, I guess to help your survival. Did time become different then, did the chronology of events matter or did time do something different?**

Time didn't matter, it was just going through as I said a new life, you did what was set out for you.

39:30 In the days where there was no working party you chatted, you talked.

How did you keep track of the passing time?

Well we had the radios working, the secret radios working. So we had a time sense up to there. I can't remember keeping real dates and time.

Do you remember having a birthday?

40:00 Oh yes I knew the 17th of November I thought about them at home. I knew my wife's birthday and what they would be doing at home yes. I registered those.

Were those events harder for you or was there some sort of celebration?

Oh they were hard on you, those were the times when I got away on myself. I don't think I said it before but about every three months I got away by myself

40:30 and allowed myself the luxury of forgetting all about prison camp, I went back home, every three months I went home. And I was back home with my wife, I was doing things with her, playing tennis with the others and the prison camp became a nothing, it just wasn't there. I did that for about an hour which I did by myself,

41:00 I come out of it and sort of "Gee that was beaut," and then switch, look around the huts, back into this again for three months. And that was the only way I managed to smooth out or keep with me all of the senses and memories and the real things that mattered, life with your wife, who you love and

41:30 family, all of those things. That was the only way you could keep them there. They acted as a barrier, I had it every three months, they acted as a barrier and prevented things getting too much into you. They were a good – what do a call it? – a good preventive, in other words they kept you level, stopped you getting down too low and that was terribly easy to do.

42:00 End of tape

Tape 7

00:30 **John we were, you were mentioning just before what we had been talking about were the happier times and you wanted to have a chance to talk**

01:00 **about the less happy time? Would you like to tell me about the harder?**

Yes, yes I would. It was in the next to last camp that things got worse for me. We from the Maka Sura we have just been talking about, we were in a situation where

01:30 the Japs believed the Americans might land in Java, and they decided to separate all of the officers of the Allied troops from the other ranks so that planned action or guerrilla warfare could not be done. And so suddenly out of the Maka Sura camp, there was a division between officers and other ranks, and the officers were all sent from there by

02:00 train to Bandong and the other ranks stayed behind and it included our nursing part of our hospital. And so when we got to Bandong and went into a school as a camp we had no nursing staff and we had a few sick people. And the

02:30 doctors called for volunteers to help in the camp hospital such as it was. When I say 'camp hospital' don't get me wrong, it can mean a room, a shed, anything at all. These were probably a classroom or something like that. And I volunteered to nurse in the hospital, there was an incentive, a little bit more

03:00 bread every day to work. And I had done my first aid training in the police force. I felt I might be able to be of service so I joined the nursing staff. And there I went through what I hadn't before, I went through the basement section of prisoner of war camp, where the sick and dying were, first time I had. And they put me into a section of the

03:30 ward where they were all dysentery patients. They had amoebic dysentery which was fatal. Ordinary dysentery and other illnesses, like diabetes and infections. Some had got things like hookworm into their bodies from the ground and bare feet . And I found myself nursing a Dutch

04:00 officer about thirty years of age who had a wife and two children. He was very sick with amoebic dysentery. The only hygiene we had was a bucket of Lysol at the entrance door to the ward. Every time you went in you dipped your hands up to the arms in the Lysol bucket, washed them thoroughly and

then towelled them off on a piece of rag.

04:30 Then you had to handle these soldiers in their beds who couldn't control their bowels. You had to move them clean them up, just like a nurse in a hospital, and try to keep them as clean and as decent as you could. This captain

05:00 told me all about his family about his ambition to go to Australia, because he was a very keen horseman, and Australia would provide him with the environment for riding and things like that and he was looking forward to all of these things, he talked a lot about these things to me. And of course being an Australian he asked me lots of questions and we had lots of conversations .

05:30 And it was very difficult for me, not an experienced nurse, not an orderly, not a hospital trained, not knowing, it was a very difficult time to give this fellow what he really needed, which was encouragement, knowing he was going to die, encouragement, thinking about his wife and children,

06:00 and when periodically you had to provide a specimen for the, they had a microscope there and you had to provide a specimen for the microscope and you had to use a half a coconut container with all of the white stuff taken out, just the hard bowl. Half a one of those in which to collect specimens and put them into the right place and clean up,

06:30 fix everything up, write the report on how everything was going. Doing that every day with him, and with others, but he was my special patient. And finally one day he was talking to me, he just dropped his head back and died just like that. And so all right, I realised I couldn't let these things get into to me too much., this

07:00 was just another soldier and he had died. And that went on through that hospital over the weeks that I was in there I was nursing a Dutch judge, he was a Dutch Indonesian Eurasian judge in Indonesia and he had diabetes. We appealed to the Jap

07:30 commander for insulin to treat him, "No insulin." Every time, "No insulin." The same with the Dutch officer I was treating, "No medicine for dysentery, no medicine." And you're working in this hospital knowing that it would be a sheer matter of luck if these people survived before they got their medicine.

08:00 Or until they got it, well one day I had been fixing up this judge just before we got our rice and tea at lunch time and I went away to get that and I came back half an hour later and he had gone, he had just died. Because the diabetes produced ulcers and things inside his system and they just burst. He got septicaemia and in half an hour you're dead.

08:30 And the callousness, the impossibility of these people and their attitudes to life was beyond belief. And it is the one thing that I, irrespective of whatever else I think about the Japanese, it is the one things that I couldn't forgive them for, was that they didn't care about life, sickness in the camp,

09:00 they didn't care al all. Not a bit. And so the hospital went on like this, treating people, losing them. Helping them, watching my hygiene terribly closely in case I got the same thing, until all of a sudden we were transferred to another camp. Now this was a reformatory, big stonewalls

09:30 ten feet high, guard towers, stonewalls, twenty, thirty feet high around each corner. A real stalag German touch about them., huge double gates at the front and when they shut, that was it. Inside you were finished. And so we finished up in this camp and there was not enough room for us, 400 people and there was about 1500 of us there crammed in.

10:00 And they were building pigeon holes in the room, they were building compartments, just enough room for a person to slip into and sleep in, and on top of that they would build another lot and on top of that another lot. So you had tiers of people sleeping in these pigeon hole compartments. But while they were doing that the men slept all over the concrete floor and if you wanted to go to the toilet at night you had to pick your way so that you didn't tread on a man's hand or arm as you worked your way to the

10:30 door to go to the toilets. The living was very very close there, very close. And the whole situation was very unacceptable, not enough water, not enough cleanliness. And one night I was in my allotted space and one of our people came over from the hospital section and said, "You're wanted in the hospital." Where I was

11:00 nursing. I went over and there was my mate who had been with me for a long time in camp, a little fellow, five feet tall and me six feet tall but we made great mates. He had had a duodena ulcer for his whole time in prison camp and this evening it had burst. The ulcer burst and so he was being prepared for surgery and he had asked for me

11:30 to be his nurse. The surgery was just a small room with a single globe, wash trough, no proper facilities for disinfecting all of the instruments, there was a senior Dutch surgeon doing the operation. A British major who was the vital statistics

12:00 control and the anaesthetist. So the surgeon put me at the top of the table, captain there, anaesthetist there, surgeon there, and I was given the job of checking his pulse, there was no machines in those days, just check his pulse with your finger on it, which I did. And the surgeon commenced the operation,

12:30 opened his – up down – the stomach, I am at his head and he just opened him up right down the stomach with a scalpel, I wondered how I would go. I am watching the pulse and as he is going in all of a sudden, all of the midges flying around the lamp are coming into the surgery area falling into it, so the surgeon could go on operating, so he gave me a cloth around the man's shoulder, a pair of forceps, and said, "Now as they fall in pick them out and wipe them on that rag."

13:00 And so I was busy checking the pulse, lifting all of these insects out and wiping them on the rag and the surgeon proceeded with the operation. He opened him right up, turned the stomach right out and there was the hole, like a pencil hole in the duodenum. He tried to stitch it up but it wouldn't stitch up so he had to put a patch of local tissue , he just patched right around like a boy's patch on a pair of pants, like a mother stitches a patch on.

13:30 Just did that and then he opened him up in the groin, put in the drainage tubes, I am picking out insects all of the time, I am the insect picker and pulse keeper. And we got him through the operation, they stitched him up in a corset. And then I had to go through the night to bring him back out of deep anaesthetic, this is my first experience of anything like this. And under instruction from the surgeon I kept all of the records, readings everything like that .

14:00 And at four in the morning my mate started to come around, and I nursed him through that dangerous period of not moving too much. He came out okay, I went back and slept most of the day and I came in each night to nurse him through the next night and on the fourth day I came in to the ward and he is sitting up in bed with his big

14:30 glasses on and his big brown eyes, and I said, "How are you today Bert?" and he said, "No F'en good!" I said, "What's the matter?" He said he was being fed up the anus because they couldn't come through the stomach. He said, "The friggen so and so didn't put any sugar in my rice." Being put up the anus they

15:00 didn't put any sugar in his rice, that was his opening joke for the day. Everybody burst out laughing after the fourth day of his operation. He survived that operation under 50:50 chances. Came back to Australia, had some of his bowel removed and lived until he was eighty-two. And just after

15:30 that we had a parade by the Japs. The Japs had asked our senior officers to provide a list of carpenters and mechanics, tradesmen. They had a project for us. Well the COs refused to give this list to the Japs and so the Japs had a parade of the COs and I was amongst the officer set up, three rows out in front of the parade ground.

16:00 And here is a big Japanese and a little Japanese, he is a commander, and he carried on about his no list. And finally he lost his temper and he picked up a fairly big chair and he bashed it over the commanding officer's head. Knocked him out, and then he went to the next one and hit him over the head, he finally broke the chair up over these people's heads. I am standing in the second row, petrified that it is my turn next.

16:30 And that's written up in that book I have got there, that particular incident because Vanderpost was one of the blokes that went through it. We won our way, after that we had to submit a list of volunteers which we did, and I went off as a mechanic to Batavia and a mate of mine who had never had a spanner on a nut put himself as a mechanic and joined me.

17:00 We went down with this group back to Cycle camp and from Cycle camp we had to proceed marching and by train down to the Batavia docks. To work on Chevrolet motor trucks, taking engines out and reconditioning engines, as mechanics reconditioning them, and a very interesting six weeks took place there, we took engines out of the trucks, we took them to pieces, we took

17:30 the all of the parts out and every time we put new bits back in we loosened off all of the nuts, every time we had done it up, we loosened them off so they wouldn't last more than a couple of weeks. We reassembled all of the engines, put them back in the trucks, and were going quite well and that was a reasonably interesting part of our life, although we didn't know much about what we were doing, we worked it out quickly.

18:00 And one morning I woke up. Dead silence. Nothing happening. I thought, "I have missed the working party, I will be in trouble." But nobody went out that day, it was very quiet. No Japs around. This was in August 1945, about the 15th, 13th of August, and there was lots of betting going on that the war was finished but we had no

18:30 official information. But the Japs were behaving strangely, but we dare not hope too much about it. But our secret radio had told us it had finished and the CO said that the news was not to be broadcast because he didn't want any troubles in the camp at that moment. And a couple of days later the Japs announced it. People have said to me, "How did you feel

19:00 when you knew the war was over?" and I said, "Well I will tell you." Compared to today I think what they were would be the feelings of an average man and his wife today struggling to get by and they're struggling and they win the competition, you know?

Lotto.

19:30 Million-dollar thing that we see every night, they win this lottery. And they find they have got a million dollars, the worries are gone, the oppression has been lifted off them. I think that's the feeling we had, all of the sudden lifting of the oppression we had gone through, it was finished. We had survived we were going to get home.

20:00 The depth of the feeling was impossible to describe. Just how you reacted and you felt in those early couple of days. You couldn't get with it, you couldn't sort of realise it. It was a difficult situation at that time, a difficult situation to handle, but there it was, I survived.

Were you allowing yourself to think of home at that point?

20:30 Not much. I knew, we all knew, the war was approaching an end somewhere but what we didn't know that moment that instructions had been issued from Japan that before a surrender was made all POWs

21:00 were to be destroyed, that came out on official papers later, we were to be eliminated. And at that particular time the situation wasn't decided about elimination or not. Consequently we didn't know what was going to happen, we were in the dark about how we were going to be treated. For a period we were sitting in the middle of a minefield

21:30 wondering which way it was going to go. In fact in the reformatory camp, Colonel Vanderpost, who wrote that book, got to work with the other senior officers and designed ways and means of protecting themselves against the Japs if this final solution should be applied to us.

22:00 The prepared a big plan of survival for that very purpose. But it didn't come to that, the Japs surrendered and immediately the responsibility for prisoners of war was thrown straight on to the Japanese commanders of prison camps, for their security or else. And so what the Japs did. They tightened the security up on us and kept us for a further six weeks in prison camp.

22:30 After the war was finished we couldn't move, couldn't do a thing. So that was a long period, another six weeks. And it was then a case of a careful transition back to food and clothing, and plans for whatever took place at that time. And I went out in charge of the working party to help the women

23:00 prisoners of war in gaols, they had been put in gaols with their children. I went out to help them. We chose a working party to do that and in the process of doing that, hard to believe, but there was the widow and two girls of the captain who had died in my hands.

23:30 And that was a difficult time. Very difficult time. And also in camp was the girl who had given me the sewing kit in the very first fortnight of POW. She gave me the sewing kit to see me through, she was in this camp with her brother and mother. And so I was able to catch up with these people which was good. And I immediately ordered the Jap commander of the camp to provide food

24:00 for them and I got chicken, food in, they were short of food, and the Jap commander invited me to have a drink, which I did, and he pulled out a liqueur of some sort and I had about a wine glass full and I walked over with the food that had been brought in to give to the folks and I keeled over drunk. Officer in charge of the

24:30 working party! I was drunk on that much. So I took respite in a little cell occupied by two Australian girls that had married Dutch soldiers. They took me in very quickly and said, "You're drunk!" and I said, " I know I am, I know I am drunk" so they put me on a bed and I had to lie there for half an hour before I could go on with my work in charge of the men. One

25:00 of the humorous ends to my thing. And there was a wonderful girl there who offered to launder my shorts and shirt, things like that. Which she did and I couldn't get back to get them – I was posted back to Australia – so she sent them back with another officer with a note regretting that she couldn't say good bye to me. Lovely person. And I stuck the note in my pocket and a few weeks later

25:30 when I got home and my wife was washing my shirt she said, "What's this?" Who is this?" and I had a lot of please explaining to do.

Can you tell me about coming home, how you got home and…?

Yes I was picked early out of the hat, on a piece of paper instead of alphabetically. W [for Wright] I was always last.

26:00 Picked out of a hat to be evacuated by an aircraft from one of our squadron on Balikpapan. And I went out to the aerodrome to be evacuated and I noticed that every car that passed with a Jap, they were all saluting me. Quite a change of situation I was being saluted, wonderful, by the Japs. I got out to the aerodrome and there were five

26:30 B25 bombers there waiting. And so we were allocated seven to a plane and we sat around waiting because they were all Dutch pilots who had got away before and they had been given the flight in to go and see where their people were. So we had a delayed period. After a while our pilots returned and I was allocated an aircraft and I went aboard with everybody else

27:00 but being air force the captain called me up to the front cockpit. And we took off from the airfield. And

he said, “Do you want to look down? Do you want to see the prison camp?” and I said, “I would love to, I always used to look up and say one day I will be looking down here, one day.” So after not having flown in an aircraft for four years he flew the aircraft around wingtip vertical

27:30 just above the trees so I could have a good close look at where I had been. And I thought this could be dangerous, so I said, “I have had enough.” So he headed off for Balikpapan. And he said, “Would you like to fly it?” and I said, “Yeah I would love to fly it.” So I sat in the captain’s seat with my hands on the controls flying a B25 bomber. And he said to me, “How did you get caught? Where were you caught? What happened?”

28:00 And I said to him, “Tried to escape from Bandong the last night of the war in an old B18 bomber.” He said, “What day?” I said, “The last night of the war before capitulation.” He said, “Were you in an old B 18?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Did you see a car come out?” I said, “Yes.” He said “I was driving that car. We

28:30 wanted you to stay while we took off together.” After three and a half years the same man flew me out, which I think was one of the coincidences of the war. And he landed at Balikpapan and I dropped out of the plane and a pair of hands was put over my eyes from the back and said, “Guess who? Guess who?” and I said, “Oh come on I can’t guess who!”

29:00 And it was my wife’s cousin who was in intelligence, he knew I was coming out and he made a point of being there to welcome me. And he looked after me while I was in Balikpapan. Gave me a jeep to drive around in. I was in Balikpapan for about three days and passed on then to Morotai, by sick aeroplane again, second time over sea.

29:30 And at Morotai I had to go through the army health section at Morotai. They prescribed spectacles because my eyes had suffered from vitamin deficiencies. We saw a wonderful open air show there and a friend of mine in the air force got me out on an early flight on a Liberator to Darwin. And we were all

30:00 sickies in the back of the plane. I wasn’t because I had had six weeks in prison camp on good food and I got stuck into my PT and I was very fit when I came out eventually. We had all of these sick men and nurses in the plane to look after us. And half way to Darwin one of our engines gave up the ghost, it was an old one. So how many more could go before it would happen? And we had heard of aircraft

30:30 evacuating POWs which crashed on take off. Killed the lot. And so we were very superstitious about this, very worried. But we got to Darwin safely and I spent four days there being checked through Red Cross, and I had been in Darwin of course for the year s before the war and I was able to revisit my house and the people on the station of course who were still there. It was a great reunion with them.

31:00 And very early in the morning, about dawn we were taken out to the aerodrome to be taken down to Adelaide in another Liberator and I got hold of the pilot and told him about the last Liberator with the crook engine and I said, “We have got to go all of the way to Adelaide. I don’t like these things.” And he said, “Oh this is a new one John, this is a new Liberator.” He had no worries and I said, “Thanks very much that’s lovely.”

31:30 And someone called out for Flight Lieutenant Wright, and I said, “I am out the front here.” “I have got a signal from Adelaide for you. Your wife’s cousin is in charge of the motor transport in the RAAF there and he has arranged for a special car to meet you a the Gawler airport, with your wife.” It was good. And so we got aboard and

32:00 flew down to Alice Springs, where they put a wonderful thing on for us in the Red Cross hall, tables laden with food and ham and salads, and when we left it was hardly touched and everybody was upset. And I had to tell them that we greatly appreciated their generosity but our stomachs were so small we could only eat small amounts of food and they were too rich for us, we just couldn’t handle it. And so we took off from Alice Springs, the last leg home and they put on

32:30 5AD and a pair of earphones for me to listen to the latest music as we flew down. And the pilots were chiacking me a bit, they were saying, “Are you married?” and I said, “Yes, married four years.” And they said, “Well whacko tonight.” This sort of chiacking all of the way down from Alice Springs to Darwin. And I said, “You don’t want to be too sure of that, three and a half years

33:00 on the rations we had might have had a serious effect. I don’t know.” But we had a lot of fun, laughing and talking about it. When we approached Gawler I stood up in my jump suit and I said, “Now you are charged with a safe landing where, don’t make any mistakes will you? This is the last leg.” He said, “Oh no I have flown this

33:30 aircraft a long way and lots of times.” So he made a safe landing and I opened up the door and the ladder went down to the ground and I had my guitar over my shoulder and stepped out and stepped down the ladder and there is my wife waiting for me.

34:00 Beautiful, lovely. The end of it all you know sort of, I was finished. And we went into town from Gawler and I met my mother and father

34:30 on North Terrace and changed cars and we went back to Belair to home. And it is very hard to describe that, coming back to all of your folks.

35:00 And to find that two brother have been through the air force, in and out while you were away and you knew nothing about it. One had been shot up in England, survived his injuries and came back home. And the other one survived all of his training and killed himself six months later in Belair in his car. Lost him at twenty-one after all that had happened.

35:30 But it was a wonderful reunion. I was thinking how different it was from my father's return home. There were no things like that happen in that day. Didn't come back by train, came back by

36:00 plane. And a lot of our ex-POWs came back by ship, it took longer periods. And I remember well one thing my brother had written to me, when I was in Darwin I got his letter, he said, "Please don't worry about how you look, don't worry about your condition, we have seen the photographs, the newsreels, we are well aware

36:30 of these things, how you will be." And I step off the aeroplane and I am a picture of physical fitness, and when I arrived home he just looked at me and said, "For God's sake, why was I worrying about you? Look at you. We have been seeing pictures of skeletons and terrible things, look at you. Where have you been?"

37:00 I said, "I have been looking after myself and I have had six weeks rehabilitation. Good food and exercise. You're not looking at what I was, a prisoner of war, you're not looking at me at all." And that was the end of my air force days. Not the end of air force days but that was the end of that particular era of my life.

37:30 Which represented at that time fifteen per cent of my life was that, fifteen per cent of it. That experience. So it I don't know.

How do you think those experiences had changed

38:00 **the way that you were towards other people?**

Yes.

How?

It made me much more tolerant of people having lived so closely together with all sort of characters, all sorts of good things and bad things and having to get on with them all. It gave me a different outlook on life.

38:30 With people after that I always looked at their side of it, I always accepted things I wouldn't have accepted before. I was prepared to accept people's flaws along with their good qualities and I realised that friendship with people is so important. Even in our ordinary life to be friends

39:00 and not walk away or repel somebody because of some factor, there is always some good in everybody and it always came out up there. Such as Johnny Kova giving me three vitamin tablets, things like that. Sharing your adversities. And it was five years later than that 1952

39:30 that the whole thing hit me and I had a complete collapse, five years. Five years collapse after that. And…

Do you know why?

Well I was told subsequently by the experts that I was one of the types who

40:00 these things were taken in deeply., there were men up there who were up there with me and have spent their life back here almost perfectly normal. Went back to their work and went through lives progressing, never having a set-back and they went through exactly what I did. And they are researching this in America now, in view of the wars, they are researching the fact that there are personalities and there are personalities.

40:30 Some are unaffected by certain experiences, the other person is deeply affected and has to be helped out of it and has to climb out of it. And they are proving that. This is what happened to me, and in those early days when it happened to me there was no knowledge of these things, they didn't understand how deeply these things were set in your psyche or whatever it was .

41:00 And I came under some pressure in life in 1952 and they told me that this reaction was probably due to my reduced level of capacity to handle stress. Whereas I could handle that stress before, now it was there and I had exceeded it.

We will just stop there thanks John.

41:25 **End of tape**

Tape 8

00:30 **You were talking about your wife and your guitar?**

When she saw me come down the stepladder out of the aircraft I had it slung over my shoulder and she just took one look at it and said, “What have you been up to? I thought you were a prisoner of war instead of playing guitars?”

01:00 And so I said, “Well I had always wanted to play the guitar and in prison camp there was an English pilot of Battle of Britain and he had this guitar and he could play it in camp. And I asked him one day could I learn a bit to play the guitar…’ and he said, “Yes of course you can that’s fine.” So he played the full six strings all of the time,

01:30 not just the top strings but the whole area. So he taught me the proper method of playing accompaniment on chords with all six strings up all of the scales. Up the octave and that meant a fairly wide ability to accompany something., so he lent me his guitar, taught me the notes, lent me the music, taught me all of the chords, how to make them. And I

02:00 avidly studied this in the Maka Sura camp, that’s where I started. Not Yeaarmarght camp, Yeaarmarght, and strangely enough you could get guitar strings in, because they were very musical in Java, huge supplies of musical instruments and strings and so I could always get guitar string . And so he taught me how to play all of the chords and how to put them into accompaniment, in melodies and things like that.

02:30 And he provided me with a lot of relief, a lot of get-away-from-it sort of business because they are a pretty harmonious guitar, the Spanish guitar. And in one of the concerts in one of the camps I accompanied four Dutch singers in a quartet. One of the songs they sang was “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” remember that one?

03:00 And I learnt the accompaniment for that. So I had the doubtful honour of having played in a concert the accompaniment on a Spanish guitar which my wife didn’t believe me when I told her. She said, “Oh you’re kidding.” And I said, “No. I did. I played accompaniment.” And I brought it home and I played it quite a lot at home for quite a long period but gradually I got involved in my work and other things

03:30 and it went by the board. The kids weren’t interested in Spanish guitars, they wanted photographs of them holding it, but that was all. And so it has remained up in its cupboard, nobody dare touch it anyway, it is sacrosanct. It is the memories they bring back, they are wonderful. Wonderful memories.

Did you tell you wife a lot about your experiences?

04:00 Only the good parts, the laughing parts, the funny parts like making electric stoves and boiling water on them and nearly getting caught by the Jap guard going through looking for a radio, he didn’t recognise my big electric stove built up off the ground, he went straight past it looking for a wireless, if he had have found that I would have been thrashed, I would have been really beaten up but he went straight past it.

04:30 Water boiling in it and I was absolutely petrified, I couldn’t believe it. They have a one-track mind, if they are looking for a radio they don’t see anything else. And the other electric one I made as a toaster, a full brick made into a toaster and I used to run the wires up and hitch them up to the wires going through the atap hut at the top. Every time

05:00 you wanted to use it, you got the two wires with hooks on the end going on to two different wires, and you would go and put one on and the other would go on with a bit of a flash like that, but then it was connected you see that was your switch hanging the hooks on the live wires. And then the toaster would glow and you would make a bit of toast off the bread we were getting in those days, could make some toast. And you could also boil your dixie on it too and that was great fun making those things.

05:30 One day my mate – I was out on a work party and I came back – and the whole thing is wrecked. My toasting stove is wrecked, coil springs are stretched out and there was a knife welded to the, sometimes when it didn’t light you had to prod the connections and they would spark and they would weld together and they would light. And the knife I used to prod it with had a shaft that went right through the handle. Metal top – right up the top.

06:00 And he was prodding away right on this thing and all of a sudden he got the live part of it and he got earthed and the whole thing went up through his arm, over he went . And he ripped the whole thing apart, ruined my contraption and there is the knife lying connected to the things and he broke the circuits. So that caused a bit of fun in the hut. Little things like that were right, they gave us a little bit of

06:30 pleasure in being able to use them.

Can we just stop for a moment. Just give us a knock when you’re ready, I am just going to bounce around a bit more John in this last tape, there is a couple of things I wanted to ask you about, more general questions,

07:00 **before you had that six weeks of rehabilitation what weight were you when you were finally liberated?**

I would have been about eleven stone,

How much weight had you lost?

At one stage I had lost about, I used to be thirteen and a half and I had gone down to about ten, that was a low peak when food was short and I was

07:30 working.

You were telling me the stories of the snake and one time you got it over the guards?

Yes working out in the paddocks by the rice paddies one day I saw this green tree snake going through the grass one day so I decided I would catch it and see what it was like. It didn't appear to be venomous by the shape of its head. But I caught it

08:00 and it was about two foot six long, pretty snake. And so I played around with it and finally I had it going up my arm on the ground as it went to go off I would go and put my arm in front of it like this and eventually it went up my arm and right up over my shoulder and neck, it wasn't venomous I had proved that. Went around my neck and I suddenly had a thought. I had a straw, had with some straw things around the band.

08:30 So I took my hat off and I got the snake back and I fed its head into the straw around the hat. And it took to it very nicely and straight in and came out of the other side of it its head, just doing this. And so I put it on and shortly after that we had count to go back to the camp. Now they didn't see it

09:00 the first time, we got on our trucks turned up at the camp, got out of it again and this time when the guard came past counting, this snake put its head out and went like this and he saw the snake this time. He let out a yell and he jumped back about six feet. Petrified, absolutely petrified, "Go away, go away. Go away." He counted me but he wouldn't come near me

09:30 wouldn't touch me, wouldn't bash me, "Go away." Which I did. I walked off the parade back to my hut. I thought I beat that fellow with my snake, I think I will wear it out again on a working party and see if I get any privileges. It didn't get down to that though. I thought I would have a joke with the fellows in the hut now, so I went back to my hut with the snake in my hat and I took my hat off and sat it on the bunk and the fellows are sitting

10:00 there talking, and I sort of encouraged the snake out and presently he came out of it and he was on the bamboo moving across the bamboo and I emptied the hut in two minutes straight. There was nobody in the hut., they had gone. "Get rid of that B-- thing! Get rid of it out of there!" So I thought, "Oh well, I may as well" I took him out and put him under the wire. But for once in my time the Japs left me well alone.

10:30 **What sort of mind games did you play between the Australian soldiers and the Japanese?**

When I was in charge of the physical welfare of the Maka Sura camp there was a Christian Jap there, Christian. And he approached me and talked about being a Christian and in our discussions, it was quite a friendly discussion between the guard and myself, he was one of the guards who was not dangerous,

11:00 and he pointed out to me that he didn't agree with what was going on, but in any situation he had to be very careful what he did but he wanted me to know that he was a Christian and didn't agree with this treatment and things like this. Where were we at then?

I was thinking about, that's all right, you can tell the story.

11:30 And I through him was able to get in badminton sets, it was a more fit camp than the rest. I got in badminton sets so the fellows could play badminton and fitten themselves up. I got in volleyball equipment and nets and I got in quite a few lollies and sweets and things through him. Came through my hands and I could dish them out to the fellows that were doing them and we set up our little sport thing and we could have competitions.

12:00 And that lifted the morale quite a bit too, having somebody like that who would bring these things in for you and help you create a better environment.

I was thinking more psychological warfare between you and the Japanese guards. Were there sort of little, you might exaggerate a salute or make a remark ironically or did you have

12:30 **code names? Certain nicknames you gave the guards?**

Yes we did we had some nicknames for the guards, I can't offhand remember any particular ones. The guard called Mori was called Bamboo Mori because he was always hitting people with the

13:00 long bamboo stick about that thick. "Get along, get up!" So we called him bamboo, but I don't know if he knew what that was all about. But the bamboo stick came in very handy when the physical training parades were on with the music playing, a lot of the fellows just wanted to stay in their huts, I couldn't get them out, they just ignored me, and so the Japs all of a sudden put their own system

13:30 in and I had to laugh, I am standing out there at the point where they are coming on to the parade ground to form up to do PT. And I hear this commotion in the huts and all of a sudden fellows start streaming out the doors of the huts, with Japs behind with bamboo sticks belting their bottoms and shoulders, the Japs went straight through the huts and cleaned out every man who

14:00 wasn't outside. It was absolute pandemonium the way they came out of these places. Wouldn't come out for me but would come out for a Jap and a stick.

You met other prisoners, the civilian internees and the Dutch, and the girl that had given you the sewing kit at the, when you were liberated, what had happened to her, how was their internment?

14:30 Bare you referring to the Dutch girl who had brought me the sewing kit, that one?

Yes.

Her husband was transferred down to the Ambon area of Java, Ambon area and she was left in Java. Now she became an internee in a goal,

15:00 he went down there and he came back into my camp with the very sick group that came back. And I connected up with him again, he hadn't heard from his wife and she hadn't heard from him, no communication. When I saw her at the end of the war she hadn't any idea for the three and a half years where her husband was, no idea at all. I was able to tell her where he was, I knew

15:30 where he had gone to, Singapore. And I said, "I am sure." She didn't know where to head to, you see? So I said, "He has gone to Singapore and if you go to Singapore you will find him." And I had a letter later from a ship en route to Holland from Singapore telling me that she had found her husband in Singapore, everything was right, everything was lovely and

16:00 thanks very much for the help. So that ended up all right, but the Dutch wife and her two daughters and her husband they became part of the Dutch community, all going back to Holland.

When you look at photographs of yourself before you joined up, that photograph we will take a photograph of that when we finish, but when you finished do you look at that and

16:30 **recognise yourself, were you still the same person before captivity?**

I did have a newspaper photograph of me when I was posted to the victory contingent after the war, I got a photograph in the Melbourne Herald, and I looked at that and compared it

17:00 with the other photograph and you could see a big difference in the two. But I think you would recognise me all right.,

I am not talking about physically I mean you had had fifteen per cent of your life taken away by this experience, how had you changed mentally, emotionally, spiritually?

Well spiritually I became a, not an atheist, but certainly agnostic.

17:30 I didn't believe, I didn't just accept what religion told me at all. Experience told me that things that I had been taught were not really true.

In the camp?

In the camp.

What in particular made you become an agnostic?

I could not

18:00 accept the teachings of the Bible, the moral teachings. I could not accept at that particular time forgiveness was not in my mind anywhere, no forgiveness. I had also lost a confidence in humanity because I used regard humanity in sort of a

18:30 flat fashion, humanity, now I sort of regard humanity in depth. I realised that there were so much different depth of humanity. There was the good, there was the fairly good and there was a very big layer of rotten, humanity was rotten. And I could not

19:00 accept that all of this humanity that I had learned about physically myself and heard about confirmed in other areas, I could not accept that all of this humanity could be put together on the basis of: 'forgive the person, he know not what he does'. I just said, "I cannot accept that." I will not

19:30 be able with the rest of my time, of my period of time, I will not be able to accept that the leaders of the world who brought on all of the misery they brought on and the way they did it, they disregarded

20:00 life, I could not accept that these people could ever be accepted into the sort of humanitarian mass that is the ideal that's placed in religion.

Have you been able to forgive your gaolers your captors?

No I don't forgive the, what they did at all. I don't forgive what they did at all. The only thing I can say about that

20:30 is I can understand what they did or why they did it but in no way can I accept it, in no way can I accept it because they did not have human values. Did not have real human values. In other words their attitude towards humanity was very expendable according to the circumstances, very expendable.

21:00 **What would you say to the comment that there is a little bit of Japanese prison gaoler in everybody?**

I could, I would comment on that to the extent that that could be so with members of communities who have far flung ancestry set-ups behind them.

21:30 I tend to classify people in that particular situation. I would think that anybody whose roots go back centuries such as the Japanese, Chinese, British, Europeans and others, I can accept that

22:00 there could be a little bit of Japanese in all of those people. Because they came through the ages when certain values existed, they came through the ages when certain values existed, they all came through those ages. But if we come down to countries like Australia, newly developed communities with no deep background, the people who come to our country have got deep backgrounds, but they have left those and joined our country.

22:30 And they gradually lose the line and the values that go through it back to the deep past. If they leave the country that they belong to and have belonged to all of those years, and leave their country, their lineages go back fifteen centuries or whatever it might be, any people in that group I think might have that factor that you said a little bit of Japanese could be in them.

23:00 **Not Japanese but Japanese, the type, the thing that would create that reaction between,**

Not necessarily Jap but a they have got a common quality which can be common to them, but each of those people still have that Japanese or that Chinese or that other race,

23:30 they still have that long ancestries and I think they have lasted all of these years.

I mean these Japanese gaolers were so inhumane, they treated you so inhumanely. That that could happen to any race perhaps, do you think, anybody could do that?

That's right, going back deep into

24:00 history it was all warlike, it would be very difficult to find back a thousand year, two thousand years countries who loved each other and got on well with each other because they were all fighting each other to either take over the benefits they had in their country, or because it's a tribal character,

24:30 which tribes are always fighting between each other for all sorts of reasons which today we wouldn't accept, we wouldn't accept that.

Again a general question, once you were all released from prison, while you came back to a family, were there men who didn't make it in the community, once they had come back to Australia, the prisoners of war? Those who really couldn't cope with what they

25:00 **had been through, what had happened?**

I did a study once at the request of my doctor, it was to do with the Vietnamese War, Vietnamese [War] Veterans, and a book had been written by a man, an officer like you're interviewing me, he interviewed Vietnam Veterans. And he took the veterans from different bases, different family bases, and the doctor was very critical of the

25:30 Vietnam Veterans' attitude towards things. And so I read the book, it was a book written completely unbiased, dealing with facts and you work it our yourself, he didn't draw conclusions. And when I had read the book I came to the conclusion that there were soldier's lives covered in that book and I found that the ones who had troubles

26:00 after Vietnam mostly came from broken family systems and they were conscripts and men who were volunteers and from good family backgrounds like I had, they came through and they're not in any trouble.

Were there people who committed suicide that you knew of afterwards?

Yeah that's right.

Specifically people you know who did that?

Yes my explanation or

26:30 interpretation of that was that they started from a bad base and a volunteer soldier from a good background was a very different soldier from a conscription base with broken father or mother, father who was not interested in his son and all of these troubled areas. He did not have the necessary

character

27:00 built into him by an environment like these other people had had. Irrespective of whatever his genes were, at the very beginning not the same, not the same as the good background, educated and so on.

What got you out of your breakdown?

Well first of all it happened to me in Mount Gambier,

27:30 I had a collapse, I didn't know what it was all about, we had three children and I couldn't work, I couldn't do anything. I had bad repercussions from the war in those days, I was always back in Singapore in the bombing. And that was in '52.

Dreams or when you were awake?

Not dream, no not dreams. I was sent back to

28:00 Adelaide from diagnosis and report for a week in Dawes Road [hospital] and they said, "I am sorry there is nothing wrong with you. I can't find anything wrong with you, perfect." And I said, "Does that mean that my problem is my own?" and they said, "Yes." "What do I do?" "Go and see a psychiatrist at Mount Gambier." I did. He said, "Change your job." Never asked me any questions. "Change your job."

28:30 I changed my job ten times in the next five years.

What were your symptoms? What were the manifestations for you personally?

I couldn't settle down to anything, I was disturbed, if I was driving along the road and a I saw a dead magpie on the side of the road I would go up in the air like that. Anything to do with death.

What did the magpie signify?

Because when I had my breakdown I went through a death reaction. I thought I was dying. I fell out of my car, I pulled my car up on the side of the road,

29:00 I had this huge fear come over me came from nowhere, it terrified me so deeply I can't describe it. I stopped the car and I crawled out on to the side of the road and as I did this kneeling down on my hands, going past my mind was my family, a coffin and I was dying, gone finished. Absolutely ripped apart by this terrible fear that was going

29:30 through me, indescribable fear. And a passing motorist picked me up, one drove my car to Millicent and the other took me to a hospital. Straight in to see a doctor, up on to the table, he said, "You have had a very big shock. What has happened?" I said, "I don't know what's happened." I told him what I had been through. He checked me and said, "All of your vital statistics are good, you're sound as a bell. Don't be afraid,

30:00 you're safe, everything is good." I said, "So what's the matter?" He said, "I don't know. You have had a terrible shock. What did it?" I said, "I don't know. It just happened out of the blue." And I went into hospital for the day with hotwater bags and brandy to calm me down for the day and I got taken home that night to my young family. And I settled down and the next day I thought, "Well I had better go out to work," which I

30:30 thought I had better get ready to go to work. And all of a sudden sitting at the kitchen table over me came this fear again. And I just broke out crying, I didn't know what was the matter, this terrible hopeless fearful thing, I can't describe it just a deep fear. And I was like this for about four or five days and so they sent me off to Adelaide for diagnosis.

31:00 And while in there, in hospital every morning, 9 o'clock, I started to get all stirred up, restless, I got up to go and have my shower, I would walk around, I was repeating exactly what I did in Singapore after that first bombing raid, doing exactly the same thing. Going through the same period, until 11 o'clock, 11 o'clock it all disappeared and I was perfectly normal.

31:30 An exact replica of it, Rob.

Extraordinary.

I couldn't get over just how true it was and how the repeat was. And I explained it to the doctors and they just shook their heads. None of them said "Well, that could be this," or they could be, none of them said that, none of them. And I went to my psychiatrist in Mount Gambier and he never

32:00 asked me like you have today, what happened to me, what took place. No one asked me until five years ago, that's '95, that's 50 years ago after '45, 50 years, that was the first time that a psychiatrist in Adelaide took me right through the whole thing, and she said, "You are

32:30 post traumatic, PTSD. And you have been for 52 years." That's what was happening to me. I grew out of it eventually by reading good books, associating with good people and I gradually understood what had happened, worked it out.

John is there any particular smells or tastes or sounds that take you back to the

33:00 **time when you were a prisoner of war?**

I think the one thing that affects me most is to see a picture with Japanese in it. I shortly after the war Chips Rafferty was in a film call, something Alice? What was it called?

A Town Like Alice?

Yes A Town Like Alice and I was petrified. I had to get up and leave the set, watching the Japs

33:30 on the set, I just couldn't do it. I just had to walk out.

Is it just pictures? Do you feel something if you see a Japanese in the street?

It is all right if I see a Japanese person, but if see a Japanese solider, whatever he is, on film or anywhere it immediately gets me, a Japanese soldier in uniform and that's why I had trouble watching Changi.

34:00 **The TV documentary that was on recently?**

When I see a Japanese soldier in uniform something grabs me in here straight away. Upsets me immediately. If I see a Japanese walking in the street, no problem.

How did you get over that 52 years of PTSD? Have you or you just deal with it?

Well I managed to conquer it and climb back over the five years. We lost everything we had in that five years. We lost everything. Three children, new car, house

34:30 everything. And I was so unsettled I had several jobs, made just enough money to live on, we lost our car, we lost our home, we lost our money. Christmas '54, we had ten pounds left for Christmas '54, ten pounds left. And I was at the bottom of the barrel at that particular stage, with three children. And I started out then reading

35:00 very good books on my sort of problems.

But there was no professional help available at all?

No they all took the same track every time I went to see somebody, they all took the same track and I knew it wasn't the right track and it didn't help me, so I gave it up, I gave it away because none of them asked me what happened to me.

Did you talk to other veterans, other POWs about your experience?

35:30 Not very much, no, I didn't speak to them about it. I am afraid at that particular time I didn't like to admit what had happened to me. I didn't want to say, "Well, I have had a breakdown." I didn't want to say that. I tend to keep it inside with me, because people were saying, my

36:00 manager said, "Look John, you have only got to snap out of it." My brother-in-law said, "I think you have only got to snap out of it." And I was listening to these people telling me to snap out of it and wishing to God they could get in my position and try and snap out of it because it was not possible to snap out of it, you had to grow out of it, grow and understand. And I

36:30 joined the Legal and General Insurance Company with a lot of young fellows, young groups and they were progressive, they were successful, hadn't been in the services and I got with these people and it rubbed off on me. And all of a sudden I can be like them, all I have got to understand that is what's wrong with me is understanding what happened to me, and I started to understand

37:00 what had taken place. Especially reading the very good books by leading Americans and people like that. They enabled me to see through what I was going through and see why.

Did your wife understand what you were going through?

I don't think she understood until later on, but I think she accepted that this was due to what I had been through, she accepted it and

37:30 she held the fort for a good four or five years, with the kids she held everything together. And after this period I finally decided I was ready, I felt confident, I was like in prison camp, I have got to have a goal, I got back to that philosophy, get a goal, work out how you get there and go and do it. And remember you're not going to die, there is nothing the matter with you,

38:00 you're safe, you're secure. And I did that. Not easy for a start but over four years all of a sudden I was out and in control of myself after four years. That was 1961, '57. '57.

And yet you still had some symptoms several years ago?

Oh yes I still had at times this thing threatening to come back on me. And do you know what stopped it? The fear of it stopped it.

38:30 The fear of having it happened again evened the balance and it didn't happen to me again. And so I knew then at that stage that I was out of that danger area.

You could manage it?

I could manage it but it wasn't until then.

How has your wife managed her time when you were a POW? How had she coped?

She worked, she had a good job, she worked where she used to work before we got married.

39:00 She lived for eight months as I said not knowing where I was. Finally got cards going between us, I got all of those records. The Japanese controlled cards, I have got all of those records, she got the first one in August, eight months after in August. The first thing she knew about me. And we got little bits and pieces backwards and forwards after that about once a year.

39:30 **Getting towards the end looking back on your experience what would you change if anything?**

How far back from?

As far as your POW experience I mean do you look on that as lost time that you would rather change or do you look on it as even a positive experience? How do you look back on that now from this distance?

Well I think as a result of the POW experience

40:00 I was able to handle things that when I was younger before that I didn't handle if problems arose or I could work them out better, I could look at them better in deeper perspective. I realised that

40:30 after what I had been through and succeeded with, I realised that I always had a bit of an inferiority complex about things, how well could I do it? Would I be successful? Things like that. But I think that cured me because the things I had to do in prison camp and go away with and did them left me with the realisation that I could do a lot more things better than I thought I could. And that's what made me take on life assurance management in my last

41:00 few years.

How do you feel about war?

War? Unavoidable forever. It will go on and you can't stop it.

Does it solve problems though?

Well I have come to the conclusion that was doesn't resolve anything.

41:30 All it does is shift power. It just shifts power thing around the place. If I was talking to them then.

This will be seen by someone in fifty years' time.

I would say to them I am not surprised at where you are, human values have deteriorated over those years,

42:00 the wars haven't stopped.

INTERVIEW ENDS