Australians at War Film Archive

Kenneth Wilkinson (Ken) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:38 **Great, OK Ken, here we go. And if you could just take us through that life arc that we were discussing earlier and the summaries of your life so far?**

I was born on the 3rd of July 1925, in Brighton, about a mile as the crow flies from where we are right now. And

01:00 I can remember back, when I was about three years of age, I found a penny in the back yard, put it in a tobacco tin, and tried to leave home. And I walked up to the bus stop and some lady recognised me, and sent me, took me home again. So in those days, I can remember the Depression very well, because our family, I was from a large family, I was the 7th child, all the others were about two

01:30 years apart, but I was seven years from the last sister, and my brother, my eldest brother was 17 when I was born, so there was a fair range, and a big family. And later we moved up to North Brighton, not far from the railway station there, and that's when the Depression hit us. And oh, my father was out of work for just a short time fortunately. My eldest brother kept a job all his working life with the same company, so he

02:00 helped to support us there for a while, so we managed to struggle through. And I went to Brighton State School on Wilson Street, Brighton, it's now called Brighton Primary. And the 6th Grade, my mother had me auditioned at a church, All Saints, East St Kilda, to be a choir boy there, and hopefully get a scholarship to Caulfield Grammar, which I did, and I spent four years at Caulfield Grammar,

02:30 and finished my education there. During my time, I became aviation minded, and did all the subjects mentioned in the school diary to hopefully become a cadet at the Air Force College at Point Cook. However the war came along in 1940, and that was the last year of my schooling, the intermediate certificate. Of course it was much easier to get into the air force, because they were calling for so many people.

03:00 But I got air minded in 1938, I think it was, when I was in hospital with a problem, my mother was in Sydney on holidays, and my sister and father got me put into a little hospital in Brighton here, and she brought me a library book about First World War aces and fighter pilots, and I was immediately hooked. So I read many, many books on that, and I joined the Australian Air League, and then when the air training course started

03:30 during the war, I joined that and I was first to join in the Number 5 Squadron Brighton. And we went to parades every Saturday afternoon, and school at Brighton Technical College where we learnt Morse code and brushed up on maths, trigonometry and what not. So when it came time to turn 18, we were pretty well trained, so we got sort of preference over others coming into, in getting into the air force quickly.

04:00 And I served, did my training on Tiger Moths, at Somers first to do our academic training for three months, where you select to be either a pilot or a navigator or a wireless operator or an air gunner. Fortunately I was selected for pilot training, and then went to Western Junction in Tasmania, which is the main Launceston airport, that was our training area. And then to Wirraways at Deniliquin, advanced training.

04:30 And then fortunately I was selected to go to Mildura for training as a fighter pilot. Of the 48 who graduated, only about half of us went to Mildura, the rest of us went to be flying instructors or staff pilots in other areas. But of the crew that went to Mildura, many were scrubbed, as not being up to the standard required. And those of us who managed to struggle through were posted up to

05:00 squadrons either Kittyhawks, Boomerang or Spitfire Squadrons, in my case Kittyhawks to 77th Squadron, in the islands. And I stayed on in the air force for about, a bit over a year, after the war, I was an Air Traffic Control Officer, in charge of flying control at Townsville and Point Cook. And at Point Cook, I decided I was not doing any flying,

05:30 which I wanted to do, so I decided to take my discharge and go back to where I, the company Hoyts Theatres Limited where I'd worked, when I left school for a while. And then I changed jobs for a bit, until I settled down into a, I wanted to get into the selling field, the sales field, which I did. And I ended up being in the Safety Equipment Protective Clothing Field for oh, 31 years or so, until a

06:00 heart attack forced me to retire early at the age of 57, and changed my lifestyle completely. I'd been a heavy smoker during the war years, we smoked heavily, we were issued with cigarettes and stuff. So I worked in that Safety Company as, starting as a sales rep, but I was Sales Manager, Sales Director, Marketing Director, in fact, Sales and Marketing was my main thing.

06:30 It was my job to get, and we formed a national set-up, with branches interstate. We had seven branches all together. And we were one of the leading pioneering companies, really, in that field. We also got into the marine, life jacket, buoyancy vest market, and became, probably the largest manufacturer in the finish, through advertising and having our own sales force in the field, Australia

07:00 wide. So it was a very interesting area, and I was sad that, I had the nasty heart attack, well three attacks to be quite honest. And then, of course at the time it happened, the company was being sold to an English company, and I was to be the Australian advisor to the English, and of course, I missed out, they didn't want a broken down Executive. So I had to just take retirement, and

07:30 live my life, as I've done for 21 years, which has been pretty good. I had open heart surgery 21 years ago, and they did a good job, and with medication, I'm still soldiering on, so to speak. So in retirement, I've been able to play bowls, and fiddle around, do a bit of gardening that sort of thing, and keep myself occupied. So that's about the size of it.

08:00 **That's great, excellent, that's a great life arc and you did it just as we wanted, so congrats. So now we'll just, we'll, we'll start at the beginning, and tell us a bit about your mother and father, and those times growing up?**

Well, my mother, when I was born, she didn't make the hospital, I was born in the house actually.

08:30 And, oh Mum, having seven kids was pretty used to the business, so she, I don't think any problems. But as I mentioned, I recall when I was three, and my days of growing up, see the Depression was, our family was very badly affected by that Depression. And I can remember going to school with holes in my shoes and patched pants sort of thing. I wasn't the only one, there was so many kids there,

09:00 and their parents were in difficult positions. Because the unemployment rate was about a third, you know, 30 odd percent or more, which was dreadful. Fortunately, you know, my father, he was, he'd come from South Australia originally, and he'd worked for a contracting company in Brighton, and did so, the rest of his working days. He was a pretty healthy fellow, he died at 84.

09:30 And my mother, she died when she was on her 88th birthday, in May 1974, and she was a great mother to keep a big brood like that. As I mentioned before, my eldest brother worked with the same, the Gibson Chemical Company, which is still in existence, very strong company, and he had a good job there for all his working life. My next brother, he was

10:00 badly affected by the Depression, he had to go to the country and help his future father-in-law, they opened a gold mine up at, up near Kyneton. And they tunnelled into the mountainside, and they did get gold, enough to get food to survive on. In fact as a kid, someone took me up there, and I remember going into the tunnel, and staying in the log cabin that they'd built on the site, sort of thing. And they'd pushed this truck, you know, into the tunnel

10:30 and out it loaded, on wooden rails, not metal rails, they did it hard. But they got sufficient food into their mouths. My next brother. Oh unfortunately we lost a, long before I was born, when my parents had a farm at Alexandria, they lost an older sister, she died in a tragic accident on the farm. And the next brother Lionel, he

11:00 also, he was an apprentice when he left school to an engineering company, they did road, bridge building, I think. And when the Depression hit, he lost his job, lost his apprenticeship, and he ended up working on a dairy farm in the country, somebody took him on, and for years he lived up there for ten shillings a week, and his keep sort of thing, and we hardly saw him, he wrote every week and Mum wrote, he had a dreadful life.

11:30 And the same brother went on to be, join the AIF [Australian Imperial Force], he went to Darwin and then to Ambon in the 22/21st Battalion, which was trapped on Ambon, and they were terribly treated by the Japanese. In fact, they had the worst prisoner of war record of all the prisoners of the Japs, where they lost two thirds of the whole battalion died, either in torture or just

12:00 malnutrition, or whatever, and only one third of them came back. Whereas in the whole of the Japanese prisoners of war, two thirds came back. So Ambon copped a terrible thing. So he died six weeks before the war ended. And I wasn't all that far away when it happened. And my next, my sister, she's nine years older than me, Shirley, she's still alive, she's a widow,

12:30 and living in Melbourne. And my next sister to me, Joyce, she married an American during the war, and I was to be best man at the wedding, but I couldn't get leave from Deniliquin, so another brother-in-law

stood in. And, so Joyce moved to America in 1946, ’47, and lived at Portland, Oregon, and lived a very happy life with her husband, and one

13:00 daughter, and my mother went over there, and brothers and sister went over there, and sort of stayed with them over the years. But her husband died some 15 or 16 years ago, and she was widowed, and just with the one daughter, who didn’t have any children, but she’s near her mother now and her mother’s an invalid unfortunately. So we keep in touch by phone,

13:30 and writing. And then there was me. And as I say, the, the schooling, I had the best education of all the family, and I was grateful to them, it helped me in the air force, of course, and helped me in my working life. But.

Which, which school did you go to?

Well firstly Brighton

14:00 Primary, as it’s now called, in Wilson Street, Brighton, up until the 6th Grade. And then I got a scholarship through singing, a full scholarship to Caulfield Grammar School, which was hard work in those days. I lived in North Brighton, not far from the railway station, but I had to travel to the church every week morning and Saturday morning, choir practice started at quarter past eight

14:30 til quarter past nine, and the church had an arrangement with the school, that we would miss the first period each day, and that was that. But then Thursday night, we’d have to rush home from school, do our homework, and then catch the train back to Windsor to do full choir practice with the men. And then on, sometimes on Saturday afternoons, there were weddings, and we were paid for those, we got two shilling and six pence, that’s 25 cents, that was a lot of money in those days.

15:00 In fact, Mum would keep a shilling for herself towards the housekeeping, and I’d have the one and six pence, and we’d live up, after the wedding, and go down the fish shop and have fish and chips and a chocolate coated ice-block, or something, and we’d blow that nine pence of it, in one hit. But it was appreciated. And then on Sundays of course, we had to travel to the church for the morning ceremony, and the evening, Evensong, so it was a

15:30 full-on job as a choir boy, but we were professionally trained, we were taught the theory of music, and we sang some great music, I love the church music, the Hallelujah Chorus and all those things, I was one of the soloists too. And in my last year, 1940, I was the head boy of the choir, and there were 20 odd boys in the choir, large, there were sectors and calls for the quality of the music,

16:00 and voices and so forth. And my voice broke, with about three months to go, I think, but the choir master kept me going, until I finished my intermediate certificate. And he was a very good bloke, a strict disciplinarian but he was there to teach the boys to grow up, and he taught us well, and we respected him, as we respected the

16:30 church, the Arch Deacon Schofield who was in charge at the time, or most of the time. And so those days are still with me, at Caulfield Grammar I wasn’t a great pupil, I had to work hard and study and, but I got through, and passed all the subjects that I did. And participated in sports until I injured my knee, and was in plaster for a couple of months,

17:00 which set me back playing footy and cricket and all the rest of it. So I missed out on that, for the last couple of years of schooling, however.

Is music still a big part of your life?

When I left school, I was very much orientated towards church music, and I didn’t go on for my sister’s swing band type of music. But in 1940 when I started work at Hoyts Theatre,

17:30 sorry 1941, started work at Hoyts Theatres, I was an office boy. Even then it was hard to get a job, that was the lowest of the low, I had an intermediate certificate which was reasonable in those days. I suddenly heard Artie Shaw and his Orchestra playing “Frenesi.” and my music world changed. I just got the hang of the swing band arrangement, and loved the great music of, Artie Shaw

18:00 was my favourite, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, oh, I could name them all, and still is, I believe a great era of music, even the young people now, starting to sing the songs that were created in those days. The Big Bands have gone, unfortunately, because they are so expensive to run and it’s a different era. But they just made such wonderful co-ordinated music, and I like brass bands, and I love music generally.

18:30 I’m not into heavy classics, but I like classical music. And some of the stirring English music that we hear from time to time. If I might say to going back a bit to my school days, the state school particularly, every Monday the flags were raised, the Union Jack and the Australian flag, and we sang “God Save the Queen.” and we were children of the Empire, the Empire was a very, very big thing. Our school papers that came

19:00 out regularly, were all Empire this, and teachers constantly said, “Now don’t forget when you look at the world map, where you see red, that is the British Empire.” And it was drummed into us, and see everybody were, King George the Fifth was in power, on the throne. And I might say, that in 1935 I think it was when he died, all the shops had,

19:30 were decked out in purple and black ribbon and streamers, you name it, everybody was in mourning for the death of King George the Fifth, who was the King of the British Empire, and so it was. And Caulfield Grammar was also very Empire minded, and some of our teachers there, masters, were in the First World War. Our physics master, he'd been gassed a bit, and he was a bit weak in the lung

20:00 department. So from schooling, as I said, I went to Hoyts Theatres Limited, and after six months as junior office boy, I was then senior office boy for six months, and then I went into the office as a junior clerk, and did internal auditing. Hoyts was a very large company, Americanised, and their systems were unbelievable, they, there were no computers, there were so many girls

20:30 in the head office there, typists, stenographers, and comptometers, and every week that company knew the profit or loss of each theatre that they owned. And they had theatres in just about every suburb, mostly in Melbourne, not so many in Sydney oddly enough. But on the city theatres, they knew what was going on all the time, and it was so much, there was so much on the ball, I guess they were all American systems.

21:00 And it was mostly owned by the Fox Organisation, but it was a great grounding experience for commercial life, as I was to be involved in later on.

How big a part did the church play in your growing up?

Well, I'd been to church so many times, that when I finished my church and scholarship, I was a bit sick of going to church. I knew all the routines, the anthems,

21:30 the, as I say, I enjoyed singing. But we had too much church compared to all my mates, who were not choir boys and they could do what they liked on Sundays and Saturdays, when I was anchored to that scholarship. And I might add, in those days, the private school, well Caulfield Grammar's fees for non-scholarship boys was ten guineas per term, that's three terms per year. Now that's, what's that, $21

22:00 a term, that's unbelievable, you wouldn't buy anything for $21. But the rule of thumb I believe, if a man, a Father was earning say ten guineas a week, he could afford to send one child to a private school, like Caulfield Grammar. So it was worth a lot. And of course you had the, you know, proud of being in the uniform, in those days, you wore caps, I've still got a cap kicking around.

22:30 **Were you sad to see the demise of the Empire through the years?**

Yes, it's hard, I'm still an Empire man, and as we'll probably come to later, when we joined the air force, we were part of the Empire, it was called the Empire Air Training Scheme, EATS. But all fellows, young fellows taken from all over the Empire, to rally to England. mother England, which was in danger.

23:00 And there was no question about it, I suppose, 99% of the population thought the same, hence all the AIF fellows were all volunteers, they didn't have to go to war. They would have been called up in the militia, but so many volunteers went overseas pretty quickly. And in the air force and navy, you had to be volunteers, of course. It was only the militia, the local militia that they could conscript

23:30 you for service in Australia, and mandated territories, which was New Guinea and the islands there. So we, looked upon as being very old-fashioned now and fuddy duddy because we're so Americanised nowadays. But when you work it out, the Americans are our cousins, and the British people, changed a bit now, they're our heritage, really. And all our Parliaments

24:00 and things, and the Royal Australian Air Force is all based on Royal Air Force standards. And the navy, all these things, are all British trained, you might say. So I'm a bit of a, a pro-Pom at heart. I mean there are good Poms [British] and there are bad Poms, there are good Australians and not so good Australians. So, but I see no harm in it. Most of my friends,

24:30 my vintage, still think similar to myself.

Earlier, you said one of your siblings died in a, in a tragic accident, could you explain it further and what happened?

Well, I wasn't, my mother would never talk about it, it happened a long. See, she would have been 13 years older than me, it was a shooting accident, a gun. On all farms, you know, guns, a gun went off and she was killed, and very tragic,

25:00 hence my mother not wanting to talk about it. She was in hospital at the time having another a baby, it was double tragedy. However, she, the rest of them survived, apart from losing the one in the war, and there's still three of us left at the moment. I'm 78, coming up for 79, I'm the baby.

Was that your first brush with death, when

25:30 **your sibling died, was that your first time?**

Oh well I wasn't born even, when that happened. I didn't know until I saw photos of my older brothers and sisters on the wall in my sisters' room, and I said, "Who's that?" And she, my mother wouldn't talk about it. I was able to find out something from my sisters, you know. They didn't want to talk about it, it was so tragic.

What was it like growing up with such a big family?

Well I guess

26:00 I'd have to say I was a bit spoilt, even in tough times. I can remember going at the state school, we had an excursion organised to go down to Stony Point, and on the ferry over to Cowes, a one day excursion. And you had to have, I think it cost four shillings for the train, for the whole day. Well my mother scratched up the four shillings, this was about 1936. And my brother, who had been gold mining, he was back in Melbourne, he got a job,

26:30 and he used to ride his bike right out to Coburg from Brighton, would you believe, a Malvern Star, on wet days he'd catch the train. But the day of this excursion, in the darkness, he came in, when it was still dark, before he went to work, and gave me a two shilling piece, which I thought was, was terrific. Cause two bob in those days was a lot, so I had some spending money

27:00 for the day. So, as I said, that brother got a job, he was very practical, he was a good, he could make anything, build anything, fix anything, he was a very practical. Whereas my eldest brother, he was better in an office environment, he was clerical and, good hand writer. In fact, as a young fellow, he even wrote a play, I don't know whether it was ever acted upon. But he was, he had that

27:30 sort of bent. So,

Did you, did you support each other, with such a large family, you find you're supporting each other through that?

Oh yes, see most of my boyhood, the two brothers had gone away for a while, and the other brother, the eldest brother married early he was 21, and he'd gone with his wife, and he had a youngster later on. And, so at home, there was Mum, Dad, my two sisters and myself

28:00 round the table. And everything, you know, was discipline. You sat down to a meal, there was no TV [television], not even the radio was on. You sat down and you ate your meal and we, Mum was a good cook, we ate good solid square meals, and there was conversation. And so it went on. You'd hear of the day's doings. The sisters, their work,

28:30 and so forth. And playing, you know, I had a lot of mates in Brighton, in those days, there was a lot of empty paddocks around. And you'd have mates galore, you'd go to each others houses and play. And we'd build bonfires, because crackers were not banned in those days, that was a big night to look forward to. Empire Day, Empire Night, was Queens Birthday, I think it was held at. And

29:00 also November the 5th, Guy Fawkes Day, they were big cracker nights. So the kids would build bonfires in advance, with the stuff all drying out on an empty paddock, and the word would get around, it's, it'll be on tonight at such and such, you'd get some money towards some crackers. I had a billy cart, I'd go and pick up horse manure, and fill it up, and sell it to some old lady for six pence, to buy crackers, for it, you know, you did these thing, you learnt the value of money, and the value of things.

29:30 And we had a lot of fun, you know, cracker nights. And put potatoes in the fire to cook them up, and eat them, peel them, burnt skin off them and eat them. And we played cricket in the streets, football in the streets, because the cars were few and far between. There was, we came up still in the horse and cart era, there were horses clip clopping around the place. The baker came every day in a baker's cart, drawn by a horse.

30:00 The fuel merchant, he delivered wood, mallee roots and all, on horses. The milkman, during the night you'd hear clip, clop, clip, he'd be delivering milk. And, and people were so honest. Before the advent of the milk bottle, people would leave out billy cans with money in it. And the milky would just fill up half a pint, one pint, quart, whatever, and, and take the money. And some would give credit,

30:30 they'd call around every week to collect the cash or whatever, but everything was so honest. You couldn't leave anything out these days, it's sad.

Did things like that change during the Depression?

Oh, I think people got closer together. This was during the Depression and after, that people could leave money out for the milkman. Because the milkman would come in the early hours of the morning, you know, three o'clock, four, five o'clock in the morning.

31:00 So, and all the trades people delivered, you know, the butcher would deliver if you wanted it, or the grocer, they all had pushbikes. The young fellow working for the retail people would ride their bikes around, a basket in the front, and deliver your order. And the baker, I'll never forget the aroma when the bread carter opened the door at the back, the aroma of the freshly made bread, it was just beautiful, it was quality bread.

31:30 Course the war came along, and it was all changed, they had to make to a lesser standard, and it was just very poor bread, it went on for many years after the war. But nowadays, of course, they're back to making good quality bread. But you know, we ate, we managed to eat reasonably well, the plain, well, English type food, was stews and things like that. Steak was a rarity, because it was too expensive,

32:00 but you know, cooked breakfast was the go, bacon and eggs was the popular one, and toast. Eating too

much was never a problem, you didn't put on weight, because you were running, walking, exercising all the time.

Was food still available during the Depression and so on, or how tight was it?

Food?

Yes?

Oh, there's plenty of food available, if you could pay for it. But you, a bit part of the diet too,

32:30 was, was the offal things, lambs fry, which is full of goodness, and nowadays, we find it's got a bit of cholesterol in it. But if you have a certain, not too much of it, it's good for you. And tripe, what else, brains, they were all delicacies. Because the girls, the wives and mothers could trick them up, make them with gravies and things, and you know,

33:00 you appreciated you meals. But food was pretty basic, but good, good nourishment. And porridge and things like that were used.

What did you think when you first saw the cars coming on the scene?

Well sometimes we had to run for cover. I can only remember on one occasion, seeing a Stanley Steamer. You've probably heard about them, they were a car driven by steam. And it was going down Hampton

33:30 Street, just around the corner in Brighton, I saw it. And, oh other trucks with chain driven wheels, rear wheels, you know. It was, in the early days in my life, to the horse and dray we used before the advent of the trucks, and motor trucks and things, you know. Down in Brighton, actually you didn't venture far away from your home. You went to your church, before I went to be a

34:00 choir boy, All Saints Church, I lived next door to St Luke's Church in North Brighton, I was a choir boy there first. But our life revolved around our church, we weren't, my mother made me go to Sunday School, made me do this and that, and the sisters, the brothers were passed that, because they were up in the country, at this stage. But you know, I belonged to the Church of England Boys Society, we met every Friday night, played indoor basketball and indoor cricket, and see,

34:30 it was good, good fun, and it cost a penny a night, you know. It was all part of our training and discipline and carrying on. The girls had their Girls' Friendly Society to go to, and, it. There was cubs meeting there, and Scouts, Boy Scouts and all around the church. Now that church now, has been closed down, and it's now been converted into a private home. So, so things have changed.

Is sport, was sport a big part

35:00 **of your life?**

I loved my sport until I hurt my knee there for a while, but that came good, I was able to, oh later play, actually when I came back from the war, I started playing tennis, I always loved tennis. As a matter of fact, as a young kid, I coached it for a while, but I loved it, so tennis was my main game. I always followed the footy, but I only played football once I think after the war, and

35:30 I think I was using boots I'd used at school, they were a bit short, a bit small for me, and a bit uncomfortable. But I always enjoyed play, looking at the cricket matches, going. I went to the, one Test match, my Father took me to a Bradman, carried his bat overnight, so I was going to see the great Don Bradman. And the train was so loaded going along from the Sandringham to City line, that it was leaning

36:00 to one side, the springs were creaking, it was choc-a-block full of people going to this Test match, when Bradman batted. I think he went out the first couple of boys [overs], bowled, but I saw all those star players. Hammond was the Captain of the English team, Wally Hammond. And I saw O'Reilly and Fleetwood Smith, those top spin bowlers, I saw them bat, hitting the ball around the place for a short time, and then I saw them bowl for a while.

Was Bradman a

36:30 **hero of yours?**

Oh yes, he was, he was everybody's hero, everybody had heard of Don Bradman.

Was he important at that time?

Was he important?

Yes, to?

Oh yes, as a… You know, we came up with our Father's love for cricket. And they'd listen all night on the radio if our team were playing in England, even though they had to start work early in the morning, they'd listen to, up til one o'clock in the morning, listen to the BBC [British Broadcasting Commission]

37:00 broadcast, and static coming through. So it, it came through as a generational thing, a love of cricket, in

particular. And I think it's still a marvellous game, the Test cricket, it's the only game that plays for five days, lasting five days in the world, I think. It's changed a lot now, with all this one-day thing, but that has become acceptable, and most of us who were not in favour of it in the first place,

37:30 it's an exciting spectacle.

What was the MCG [Melbourne Cricket Ground] like, back then?

Well, the stand has now been pulled down and replaced, that had just been built, I think it would have been 1937. And it was all a big concrete stand, pretty big. And of course, crowded in those times. And I can remember, my Father bought me, we took a cut lunch sort of thing,

38:00 sandwiches, and he bought me a big bottle of Marchants lemonade, Marchants was the big brand name in soft drinks, in those days, and good quality stuff. And that was luxury, having a big bottle of lemonade to myself.

Were they were very fond times?

Oh yes, yes, only went that time to the cricket with the old man, and he took me to the association football, but I didn't see any league football until I came back from the war actually.

38:30 I was always a follower of South Melbourne and the Swans, and still, even though they're Sydney based. But I didn't see them play until I came back from the war, and they were playing in the Grand Final, against Carlton at the Carlton ground. I thought I was back at the war, the fellows were mowed over like ten pins, nine pins, it was a rough game, blokes were reported, and the Swans lost because they were so, they put

39:00 the dirt in, I think I'd blame them more than Carlton. But from then on, I used to watch a lot of their matches in particular, and became a member eventually of the club, before they moved to Sydney.

Was Melbourne so fanatical about sport, even back then?

Oh I'd say so yes, football and cricket. But even so, the public, they were called public schools in those days, we

39:30 now call them private schools, that's Melbourne Grammar, Wesley, Xavier, I think there was six, Geelong Grammar, Geelong College, they were the public schools. And the other private schools were like Caulfield Grammar, Brighton Grammar, Haileybury, and quite a lot of others have now gone into that other competition, and membership of that club. But now they call them private schools, and the government schools are called public, it's all gone back to front. But what I'm

40:00 getting to, every year at the annual boat races between those six schools, I think it was six, we would barrack for one of the teams, I would barrack for Melbourne Grammar. And we would wear, to our state school, we would wear their ribbons, blue, navy blue and white in my case for Melbourne Grammar. And other kids had Wesley colours, and everybody barracked for the boat race, you know, which was held then on the Yarra River, 'cause it's

40:30 closer. So things were all different, and our interests were quite, they weren't so much international, even national. Rugby, you wouldn't know what it was all about.

That's great.

40:47 **End of tape**

Tape 2

00:31 **OK turn over. Rolling. All right. Now my turn. Yeah, you did mention that, you know, the Depression years were tough, during the Depression, can you tell us how, what you'd do, what your family would do for entertainment?**

Well, the old man was always keen on a punt at the horses, and

01:00 he'd occasionally save up a few bob, and go to one of the race tracks, but not too often, well not at all in the actual Depression. But after things started to improve, he liked to have his little wager. My mother, well she didn't engage in any sport, it was a full time job sort of cooking and housekeeping and, but she did have her two sisters living in Melbourne, her younger sisters, and

01:30 they all visited each other quite frequently, and I was included, so I, you know, was taken around and enjoyed seeing my aunties and cousins and things, who were all much older than me. But the, once the brothers had gone, and the eldest brother, well he'd had a motorbike accident, and he had a bad ankle through it, and he was a bit restricted in playing sport, so he didn't kick on much in

02:00 the sporting field. And my second eldest brother, I know he came back from the country, and he took up tennis, he liked tennis. And he liked his cricket and his footy, that sort of thing.

What I mean, well clearly entertainment was a big factor in keeping the family.

Oh, picture theatres, the picture theatre, the local theatre, my Mum and Dad used to go once a week, sometimes twice a week, to the local cinema, they could walk there and walk back again.

02:30 And mother quite often went, with one of her girlfriends. And things were so different in those days. My mother, this girlfriend she used to call herself, “Oh hello Mrs Eastwood.” and Mrs Eastwood would say “Oh hello Mrs Wilkinson.” never on the first name basis, unbelievable, you wouldn’t, you’d call them anything now. But they were so genteel.

So even their own friends, they’d refer to in that way?

Yes, yes, and they were close friends, they’d visit

03:00 each other’s homes for afternoon teas and things. “Oh hello Mrs Wilkinson.” “Oh hello Mrs Eastwood.”

Is that more of an outwardly formal thing, were they more likely to do that?

That was pretty common then.

Yeah. So even if they were by themselves, they mostly like would refer to them that way.

Yes, yes.

Very unusual. Is that a regional thing in Melbourne?

Oh, I don’t know about, I think it was just a general English, probably English thing, you know, a very formal type of thing.

But

03:30 **would you find that sort of thing in the northern suburbs of Melbourne at the time?**

Oh , I don’t think I ever travelled to the northern suburbs in those days.

’Cause I am aware there was, you know, considerable cultural differences?

Oh yes, yes. Well culturally, Australia was, as they called it, a White Australia Policy, and the biggest argument in those days, was the question of religion, Protestant versus Roman Catholicism.

04:00 And out mothers, and I happened to be a Protestant, and we were told not to mix with so-and-so, he’s a Catholic. And the Catholics were told not to mix with, you know, he’s a Protestant, it was as simple as that. Like happens in Ireland, and you can’t believe it now. But the war put a finish to all that, because we were all in the thick together. And in fact, at Somers down here at the academic part of our air force training,

04:30 there was church parade on a Sunday, and they’d line up, there was 300 of us in a squadron, and there was three squadrons there at the time. And they’d call our, “Fall out all Roman Catholics and Jews.” and not many would fall out, they said they’d rather come with us to church, even though it was against their religion, they’d come to the Protestants, otherwise they’d be sent up to the cookhouse to peel potatoes or something, so that was how it was, but it changed. I mean my best mate, was born a Roman Catholic.

05:00 But he, he was kicked out of the church, because he married a Presbyterian. But we were tent mates at the war, we got our wings on the same course, and tent march in the war, and we confided in each other. And there’s something about him I might bring up later, really. But there, he’s still alive, but he’s an invalid.

Would you have actually foreseen that, I suppose you were quite young at the time, but when the war started, I don’t want to talk about the war though,

No, no.

05:30 **But when the war started did you actually foresee that in the, when you were of a more mature age, that you were more likely to have friends of a different religion?**

Well, as a kid, even though I was told not to mix with the others, I did. I mean on the train going to Windsor each day, there was, the local fish and chip shop were Italian, and the parents could hardly speak English. But the two boys went to a private Catholic school, and I was, I, they went to the

06:00 state school with me first, and I used to talk to them, we were good friends, you know. So outside of our parents sight, we were, we did mingle, there’s no question about it, it was terrible really, in fact, we’re all human beings, and we’re all Christians actually. But yet we’ve got this, it’s just like the Muslims now fighting each, it’s dreadful.

So why do you think this was the case at the time? Why did your parents have such a strong sectarian view?

06:30 That’s the way they were brought up. ’Cause the, being English of course, we were, the, and what’s his

name, King Henry the 8th, caused the breakaway from Rome, and of course, all the people reared in England and came out here, and everything, are all very Protestant minded. And of course the Germans with their Martin Luther King, he was a Protestant, of course. And so you have these factions, which is terrible. But fortunately

07:00 it's not such a big problem these days, certainly not in this country, I don't think. Not among the Christian community.

And the church obviously was a very important part of life.

Very, very important.

Tell us how it functioned with your family and yourself at the time, during the Depression and so forth?

Well, but brothers, they were gone, they were passed the church, Sunday School age, sort of thing. But my two sisters and myself went to Sunday School at St Lukes,

07:30 firstly. And they'd take me, you'd have a big, it was conducted in the afternoon in those days, and they switched to morning later on. But the sisters, they belonged to the Girls Friendly Society, and as I mentioned, I belonged to the boys thing. But I was also in the choir, and we were paid three [shillings] and four pence every quarter, as choir boys singing in that choir. We only had practice once a week

08:00 in that one, but it wasn't a professional choir, that the other one was. So you didn't have the transport to go far, you didn't have the money to catch a train or a bus to go too far either. So people lived in their own community. And the car, in a sense has destroyed the family togetherness, really.

The car?

Really, because people have wandered off into other suburbs

08:30 miles away. And we weren't too badly, because my eldest brother, he lived in a couple of different houses not far away, but then he moved to Ormond which was only a bus ride away. And the other brother, when he was married in 1936, this is the one that was in the gold mine, he lived at Bentleigh, and a bus went from our place to Bentleigh. And my sister, that's nine years older, Shirley,

09:00 she was living in Sydney for a while, but after the war they moved back to Melbourne, and she got a house in Hampton here, just in this, up the road a bit, oh, the other way. And so we weren't far from each other. But in latter years, that same sister moved out to North Balwyn, which is a long haul, even for the days of cars, it's a day's march to get there and back again. So, if you, not too many people had a car,

09:30 although in our farming days, going back to the farm days, my mother bought the first car in Alexandra, I remember, I couldn't imagine my mother driving a car, but she did. And she came from a pretty well to do family, they set them up on the farm. But I think she paid about 800 something pounds for a Maxwell car. And a fellow who I worked with years ago, oddly enough, he came from that same town, and he can remember my mother driving the car through the streets

10:00 of Alexandra.

Women, obviously women didn't drive that frequently in those days, unless they had a fair bit of money to be throwing about.

Exactly, one of my aunties, the younger aunties, she had her own car, her husband, 'cause they were a two car economy, unfortunately they went broke during the Depression. But she drove a car, a Morris Cowley, a bull nosed Morris Cowley, I can remember, but it was pretty

10:30 rare to see women, girls driving. It was rare to see men driving, actually. And, that I can remember that one of the local estate agents in North Brighton, he was a World War 1 Officer, and he had this successful company. And he drove around in a Rolls Royce, so he was doing quite well. But, but even the tradesmen, say the grocer and that, he didn't have

11:00 a car, but he delivered on pushbike, his assistant would deliver, as I said, on pushbike. So the cars didn't sort of come into quantity until after the war, and they were very hard to get. People put a deposit on a car, and they had to wait 12 months before the car was delivered, because they were all imported then, until the Holden was made in 1948, I think.

Now,

11:30 **you mentioned that, you know, from the age of 14 basically, you were interested in military aviation. And I'd like to know how much you actually knew about the First World War, as a young lad, before the Second World War started?**

Yes. Well again, the, even though I was born only what, seven years after the First World War finished, at school we were taught about

12:00 Simpson and his donkey, I can remember that story going right back, probably to the second or third grade. And Armistice Day, at least Anzac Day when it came up, we… I was disappointed, I was crook on

my father, because he didn't go to the war, I didn't realize that he had a heap of kids and he was a farmer at the time, he couldn't have gone, he needn't have gone.

When you say you were crook,

No, well other kids had medals to wear to school, and I didn't have any medals, I think.

Did you actually

12:30 **tell him that in any way?**

Oh no, no, no. 'Cause he was a, being the 7th, and, he was an old man, I thought, he was a very old father compared to some of my mates, they had young fathers. Because he would have been about 44, when I was born, I suppose. And to me, that was old, it was a grandfather, you know.

That is old, by any standard, isn't it.

13:00 Because they all wore hats and they wore flannel singlets, and it was all different. But at school, we were, you know, special parades for an Anzac service, that was at the state school. And at Caulfield Grammar, as I said, some of the masters were First World War veterans, and they would give a talk on the Anzac service. So it was drummed into us, and

13:30 so we were told of the Gallipoli and the sufferings in France, and the trench warfare. So.

Did your Father ever express regret that he didn't go to the First World War?

No, well he did tell me at one stage, that he was in a queue of fellows to join the, to join up in the Crimean War, this is before he was married. And they got word through that the war had ended, so he missed out on that

14:00 one. But, that's all, I didn't talk to him about the wars much, really. He was, of course, proud of his boys being in the service in the Second World War. Our mother, of course was, well the pair of them, but I suppose particularly the mother, because they sort of

14:30 wear it the hardest I guess, the Government during the war, issued to mothers a brooch, it was a bar on the bottom, and if you had one boy, there was a star or, on the bar. In my case, my mother had three stars, when I joined up, because she had three boys on active service.

What was that to represent?

Oh just to let people know,

15:00 to do with patriotism, I guess. It let people know that she's got three sons away, fighting in the war. On the other hand, there was some fellows of military age, who were not in uniform, and people would give them white feathers, and, as though they were cowards for not joining up. Yet they might be medically unfit, to the extent, that the government when people did

15:30 volunteer then, and did not pass the medical exam, they were given a special badge to wear, so that people wouldn't be nasty with them. Oh no, it was very, very bigoted, you know. So.

Did you know about white feathers

Oh yes

when you were younger?

We heard about that as kids, from the First War.

Any particular stories?

Ah yes. When I joined Hoyts Theatre,

16:00 as junior office boy, the fellow who taught me the business, he became senior office boy, and he looked a lot older than what he was, he was about a year older than me, but he wore a pork pie hat, and a good suit, and he smoked a pipe, would you believe, and he was an office boy. Now he looked much older than he really was, and he was travelling on the tram into the city, and some woman gave him a white feather. And he wasn't even old enough, as soon as he was 18, he was off like a bolt, he was into the army,

16:30 volunteered, but he was given a white feather. So that's the only one that I can recall.

It seemed to be that the white feathers were given from mainly Protestant women, who would hand white feathers, because there was quite a division between the Catholics and the Protestants about the war itself, wasn't there?

Well I didn't see that really.

Did your Father ever talk about that, or your mother ever talk about it?

No, no, no.

17:00 No, I've never thought of it as being a religious thing, I thought it was just a patriotic thing, that if you were old enough to get and save your country, sort of thing, fight for your country, you should be there. And it wasn't really discussed in the family.

Did you know about Billy Hughes and Archbishop Mannix?

Oh Archbishop Mannix was

17:30 a family word, you might say that everybody in Melbourne knew about that, because he used to lead, I think the St Patrick's Day march, and he was quite outspoken, I think he was against the First World War business. And so, the Protestants didn't care for Archbishop Mannix too much. I can remember in my work days, driving down the streets, over that way in Melbourne, where he used to walk from Raheen where he lived, down to St Patrick's

18:00 every day, and sometimes I'd see him, with all his garbage gators and things, and I have seen him, did see him in person. But he was, 'cause he was very, very Irish, but a Protestant didn't have a lot of love for the old Archbishop.

Was Billy Hughes an iconic figure for the Protestants?

Well, I've never thought of it from a religious point of view. We knew he was a Labor politician, and he

18:30 wanted conscription in the First War, and I think it was knocked on the head. But you know, as you people, politics were not a big deal of our young life.

The glamour of war would have certainly caught on with you.

Yeah.

The First World War, that is?

Yes, yes. And we didn't. In my case, in reading the book that my sister brought me from the library, a lending library, it was just such fascinating, the

19:00 Pilots' dog fighting, you know. I said, "Get me another book." and she bought me another one and another one, and then I just started getting books and making model aeroplanes, and I became a complete bore on matters of aviation.

Why particularly the, the air force?

Oh, the flying just sort of got to me, and I wanted to fly aeroplanes. Before that, I was mad keen on model railways, and I

19:30 started to build my own railway track, you could buy the rail and stuff from model dockyards, and I used to get my pocket money. And I'd say to people, don't give me presents, give me the money because I want to buy the rails and things, and things to start building a track around my backyard. Which I started to do, but suddenly the aviation came on the scene, and I sold all my railway bits to a kid, and he never, ever paid me. That was the commercial deal I failed in,

20:00 he still owes me a quid. So when the Australian Air League formed, there was a Brighton branch of that, I joined that as a Junior, there was short, they had a uniform, short pants and a blue shirt and a cap. And the Seniors, who had to be, I don't know, 16 and over or something, they wore long pants as their tunic, sort of thing. So

20:30 we attended lectures at different venues down here at the Brighton Beach Oval, was our meeting place there for a while. And they taught us things about aviation, how the wing of an aircraft, talk about old bi-planes how it was constructed, and the markings, the registration markings of the different nations, like VH for Australia, G for England, D for Germany, things like that.

21:00 And they had parades, and it was enjoyable. And I was made a flight commander, I had two stripes and a swagger stick, would you believe as a kid of 14, or whatever. So I was in that when the war broke out. But at school, I'd noticed in the school diary it had 'Careers for Young Men', it had all sorts of things, and also the three services, the naval cadet business, at age 13 you could

21:30 apply for cadetships in the navy. And army Duntroon and the Royal Australian Air Force was the RAF [Royal Air Force] College at Point Cook. And I looked at all the subjects that you had to have, an intermediate certificate, so I did all those subjects, including English and a language, and French I did, and physics and maths, things like that. So I was so keen and loved making these model aeroplanes with elastic

22:00 driven ones and flying them around, and gliders I'd make. Then when the war got going, sometimes an aircraft would fly over here, a Lockhead Hudson or an Avro Anson, I'd rush outside to see it, and before it passed it over, because they were slower in those days. And then when it was announced that the Air Training Corp was starting, and there was a squadron forming

22:30 at Brighton, I rushed after work, I rushed down, it was a Friday night, and I was the first to join it. There was a corporal, like a proper full time air force corporal as a clerk, sort of organising it. So a

whole heap of lads joined, and we met there Saturday afternoons for drill instruction, and the commanding officers and engines, were First World War pilots, squadron leader and flight lieutenant of the Edgerton.

23:00 And they were civilians, but it became officers of their training corp. And they, see the Second World War was run by First World War pilots, and other people of course, in the army, because they were all trained fellows, and some of them were very highly decorated. So I found that good, and eventually I was made corporal and then sergeant, and

23:30 acting flights, I had my own squad for the drill. As well as the drill part of it on Saturday afternoons, we went to Brighton Technical College, I think it was one night a week, or two nights a week, learning Morse code and maths and all that sort of thing, all the academic things, which stood us in good stead. I mean, we had done some of this at school, it was a brush-up, and you had to sit for exams.

24:00 And sometimes they'd, we'd have a camp, they'd take us down to Laverton one day, and, sorry for a week I stayed at Laverton in a camp. And it was great fun. And we had to sign a form, get our parents to sign a form that, if we were able to get a ride on an aircraft, you had to sign an indemnity thing, that if you were killed, there'd be no claim on the government, so I got my mother to sign that. And I was able to get

24:30 two flights on an Avro Anson on that week trip, and oh, that was great fun. And on another occasion, we had a Sunday visit to Point Cook, which was a training, advanced training school for twin-engined pilots, and I managed to get a ride in an Airspeed Oxford. And looked at how they trained the bomb aimers, how they lined up things, you know, things like that, and around the station, great stuff. And I was sweating on turning 18, of course,

25:00 I was old enough to join up. And that day came, and I was called into Russell Street Recruiting Centre for a medical examination. And oh a day or so later, I received a reply to say that I had to report back for something was wrong, and I thought I'd failed the medical, and I thought, "Oh my God." And as turned out, the X-ray hadn't come out properly, they had to do the X-ray, and it was all right, thank God.

25:30 So, I was then on the waiting list to be called up for full time service, and three of my close mates at Air Training Corp, had already turned 18, and passed their medical and they were just waiting for a call-up. And as it happened, I knew a, a girl who was a WAAAF [Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force], we used to go to the same church, and I said, "Any chance of you, there's four of us ready to go in now, can we, do you know somebody who can get us in together?" And she worked,

26:00 I think she worked, we all got in together, at the same time. And as it happened, the three of us, the four of us went down to Somers to do three months training there. Well, you did two months and then you were categorised, as to whether you'd be a pilot, trainee or navigator, or wireless operator, air gunner, cause depending on that, pilots and navigators had to do another month, where you were taught navigation in particular.

26:30 Because that school down there taught you war gasses, we could pull a machine-gun to pieces and put it together again, and everything, apart from a normal academic things, it was a very good high pressure school of learning. Six days a week, only one day off for holidays. Sundays they gave us, some weekends they gave us two days off. And it was a crammed thing, the middle of winter it was freezing cold down there.

27:00 And it was all regimented, we lived in huts, unlined war time huts, and on straw palliasses. And you had only three blankets or something, and they had to be folded up in a certain way that the blue stripes showing a certain way, if they were a little bit out on inspection, you'd be in trouble. So the drill instructors ran us there, and as I said, there was 900 fellows, at any

27:30 one time at Somers, and that was only one initial school. There was another one in Victor Harbour in South Australia, another in Sydney at Bradfield Park, another one at Sandgate in Queensland, and another one for a little while in Perth. All training the rookies for air crew, of the Empire Air Training Scheme. And it was an amazing, I've got a book on it, put out, and it's, it was an amazing thing the way it was all brought together,

28:00 and run so well. They had to establish air fields everywhere, they had to get aircraft, they had to train instructors, flying instructors, because there was a lot of fellows had civilian licenses before the war, a lot of them got in bang with a commission to be instructors. And they did a great job, most of them, many of them were too old to go on combat, but they were good for instruction.

I forgot to ask you before, about what you were

28:30 **doing when the actual Second World War started, the first day it was declared?**

The day, I can remember the day, it was a Sunday, I'm sure it was a Sunday. And I could hear a newspaper, I think before we even heard the radio news, the newspaper boys had brought out an extra, were selling an extra, were selling what was called an extraordinary paper, which they did on certain functions, when some big thing hit like King George the Fifth dying,

29:00 they'd bring out an extraordinary paper. And extraordinary war declared, and yelling out the kids in the street. Next thing we knew, within a day, I can remember seeing an air force fellow walking past my

house, he was called up immediately. And I, fellows who were on, in Citizen Air Force and in, on call-up duty, or instant call-up, or 24 hour notice they used to call it, they were on their way

29:30 to their units, to be involved full time. So that was a, a memorable day. And I thought oh gosh, I was, what 15, '39, I was 14 and a half, yes, 14 and a quarter to be precise. And so, all the places were agog with, you know,

30:00 England and war. Because you'd know the fact that Poland was attacked by Germany, caused England, England said, "You move into Poland, we will declare war." and that's what happened.

So you weren't surprised at all when war started?

Well it looked, well as a kid, I wasn't too clued up.

30:30 Well in the papers, it was all things were being talked about, and on the radio, and something was going to happen.

What was the reaction of your parents to the war?

Oh, I can't,

31:00 oh I suppose, I can't recall it, but probably the mothers, they would be thinking, "Oh gosh, our, we've got sons of military age, and what's going to happen to them?" Because the one in the country, of course, he was, they wouldn't let the farming fellows join for a while, because they were needed to produce food, but he broke away later and he got out, and joined up. So the whole place was agog with,

31:30 you know, messages going out, calling up people, and, and recruiting places setting up, to, getting volunteers to join the AIF, that was the big thing, to get army men to volunteer. And they came from far and wide, because a lot of them had been unemployed, and it was a means of getting some, getting work. And some of them joined up for, not only patriotism, but some of them joined for adventure.

32:00 There was a lot of, in all our thinking, I suppose, as young people.

Why didn't you choose to join the AIF?

Oh well, because I'd become air minded as a kid. I just wanted to be a flier, if I could.

So you had no other vision whatsoever, apart from flying, in joining up?

Not in the services, no, no, I always wanted to be an

32:30 aviator.

There was no appeal, the military, the army, never had an appeal to you in any way?

Oh, when I was a little kid, you know, seeing the other kids with medals their Father's had in the army, in the First War, perhaps I thought of army. But my mother, she said if you have to join something, she would have preferred me to been in the navy, because she loves ships. And later on, she was able to do some trips up to Sydney, one of her sisters moved up there.

33:00 And she loved sea going voyages, she was never sea sick and she travelled to America to see my sister there by ship, and loved it, later on. But I had no intention of, I said, "No Mum, I want to be a pilot." to the extent that I did my block one day, and I jumped on a model aeroplane when she said she wouldn't sign the papers for me to join the Air Training Course.

33:30 And I jumped on it, smashed an aeroplane to pieces, and I said, "Well there you are, I want to join the air force" and later on.

What was the status of the air force, of pilots, what sort of social representation did they have?

Well, you didn't know a lot about them. I went to my second sister, Shirley, she and her new husband sort of thing, took me to an air display at Flemington Racecourse in 1938.

34:00 And it was so fantastic, it had Avro Ansons doing dummy bombing, they'd explode something on the ground, as though it had been, a bomb had been dropped. And they had Hawker Demon bi-planes flying, and they had three aircraft tied together with ribbons, and they went over the steeple chase course, around, in formation, low formation. And later on, I was talking about that to my commanding officer, and he said, "You

34:30 were there Will?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you remember three aircraft flying around, tied." I said "Yes." he said, "I was flying one of those aircraft." He was a sergeant pilot in those days. So that was a great thing, and there, that was the only time I saw the air force in quantity you might say, in volume. You just saw the odd individual, although you used to, before, I remember at the state school, I went over to the shop at lunch, play time in the

35:00 morning to get a pie or something. And a beautiful silver bi-plane flew low over the, over us, with, I

can’t remember, the school flying, I don’t know, it went right over the state school, and Brighton Grammar not far, it might have been a Brighton Grammarian. But it was so low and it looked so beautiful, with silver with varnished struts, I can remember it now, with the red, white and blue red round L’s, so that was my first sight of

35:30 An air force aircraft I think, that would have been about 1935.

Was that by any chance a Curtis model aircraft? Do you remember the make of the aircraft?

Oh, it was a bi-plane, it was probably either an Avro Cadet, or, probably an Avro Cadet, because it was a trainer. I don’t think it was a Bristol Bulldog or a Hawker Demon, I’d say it was an Avro Cadet

36:00 trainer, but it looked terrific with the sun shining on it. But I didn’t have the Air force bug at that stage, but perhaps that helped, it was not long after that, that I got it.

When you were in the Air Training Corp initially in ’40, ’41, what was the training like, how did you find i

36:30 **it, tough Air Force training?**

Oh it was, the drill, you know we were taught the full drill procedure, and there’s a lot in it really, drill to most is a boring sort of a thing, but as we were sarge [sergeant] in our own school, we had to be extra good at it really, to know what commands to give and when. Cause when you’ve got a large parade of people, you’ve got to be able to manoeuvre them, it’s like flying formation in an aircraft, it’s easy to fly on your own, but when you’ve got to

37:00 control 12 aircraft or whatever, it’s quite a different matter. But it’s all part of the precision, as you learn and service discipline. And, so, as well as the Saturday afternoon drill, we had sports too. We had to reach a certain proficiency in running 100 yards, as it was called them, or 220 yards, or high jump, the Air

37:30 Training Course set a standard, that they wanted the fellows to reach. Because physical fitness was a very important part of air crew wellbeing.

Did you at this stage have any intention to be a fighter pilot or a bomber pilot, anything specific in mind?

Well even though the first books I read were to do about fighter pilots, my ambitions were to be an air force pilot,

38:00 I hadn’t really got it down to being a fighter pilot or bomber pilot, or whatever, I just wanted to be an air force pilot. And it was a burning ambition. So when we were, it continued on, this WAAAF got us into the same, on the same day, and we, three of us were ordained to be, for pilot training, and another one was to be a navigator.

38:30 And the three of us kept together, we went from Somers to Western Junction in Tasmania, which was a great, a wonderful war over there in Tasmania, the people were wonderful and the meals were good. We used to get a days off, day off a week, Saturday, and we’d go and have a few beers, we were only kids, we drank too much for our age, but we did, had a bit of fun and let off steam. And, oh people

39:00 would invite us to their homes for little get-togethers, parties, meals. And the station was pretty good, it was run by, the first CO [commanding officer] was a First World War pilot, Wing Commander Matthews. And there were Tiger Moths were the aircraft, the bi-plane, and wonderful aeroplane. And there were too many of us to, 80 of us went from Somers to there, there was only 50 on a course, so

39:30 some had to miss out. And we did what they call tarmac duties for a month til the next course started, washing down aircraft and being a low, sweeping out hangers and picking up butts or whatever, just labourers, air force labourers, you might say. But getting a bit of drill thrown in, as well, the discipline kept going.

OK, well, we’ll stop now and take a bit of a break, we’ve run out of tape anyway.

Right.

40:01 - tape ends.

Tape 3

00:31 **Recording. OK. So Ken, if you could take us back to the time in Somers, and what life was like back then.**

Somers was a very gruelling sort of a place, it was an academic training station, we were taught war gasses and armament, machine-guns. And it was full on academic work all day, in cold room conditions in the middle of winter,

01:00 and sometimes at night we had to attend lectures. They were, the instructors basically were former school teachers, who were all commissioned officers. But a couple of things happened there of note, I led a charmed life in the air force, everything went my way. And a couple of things, coming back from leave one Sunday night, I was about the last to get on the big track, they were like a cattle truck they were, but they were buses really, they'd carry

01:30 a lot of people. And there was one seat left in it, just in the front, and it was next door to an officer, a flight lieutenant, who a much older fellow, he had a moustache, I remember. And I had to take this seat, and I thought, "Oh gosh, I hope I'm all right sitting next to an officer." Well he started talking to me, and he wanted to know what course I was on and all the rest of it, and I, see he had an overcoat on, so I didn't know what he was. I just presumed him to be an administrative officer. And

02:00 so I went about telling my life story, about how I wanted to be an air force pilot and this and that, Air Training Corp, Air League. And, I said in the finish, "Sir, what, where do you fit in, in the Somers?" He said, "Actually I'm not based at Somers, I'm coming down to sit on the category sub, category board selection tomorrow." I said, "Oh sir, I've got to go before that

02:30 board tomorrow." Well, that's all he said. But needless to say I, he looked at me very stern faced the next day when it was my turn to go before them, and didn't acknowledge that he asked a question as a matter of fact, as did others. Anyway, that happened, I was appointed to be a pilot for training. I must say that before that, before going before this board, we had to be

03:00 interviewed by one of two officers who were stationed at Somers. And it turned out one of them, his brother taught me at Caulfield Grammar. And the other one, his son used to sit next to me at Caulfield Grammar, so I thought, "Oh, I'm onto a good thing here." As it happens, the fellow who's Father, Max Jordan, and he saw, "Oh you went to Caulfield Grammar." "Oh yes Sir,

03:30 I remember your son quite well, Max I think his name was." so I went on. I think I also became a salesman at that time, too. So I guess from then on, he recommended me for pilot training before the other board. I've done them back to front. So from there at Somers, we were, did our extra month's navigation for pilot trainee, and we were quite frankly pleased to leave Somers,

04:00 because it was a gruelling academic thing, and strict disciplinarian areas. And one thing I was very disappointed happened, I'd become very interested in big band music, and my Artie, Artie Shaw and his Orchestra were my favourite. And the word got around that he was to play at Palm Grove with his navy band, American navy band, on a certain Sunday.

04:30 And I worked it out, it was to be a long weekend. And lo and behold before this time came up, I was a minute late to an aircraft recognition lecture, and the officer put me on a charge, paraded me before the squadron commander, who deducted, took my leave away from me that particular weekend, so I missed seeing my big band man Artie Shaw, who I still think is the greatest man that played music, so that was

05:00 a great disappointment at Somers. However, from there we were given, I think a week's leave, and we were posted, most of us, the pilots were posted to Western Junction in Tasmania.

Firstly did you join up with friends and mates, or did you join up on your own?

Well, I joined, I went in with three mates, and two of them were pilots, to be trainee pilots like me, and the other one was to go onto Mount Gambier to be navigation trainee.

05:30 So we caught the old ship Norana to go to Tasmania, it was an October day, it was very cold and rainy, miserable Melbourne day.

But, sorry Ken, but at Somers, what training did you do, did you get involved with aircraft then, or was it just theory based?

No, there was no aircraft at all, it wasn't a flying station at all, purely an academic training station.

06:00 And then the minute you went to a pilot, in our case, a pilot training area, which could have been one of many, but the one I was posted was Western Junction, which had a lovely name I think, Western Junction, it reminds me of Glenn Miller playing "Tuxedo Junction" perhaps. Anyway, we were waiting to board this Norana, when over through the outcasts, the overcast clouds, comes the big Lancaster flown by

06:30 Peter Isaacson, who had come out from England, flew it out for a sort of morale boosting, war bond tour, sort of thing. It came right over us, pretty low, I presume he was landing, getting ready to land at Fisherman's Bend, which is just across the road, across the river. So we had a very rough trip all night in the ship, I'd never been on a ship before, it was rough. And down and up, we were in the bow part of it,

07:00 and people were sick all over the place, fortunately I was alright. But it was a nasty old trip. But in the morning, we pulled into the port of Burnie, and boarded a train, a steam train, that took us through, to Western Junction, which was a railway junction, actually. So we got off there, but on the way in, we looked out the window, and saw these yellow Tiger Moths doing loops, and flying, and I thought, "Oh, this is it,

07:30 we are about to become airborne."

How did you feel about the boat ride was rough, and did you want to get on a boat again after that?

Oh it didn't worry me, I was never air sick or boat sick at all, I'm fortunate in that regard. My Mum was a good sailor, so I get it from her. One of my brothers who was in the army, he used to get sea sick horribly, and air sick. So I was all right, I enjoyed it, the rougher the better, the rough in the aircraft was better, because you've got to

08:00 be able to fly it better, sort of thing.

And did you enjoy the theory and so on, that was taught to you in Somers, or?

Oh well, a lot of it was humdrum, I enjoyed navigation, navigation is a very interesting subject. And I guess it's in our blood, from inheriting the navigational powers of such great navigators as James Cook and Matthew Flinders, and it was part of our heritage. But navigation is an interesting subject.

08:30 **It's a major part of flying too, isn't it?**

Oh well a pilot and a navigator had to know navigation. Navigators, full time navigators were used on bigger aircraft with a big crew, and they needed a full time navigator. But fighter pilots and single engine pilots, had to do their own navigation, which was a different type, it's called pilot navigation, where you're map reading all the time, and it's a bit complex to say here, but

09:00 you had some basic instruments to use, but it was basically vision, pinpointing yourself when you're travelling over the ground, and using railway tracks, roads and rivers and things to map read.

And what were the teachers like at Somers?

Oh they were pretty good, they weren't too strict. In fact, the fellow that taught us gas, I'll never forget him, he was a corporal, a nice

09:30 fellow. And before the gas examination, he said, "Well blokes." he said, "Look, I want to get a good result here, I won't give you the answers, but I'll give you the questions that you'll get in the exams." Well do you know, some fellows failed, they didn't bother to look at a book, I think I got 66%, or something. But those that failed were given a sub, so they all passed eventually, but I'll never forget that. But

10:00 it was necessary instruction, at that stage we hadn't touched Morse code, which I had learnt about in the Air Training Corp, but over at Western Junction, the Morse code was balled into you. They had, before I get into that. We did tarmac duties for a month, and then another luck thing hit me. My two mates were called to go on '43 Course,

10:30 and my name was not called, so I'd have to wait until '44 course started. And I thought, "Oh God, I'm being separated." Well you wouldn't believe, two of the blokes, their mates had missed out, and they, two mates that had been selected, wanted to be taken off and go back onto '44, so they put my name back in the hat and another one, and mine was drawn out, so I scored again, it was lady luck, and made '43 course.

What were your mates' names, and?

Roy Edwards

11:00 and Burt Krause.

And how did you become mates with them?

In the Air Training Corp, I hadn't met them before the Air Training Corp. And the other one, I went to navigator, was Alec Robinson, and he's still alive, we're the only two still alive. I can cover the other ones later. So we went onto this flying course, and Western Junction had a reputation as being a pretty tough flying school. And the story was, if you

11:30 hadn't gone solo by seven hours, they'd be looking at you. And if you hadn't gone solo by ten hours, you'd be probably scrubbed. So I tried like mad. Now my instructor was a sergeant pilot, he'd not long before got his wings himself, and sent to Central Flying School to become a Tiger Moth Instructor, and then to Western Junction. Well he became a flight sergeant automatically after you're a sergeant,

12:00 and he was still a sergeant, so he was pretty raw. So we had another fellow, LAC Thomas, LAC's leading aircraft man as a rank. And he had the tallester [?] to look after, so, you know, he seemed to be teaching me, I could follow what he was yelling out a bit. So we had voice tubes, gosper tubes, not radio, and they weren't too easy to hear through, better from some instructors than others. Some of them breathed too much into it,

12:30 and it came through into your earphones, purely by a pipe, going from the front seat in the Tiger Moth, and the pupil was in the back seat, the rear seat. So they taught you how to spin, to recover from a spin, stalling, all those necessary things, and.

All this was at Western Junction?

At Western Junction, all the basics.

Can you describe the first plane you flew?

Well,

13:00 I, it was, they only had Tiger Moths there for training. It was, you lifted the Moth about 45 miles, it was all in miles per hour then. And then you climbed away at 65 miles per hour, and then once you'd reached your thousand feet circuit height, you'd throttle back and then level out, and you'd cruise about 80 miles per hour, so they were pretty slow, but good to train on, elementary, they were elementary trainers.

13:30 The number of, the name of that base was, Number 7 Elementary Flying Training School.

What was it like the first time you went up?

Oh, it was a great sensation, you felt a bit all, you know, with your helmet on and these tubes, and earphones and things, and a heavy flying suit, it was cold weather and you had to, had a what we call an inner flying suit, which was called a woolly bull, it was a kapok lined thing, with a zip down the front. Then on top of that you'd put another heavy weight,

14:00 rubber lined canvasy type big suit, with big pockets and fur lined collars, and you could hardly walk. Now even though they'd issued us with flying boots before we go to the Western Junction, we weren't allowed to use them, we had to use ordinary shoes there, cause they said the Tiger Moths were too sensitive on the feet. So we weren't allowed to use the flying boots, which means that our feet didn't keep so warm.

What was the reason for all the, the gear?

14:30 Oh, it was so cold, and you were in an open cockpit with the wind rushing around you, and this is, Tasmania is a cold place at the best of times, and you're up a few thousand feet, it's colder again, and with the wind rushing all over you, you got cold. You had gloves too, which I found a bit, they were very stiff war-time made, very poor quality gloves, I prefer just to use the inner, a rayon, lighter weight thing, which wouldn't have given you any protection in a fire, but you could feel the

15:00 knobs and switches better. So.

The first time you went up, did you get to actually fly the plane?

Yes, it was called a familiarisation flight, where the instructor would do manoeuvres, say rate one turn, rate two turn, right up to rate four turn, which was a very tight turn pulling around with G-force one. And then he'd show you things, and then he'd let you follow and you'd take over.

15:30 And you've have to clearly give instruction, he would say, "Handing over." and you would have to say, "Taking over." because there could be a misunderstanding, and no-one's flying the thing, which did happen once in my career later on. So it was just mind boggling, the countryside down below in Tasmania was so beautiful, you know, we'd only seen pictures in books of England and so, but it was English countryside all over again. With the thorn, box thorn,

16:00 hawthorn hedges and things down in the field, it was just beautiful. And the, in this Tasmania, in this Tiger Moth, it was great. And not far away, were some very high mountains, I can't think of the name of the main mountains now. And that mountain range caused difficulties in the afternoon the weather became very rough, so they only flew in the

16:30 mornings, and we did the ground subjects in the afternoon. Because, as I mentioned, Morse code came into as a big part of our training, and they had a room set aside with all cubicles, each student had a cubicle set up with ear phones and a Morse key. And a sergeant instructor up front, and he'd send messages, and we'd have to write down

17:00 two types, in code in five-letter blocks as though you were taking down code, or in plain language, which was write it. So you had to concentrate on that a fair bit, but we only had to do 12 words a minute, pilots and navigators. Wireless operators, of course, had to get up about 25 words per minute, 'cause that was their main task.

So you couldn't communicate by voice, or only Morse code, or you had the option of both?

No, no, no

17:30 voice at this stage. This was purely in the training room, teaching us Morse code, teaching us sort of the practical part of it. And also outside, they had what was called an Alders light, a lamp and you could flash messages in Morse code, and that was important, I used that quite a bit in my career later on, which I'll come to. To flash out Morse code messages in a special Alders lamp, and most aircraft were fitted with an underneath light, a white light,

18:00 and a key which the pilot could flash a message to the ground, where there was no radio communication. So that was the Morse. And then of course we had to learn about engines, Tiger Moth

engines, the basics of it, we weren't expected how to pull an engine down and put it together. You had to understand the lubrication system and the fuel system. And airmanship, airmanship is the discipline of

18:30 flying in the air, the rules of the air, so to speak.

Were you taught tactics and so on?

Not at that stage, only, only to do with flying an aeroplane at this stage. The tactics came later on, in different aircraft. The thing there was the elementary, to teach us how to fly an aeroplane. Because once you can fly one, you can fly others, subject to getting

19:00 used to higher horse powers and engines and things. So that, other subjects of course, navigation was pumped into us all the time. We'd do navigation plots, you know, have a map in front of you, in the air force we called them maps, in the navy they called them charts, so that's a normal difference. You'd be given a set of exercises to do, as though you were flying an aeroplane from A to B to C

19:30 and back again, and you'd have to work out all the courses and allow for magnetic variation and compass deviation and all those sorts of thing. And if you made one error along, of course, you wouldn't end up where you should end up, so it was pretty important. One of my mates who joined up with me, he was a very clever fellow, he was dux of Hampton High School, he was, he got 100% in all his Air Training Corp exams,

20:00 and he was third top out of 300 fellows at Somers, and would you believe he failed in his navigation exams, and he almost cried, he said, "I've never failed in my life." Turned out he'd forgotten to allow magnetic variation, which is the earth's magnetic variation, it's a measured thing, it changes slightly each year. And he'd forgotten to allow for that in one leg, which put him right out, you see, it might have

20:30 been, I think it was 11 degrees in those days. If you're 11 degrees out, it makes a big difference in a 300 mile journey sort of thing. Anyway, he got a supplement, he got 100%.

Did you find it came naturally to you, all the flying and the navigation?

Well, the flying I sort of imagined myself, you know, as a youngster, being up in an aeroplane, I'd read so many books about it, I reckoned I could theoretically fly an aeroplane. But it

21:00 was a different picture when you actually touched the rudders and all, but I think it helped to have a knowledge of what happened when you moved the stick to the left and which aileron moved, and what did what. Because you've got to, flying is a co-ordination thing of feet, hands, brain, eyes, the works, all your senses are operating together. To do a smooth turn, you don't just apply rudder

21:30 to turn as you might think, as you would in a boat, you've got to apply aileron as well, so you've got to move a stick to the left, and left rudder. And you also find the nose will drop too, so you've got to pull that up, you've got to pull the airtrobe up tight, and a little bit of back stick to keep the nose up. So there's all sorts of forces there, all sorts of forces operating on the aircraft, and you've got to be co-ordinating your movements to allow for them.

And G-force as well?

22:00 Well G-force comes into, in a bit later, you do get it in any, when you pull an aircraft hard you, if you, where you're sitting right here, we're just suffering 1G, but pull a bit harder on the stick and it's 2G, so there's twice your weight. Now we used to pull up to 5, 6 G in fighters later on, and that's, you blackout, you get, it's a horrible feeling, but I'll mention that.

How did G-forces feel the first time you felt them?

The Tiger Moth

22:30 didn't worry us at all much. You felt them when you were diving to get a lot of speed to do aerobatics, to roll off the top you had to go to about, I've forgot the figures now, but 160 say, and pull up, and as you're pulling up, the G-forces are coming, and pushing it down, and at the end of the thing, the G-force off you, but you've got to put your head back to look for the horizon, it's a way to keep your wings level, and, and keep the pressure on the stick. In fact in the Tiger,

23:00 at the top of the loop, I think you had to whack the stick right back in your stomach, to continue the loop. Then there was roll off the top, and, I loved it, I loved it.

How, how did it measure up to what you were dreaming about, flying a plane?

Well it was a lot harder, I think, and, and when you're dreaming of things, you're not thinking of G-force or things like that. You're just thinking of a perfect situation, flying an aeroplane straight and level,

23:30 and looking at horizons. The horizon plays such a very important part in your flying, you've got to trim the aircraft to be level, be level with the horizon, when you're flying, straight and level. And there's, you have an instrument, Tiger Moths didn't have them, but later aircraft had an artificial horizon, for

instrument flying, without that, you've had it. You had

24:00 basic instruments, but in the Tiger Moth training, you, apart from spinning, which was, I liked spins and they were good for that, and they came out very readily. But you also did instrument flying as well as the link trainer instruction, which is on the ground and these days, you'd call them a simulator, but in those days they were called a link trainer, built by a link company. And we called them a horror box, we didn't like going to them, they'd put the lid on you,

24:30 and you were on your own, see, so you would fly and the instructor would tell you what to do, and, "Rate one turn to the left, right, two turn to the right." or whatever. And you had to learn to fly them pretty accurately, with the same type of compass in them that the aircraft had, and the same type of instruments. But, and then in the actual aircraft in a Tiger Moth which didn't have the blind flying instruments, it only had basics, but you were put under the hood, the instructor

25:00 would get you to take off under the hood, and you had to keep it pretty straight, you did it somehow.

What were the basic instruments in there, what did you have?

The turn and bank indicator, which told you what, if you're slipping or skidding on the turn, and at what rate you're turning, they had the English instrument, which we called them knife and fork, I think, which I preferred to the American bat and ball system. And they had an inclinometer, which

25:30 indicated what pitch you were doing, up and down. An air speed indicator, and an altometer, and then an oil pressure indicator and a couple of engine things, and that's about all.

From your flying experience, is that as basic as you get?

Oh, that's very basic, yes, basic. But then, well I'll mention later on when we come to the war, it became more complex. But even then as kids,

26:00 when we looked in the cockpit of a Tiger Moth, "Oh how will we remember all those things." but basically there, it comes automatically with training. And as a matter of, with the engine instruments and things, just keeping your eye on them, that the oil pressure doesn't drop off, or if it does, well you know to head back and close down the motor or something. But it's just a trained eye, just looking, if anything's wrong, you'll, you've got red lines written on the, marked on the instrument, the maximum

26:30 temperatures or figures, or whatever. In most aircraft there'd be a red line drawn at the maximum speed that the aircraft should cover. And that sort of thing.

Had you driven a car before this?

Only once. One of my mates, he was older than me, he paid five pounds for an old Fiat, funny looking thing. And he had a long driveway in his home, and he used to get into top gear, then jam the brakes on to stop it at the gate, but I'd never drive in the streets,

27:00 so I learnt really, I had a license to fly a plane before I, license for a car.

I'm just thinking back then, that plane was so basic, and cars at that time, would have been so basic, from, was there any similarities at all in the controls?

Oh, well, not, the steering I suppose to a certain degree. But the foot pedals are different. I mean in those days, you had to,

27:30 you didn't have automatic, you had left for your clutch and right for your brake and accelerator. No I didn't, I wouldn't liken them to be all that similar. But in flying, and I suppose the hardest part is landing the aircraft. And I took a bit of time getting that, hang of that, I, they nicknamed me "Wheeler Wilkinson." because I used to, it was very important to them, I came in on the wheels, which served me in good stead

28:00 later on, 'cause in the war you didn't do three pointers, you were always in cross wind conditions, so you always had to do wheelers. But eventually I did be able to three point them. But the Flight Commander would test you from time to time on top of your ordinary instructor, and he was, you know, pass on any hints or whatever. And then at the end of the course, a two month course on the Tiger Moth part,

28:30 then you had to be tested for your final test to pass or not to pass, by either the Chief Flying Instructor or his off-sider. As it happened I copped the Chief Flying Instructor, who was a very gruff sort of a character, he was an old man to me, because I was only an 18 year old, and he, I suppose, would have been 40, a very gruff, he didn't smile. And the course we were running a bit late, so they said

29:00 they had, we had to fly in the afternoon in the rough conditions. But the instructor said, "Don't worry about that, they'll make allowances for that." Anyway, everything went wrong, we flew in his aircraft which was perfectly rigged, it was all camouflaged and all the rest of it, yellow, his was camouflaged. And I took off alright, but I kept climbing, he didn't tell me anymore what to do. And I thought that was funny, next thing he turns round, he's screaming and pointing, and what have I done wrong, what have I done wrong.

29:30 I looked at the instruments, they're alright, but it turned out my tube had come out of its socket, so I was, he was screaming at me to do something, and I didn't hear it. And it was a very short tube, I don't know whether he'd done that purposely to upset the pupil or not, I don't know. Anyway, plugged on again, "I'm sorry sir, the tube came unstuck." So he told me, "Right, head off to so-and-so." and someone had tipped me off, one of his favourite tricks was to put you into a powered spin, and

30:00 an aircraft will never come out of a spin, unless you pull the power off it. And, and then, in the powered spin, he would say, "Right, recover and do me a forced landing on such a such a forced landing field." You don't actually land, but you make an approach as though you're going to. Well I'm, so I was ready for the spin, and he let it wind up and he said, "Right, handing over, and do me a forced landing on Longford

30:30 Field." And I thought, "God." I got it out of the spin, I thought, "Where the hell's Longford Field?" I couldn't get my bearings for a minute, and suddenly I spotted it. Well I sidestepped, I had a vicious sidestep, a full sidestep which I loved doing in the Tiger, and I came in right, and just as the, he said, "Right, climb up again, we'll do some aerobatics." So I did a roll to the left, he, that's right, he said "Do a roll to the left." well you could always roll better to the left,

31:00 because being a right hander, you push the stick over, that's the way we felt it, and most blokes would say that and agree with me, I'm sure. And it wasn't bad, I'd say to myself, "It wasn't a bad roll." He said, "Right, do one to the right." and surprisingly it rolled almost as well to the right. And I found out later, he had a perfectly rigged aircraft, you know, the rigging was better, so I was pleased with that.

31:30 Then suddenly the stick was grabbed out of my hand, "Right, taking over, now I'll show you how to do a bloody slow roll." Well, he was terrific, no instructor ever told me this. He said, "Now as we go over, to stop the engine spluttering as it did before, you gradually ease the throttle off. And right back, on your way back like this, and as we come back round, we put the throttle on, because there's still petrol left in the carburettor." he's talking to me all the way around.

32:00 And nobody has ever heard of it, I've spoken to many pilots about that, and they were never taught that. And it was a great thing, because most of them, when you get them over that far, the engines just cut out, and splutter, splutter, splutter, and you'd swoop, swish around a bit, until you came right side up. But I've tried his method later on, and it was terrific, and he was a brilliant pilot.

What was his name?

Hodges, Squadron Leader Reg Hodges.

32:30 In fact his brother belonged to the same club as me, I found out years and years later. Anyway, I, he said, "Right-o." I did some loops and things like that. He said, "Right, go back to the drome and do me a precautionary landing." Well that means you bring them in ten miles an hour slower, as though you're going to land in a shorter paddock or an emergency situation you want to have a short landing. So I came in low and slow, sort of thing, and oh,

33:00 I dropped it down on three points all right, but I wasn't happy with it. In fact, I wasn't happy with the whole thing. Because he was so strict, I thought, "Oh, I'm going to be scrubbed." And it was so buffeting, the conditions were rough, because it was the afternoon. Anyway, he said, "Right, taxi back." I taxied then, and my instructor was there waiting to see me, and he said, "How did you go, Will?" I said, "Oh I'm sorry Sir, I don't think I did too well." He said, "Oh Jesus, oh

33:30 I hope you did all right, you know, my reputation depends on you." Anyway, I had a worrying night, I didn't sleep too well, 'cause we wouldn't know until the next day, I suppose, how we got on. So we were in Morse Code the next morning, and a messenger came and spoke to the sergeant in charge of the Morse code class. And he said "Will LAC Wilkinson please report to the Chief

34:00 Grounds Instructor immediately." I said, "This is it, I'm scrubbed." Anyhow, I went to the Chief Ground Instructor, he was not the Flying Instructor, he was a very nice bloke actually, he was in charge of ground training operations. And he had a smile on his face, I said, "This is nice, I'm going to be scrubbed here, and he's got a smile on his face." He said, "I'd like to congratulate Wilkinson, you've topped the course, you've got above average." So

34:30 I thought, "Oh." he said the, "Oh the CO, the CFO [Chief Flying Officer] was very pleased with your aerobatics." and there it was. There was another bloke and I got above average for aerobatics. We were the two youngest on the course.

How did your colleagues feel about you topping the class?

Well, I just told them, I was bloody skite and a crawler and everything. But it came as a complete surprise to me.

35:00 **Did that annoy you what they called you, or just in good fun?**

Oh well, you had to get a hard skin pretty quick, or you called all sorts of things. Oh well, at that stage I didn't know, well they thought I'd been scrubbed too, you see. Because I was the only called out of the thing, course. And, but in my log book, I noticed when we finished training there, they give you an assessment thing, which is pasted

35:30 in the log book over there. And it doesn't write above average, it's got a little AA in one corner, because they didn't want you to get a swollen head about it. And it's something my kids, "Geeze I'm better than you, I can do this." but that's the, surreptitious way they did it, in my case. Because another squadron, they wrote out the words average or above average, or whatever. So.

What did topping the class lead to, did it give you extra?

36:00 Oh well, it led me on to, number one being, going to Wirraway training, single engine other than, rather than twin engine training, because I did well at aerobatics, which a fighter pilots got to be pretty good at, you see. And bombers don't do aerobatics, they're just straight and level, steep turns sort of thing, where as the single engine aircraft, you fly them around and invert them, do all sorts of things. So number one,

36:30 in more recent years, I've got all my personal air force information, and I could see form that, that experience at Western Junction, I was headed in the direction of a single engine pilot, fighter pilot. In fact, I think it was, I might have been recommended for fighter, something along, words of that effect. So you're watched all the way through, it was all recorded, it's amazing to see, I've got all my background written up, and it's surprising what's all, how they

37:00 mark you all the time, you don't know you're being checked.

What did your parents think when they found out you'd topped the class and so on?

I don't know whether I ever told them, I can't remember. Anyway, we left, we got our postings then, and I was posted to Deniliquin, Number 7 Service Flying Training School at Deniliquin. And it had Wirraway aircraft, and the only other Wirraway training school was

37:30 over at Uranquinty, near Wagga Wagga.

Did you have much contact with your parents throughout?

Oh, I wrote all the time, we corresponded all the time, they had a phone so I remember I rang them from Somers, and Deniliquin I think. But a trunk call in those days was a big deal, you know. But I had a week's leave, I think between postings. And I was in that week's leave,

38:00 I think I met my wife, at a party somewhere, yeah, a few of us went to a party, and this is where I first met, the night before I went to Deniliquin. Now Deniliquin, now I'm talking January 1944, it was hot and dusty, it was a very ordinary place compared to the lovely Tasmanian countryside. It was the sheep country, it was hot, and different station all

38:30 together. And when we finally got into our Wirraways, allocated an instructor, Flight Sergeant Nicholson and I think someone must have told me he had two thousand hours instruction on Wirraways, and he wanted to get to the war and he used to scream and rant and rave, he meant well, but he was cheesed off, you know.

Did you miss Tasmania?

Yes, I did. I've been there many times since, and love the place, love Tasmania.

39:00 **What about, what did you do when you weren't training in Tasmania?**

Oh we'd catch the bus in, and have a shower and tog up, and go and have a few beers at the Brisbane Hotel, I think it was called. There was a few pubs there, Boags Beer, we got used to Madame Boags, as we called the beer. If the Boag beer wasn't on, it would be a shortage in the war, there'd be, we'd drink rum and raspberry, a funny thing to drink, cherry brandy and dry ginger,

39:30 anything. I remember one night a few of us went out to a hotel out a bit, I can't think of the name of it, it was quite a well known pub, nice pub too. And we'd had a few beers, and went out the back shed and found an old jinker, you know, the horse used to pull. And a couple of blokes got it out, and a couple of blokes sat it in the thing, and we went down the main street, and we didn't get into trouble. You, you did high jinks,

40:00 but there was a war on, you had to let off steam somehow.

What was the worst high jinks you did?

Oh, I think, I didn't do too much, I don't think.

Nothing you'll admit to?

No, oh we used to get on the booze, sometimes badly. 'Cause we were only two pot screamers in those days. But anyway, Denny was a different place, the townspeople didn't seem to

40:30 go for us, and it was a hot place, dust all over the place.

But the townspeople of Tasmania enjoyed your company?

Yes, they were marvellous, terrific, the Tasmania people are wonderful people. And the Deniliquin people were all right I suppose, but I think they were a bit upset at having a thousand odd people

dumped on their doorstep, using all their pubs and things. Anyway, I was there for five months, and we had to do our best. And went I got into Wirraways,

41:00 this high-powered 550 horsepower, compared to the 135 horsepower of the Tiger Moth, and this great big Rayhill [?] motor in front of you. And the pupil was in the front seat, instructor in the back seat, in the reverse situation. So he had a duplicate set of controls.

We'll, cover more of that in a minute Ken, we've just got to change tapes, sorry mate.

41:24 **End of tape**

Tape 4

00:32 **Rolling. OK. Tell us about the pubs in Deniliquin?**

Well, the pubs in Deniliquin, one was called the Bloodhouse, and there was one the officers stayed at, it was the Royal, I think. But they varied quite a bit, but the beer didn't taste too good in most of them, but we did our best to have a few. But only had

01:00 one day a week, Saturday was the day off, Friday night. One of the treats we had, one of the hotels on Friday night put on Murray Cod, and we'd be up there every night, it was beautiful. But the pubs generally didn't have a great name at Denny, but then we weren't there to hang around pubs for long. But the flying side was a tougher game, because we were playing with a more dangerous aircraft. They were heavier,

01:30 they were high powered and they travelled faster. And the Wirraway was an excellent training aircraft, modified from the North American Harvard training aircraft, we tried to make a war plane out of it, which was not good. But somehow the, the wing structure was different designed here, the Wirraway had a very vicious stall, and if you held off too high above the ground it could flick, and it could flick over

02:00 on your back, which happened sometimes, night flying, I believe, and a couple of blokes were killed. But the early training, you had, I think it did about four or five hours dual training, which involved aerobatics and all the rest of that, and then they sent you off solo, I think it was about four or five hours, I think solo in a Wirraway, and felt very proud to be flying this heavy, powerful thing around.

02:30 And then, they were very good for spins, because you'd get this stall that I mentioned when you pulled back, or ran out of flying speed, and the thing would flick over to one side, and you'd boot the rudder further on, and put it into a vicious spin, and they recovered quite well. And you'd spin it the other way, and they were good for aerobatics, roll off the top. Stall, stalled turns were excellent, both in the Tiger Moth and the Wirraway were both wonderful manoeuvres.

03:00 In a stalled turn, the air speed goes right off the clock, as you just go up with hardly any movement to try come over and, and gather flying speed again.

What wasn't the Wirraway a combat worthy aircraft?

Oh it was too slow, and see they, it was no match for the, see it only cruised about 145 miles per hour. Well say the Kittyhawks and the Spitfires, they cruised at 200 plus, sort of thing.

03:30 And it was just, it was designed as a trainer, but our Commonwealth Aircraft [factory], they did a great job in building them, but they tried to make it a reconnaissance aircraft, you know, there was provision for a photographer to lie down in the back of it, like the rear gunner could turn the seat around, and lie on the floor with a camera, and take camera shots, which is a bit much. They tried to make a general purpose aircraft, out of a single engine trainer.

04:00 However, they built about 800 of them, and they did an excellent job for the Empire Air Training School, in training at lot of pilots, 100 a month came off the production line from Wirraway. And the Wirraway was used a bit later on in Number 4 and 5 Squadron, there was army co-op, and they were good, because they could carry an army officer in the back seat, and working closely with the army on pinpointing artillery targets.

Where was this?

04:30 Up in New Guinea in the Island, Bougainville as far as Borneo.

So when you say army co-operation, you're saying that only in terms of reconnaissance?

And ground staff, they used another aircraft, the Boomerang aircraft also, which was made, more powerful single engine, meant to be a stop-gap fighter, because we didn't have anything to counter the Zero, before the Kittyhawks arrived in great

05:00 numbers and the Spitfires. The Boomerang ended up to be a very good army co-op aircraft also. So the Wirraway spotters would being in the Boomerangs, and they had two cannons and four machine-guns,

and they could do ground strafing for targets, so that was good. But the training was pretty full on, in, you know,

05:30 hot conditions. And there was night flying, you had to be checked out at night, and then sent solo. I had a narrow squeak one night, when I, it wasn't my first effort, but I'd been checked out by an instructor for the circuit first. And I took off, and my instrument lights, I used to like to have a bit of instrument light on, which was controlled by a rear stat, down the right hand side of the aircraft. And it vibrated off, and I was left with the luminous lights, and

06:00 my eyes hadn't adjusted. In Deniliquin there's no horizon at night, you can't see anything, it's pitch black. And I started to get that horrible feelings of being out of control, which you get when your eyes and ears get all out of alignment, in such conditions. And I realised, I was reaching down to turn the rear stat, and I was trying to get it up, when I let the aircraft go to one side and downwards. So I was

06:30 heading, almost getting into a spiral drive, which is very dangerous, because I was still climbing away. Anyway, I realised I, copped, the horizon guided me and I managed to level the wings again, and climb up again and get control, but it was a nasty feeling. In fact when I landed, the instructor checked me out, he said, "What happened to you then?" So I told him, just like I told you. He said, "Yes." So that was the only narrow squeak

07:00 I think I had at Denny. One night at night flying, one of our fellows was killed. I'd flown earlier that night and I was in bed, and we got up next morning to see one of our beds was empty, and found out that Bluey, ginger headed fellow, I can't think of his name off hand, he was killed, he crashed, hit the ground at night, and somehow got out of the, it might have been something similar

07:30 to what happened to me, could have been. So he was killed, and he lies buried in the Deniliquin cemetery along with numerous others, which we've been to their graves since, I'll think of his name in a minute. But on his grave, we didn't know it at the time, he was an army deserter, he'd deserted the army to join the air force. And he hadn't told the army sort of thing that he was, he signed up, he volunteered for the air force and the army apparently wouldn't let him out, so he

08:00 knicked off. And on his grave, it was written his name, then his real name, formerly army number such-and-such. I'll, terribly memory, he had red hair. But fortunately we only lost the one. And another fellow was scrubbed out of the, 50 started on the course and 48 graduated. Towards the end of the course, we were,

08:30 no about half way through the course, the group captain in charge of the station called us all into the meeting, our whole course. And he made an announcement, he said, "I want 25 of you fellows to volunteer to go to Canada immediately, no leave, those who volunteer go straight on a ship to Canada, so put your hands up, anybody who wants to volunteer." And I didn't know what to do, my brother, I knew, was a prisoner of war and another brother up fighting the Japs, and I thought, "Oh."

09:00 I put my hand up, but nothing was ever heard of it, nothing was ever said, so they didn't take the 25 blokes, so, it was a mystery. So I don't know what happened, but we had another month tacked onto our course there, instead of doing two months in what was called Intermediate Training Squadron, which gets you up to your wing stage, where you qualify for your wings. And on my wings test, I did a dreadful thing. I had a

09:30 different, he was a senior instructor in the back, Flight Lieutenant Gillespie, and I had to do an instrument take off under the hood. And I, he said, "Right-o, away you go." and I'm, all I've got is my instruments. But off I go, and I reckon I was doing the best take-off I've ever done, I'm keeping the thing on zero. And suddenly "Taking over, coming out from under the hood, look what you've done." And I'd forgotten to

10:00 uncage my instruments, my gyro instruments, which means I had the zero which guided me in what direction, jammed on zero, instead of it being allowed to wander if I was off course. And I was heading towards the hangars of the airfield, and I thought, "Oh God, I'm scrubbed now." Anyway he said, "Right-o, remember what you did wrong, and don't do it again, you'll kill yourself and others." So he did let me do it again, and I passed OK.

10:30 So that was the wings part, so at this stage, I've got Tigers, I've got Wirraways as an aeroplane. Now they've got to teach you to use armament, guns, bombs and what have you. So you go to another flight, which is another squad, which is called Advance Training Squadron. So you've got to apply that aircraft to being a war machine.

Actually before you go on Ken, can you tell us about,

11:00 **we can go up to the Armament training next question, but tell us about the actual deaths in training, I know this was a big deal?**

About the deaths in training?

Accidents.

Yes, there was a lot of men were killed. I can't, I've got photos something similar. I think there's about 14 or 15 killed, I remember three were killed one Christmas Eve, must have been a Wirraway with two

in it, and a solo had a collision I presume.

11:30 But there's quite a number there, in a special, in the normal cemetery, the general cemetery, there's a war graves situation. And further on in Mildura, there was fighter pilots, about 66 graves, killed, they're all in single engine, single seat mostly aircraft.

66?

66. Yeah, I've got the records there, that I've got from the War Graves Commission, when we had a reunion back there. We're, we're going up there in a couple of months, to a reunion, as a matter of fact,

12:00 and we'll be visiting the cemetery again.

From your batch of recruits at the time, how many were actually killed in training?

Well I can't, from the 300 that started Somers, that was whittled down to 80 over in Tasmania, cause the others went elsewhere. Because navigators and wireless operators, so I don't know where most of them went. But, well, we didn't, we didn't lose any on Tiger Moths,

12:30 but while we were at Deniliquin, two Tigers collided at Western Junction, and two or three killed in that, just after we left. And we lost one, just the one at Deniliquin, Bluey Hunter, no. But other courses lost them, but Mildura was the worst part, the worst training for fighter, single engine aircraft that is.

13:00 But if you go to places like Sale, East Sale where the bombing, Beauford Bombers were mysteriously crashing, and they found out they had a bad problem with them, structural problems were wrong. And aircraft were just going on a night cross country, and not coming back. So many of them crashed without any survivors. So the bomber crews, 'cause they had four fellows on board, to lose four at a time, a lot more than the fighters. So I don't know the count of

13:30 others and I can't tell you in the total war, the training accidents were terrible, in the whole Empire Air Training Scheme. Even our navigators, of course they could be, no matter what mustering you were, the aircraft would anyway, usually killed. But at Denny and advanced training, we were taught how, it had two Browning .303 guns, firing through the propeller, which was rigged up to a

14:00 high pressure oil system. And quite often it went out of gear, and put a hole in the prop, and they'd have to file the other blades down, to make sure they were perfectly balanced. Anyhow, we did air to ground gunnery, I'm glad I had my goggles down in one case, because oil came out of the system, all over my face, and if I hadn't had the goggles on, my eyes would have copped all the oil, could have hit the ground. And then we did dive bombing on the bombing

14:30 range, and there would be somebody there in a protected hut measuring you, you know how close you were to the target. And then skip bombing, which was used against shipping, you'd bounce a bomb on the water, and then it'd bounce, bounce and. So all that, and then air to air, all the aircraft there were fitted with cine cameras. So when you were doing aerial dog fighting, there were camera shots taken to see whether you allowed enough deflection in your shooting and that sort of thing.

15:00 So it was all to do with applying the aircraft as a wall, platform, fighting platform. And then at the end of that, it was there they put on an extra month to our course, no one knows why. Perhaps they thought we were getting too many off the production line sort of thing. So we had an extra month, it didn't do any harm, it was an extra months' flying, and. So when I graduated on the 31st of May,

15:30 1944, which was one of the biggest days of my life to get that pair of wings pinned on my chest, and a formation of Wirraways, flown by instructors flew overhead as it all happened, you know. And my mother was able to get up in the train, my brother was on leave from the army, and he and his wife and little boy were there, plus my next sister Joyce. So I had quite a bit of family staying there, and we all celebrated that night.

16:00 My Mum didn't drink, my sister didn't drink, so we were in disgrace, the rest of us, we all had too much, we were so, such an important day the pinning of, having our wings on. And I was a sergeant, there were 48 graduated. I mentioned one other bloke was scrubbed, he did a silly thing. He passed his wings test, and he had a brother, a flying instructor at Ewan Quinty, the other Wirraway school. So on a cross-country flight, instead of just doing the normal thing,

16:30 he decided to beat the hell out of Ewan Quinty, you know, low flying buzzing the place, as a pupil. And his brother's a flying officer, a flying instructor there. Well they found it out and they scrubbed him for it, so he lost his, he didn't get his wings. So anyway, 48 of us graduated, 12 were made pilot officers straight off, the rest of us were sergeant pilots. And oh, I thought I was boss cocky with three stripes and a pair of wings, that was,

17:00 I'd achieved my ambition. But then of course, before we graduated, we were called before a Wing Commander, Chief Instructor, who interviewed you to see what you wanted to do, if you had a liking for something. Well as it happened, not long before that, four Vultee Vengeance dive bombers had come over and put on a bit of a very good display, they were roaring down screaming with their dive breaks out and making a hell of a noise. And one of them stayed overnight,

17:30 and I remember sitting in the cockpit the next day, thinking, "This is good." suddenly I didn't want to be

a fighter pilot, I wanted to be Vultee Vengeance dive bomber. And I told the chief instructor this, and he said “Oh well, Wilkinson, we’ve just had word that they’ve been pulled out of combat, they’re not satisfactory, so what’s your next choice?” And I said, “Fighter pilot, Sir.” And he said, “What’s your age?” He said, “You’re not even 19 yet, no you’re too young, you’ll have to be a staff pilot.” Anyway, I was posted to be a fighter pilot.

18:00 So then my, we went in order then, so about 20, roughly half went to Mildura, which was the only fighter training unit in Australia. And the rest went to central flying school, some went to be flying instructors, and some went to be staff pilots at Bairnsdale, Sale, on flying Fairy Battles, things like that, single engine,

18:30 towing drogues and that sort of thing. ’Cause those blokes were looked upon, I guess, as needing a bit more flying time, before going to OUT [Operational Training school], because they needed, they had pilots doing all this training work, so we all had our place. Well Mildura was a real, I’d been there as an Air Training Corp kid for a weekend, and we spent one day at the base, and even on that one day, I’d no sooner got out of the bus, then someone said, “Look, there’s a fellow

19:00 bailing out.” and a fellow jumped out of a Kittyhawk, the Kittyhawk spun and crashed away from the airfield, but the pilot was saved. And that was the first greeting in the Air Training Corp. And when I got there, it was a Sunday I think, we had to start flying on the Monday, the next day, allocated our huts and everything. And so you had to do about three weeks on Wirraway, using them as a fighter, before going onto either a Spitfire, or a

19:30 Kittyhawk or a Boomerang, they had all those types there. Now the fellows from the previous course were all excited, because they were going onto Kittyhawks and things the next day. And one of them, I’ll never forget a red headed chap who came through the hut, and he’s all excited, I remember seeing him in the course ahead of us at Deniliquin. Next day he was killed, in his first flight in a Kittyhawk, an electrical fire and he, while I was out in a Wirraway somewhere, he was killed back at the,

20:00 near the base. So Mildura was a marvellous place, a terrific town, great situation, but it was chock-a-block, too many aircraft operating there, there was collisions and things happening, it was a dangerous place, hence the number of casualties. But we did our three weeks Wirraways, and the instructors were all experienced fighter pilots, they’d all come back from the war in the Middle East,

20:30 New Guinea, wherever, England, and you were being taught by a fighter pilot who to, tactics and everything. And one of my instructors, a dear chap, he was to be a future Prime Minister, a fellow called John Gorton. He’s in a log book over there, and I’ve met him since he was Prime Minister, had a few beers with him.

So what did you know about John Gorton’s record at the time?

21:00 Well all I knew, he was a quite a, he was a flight lieutenant and he had a pushed in nose, and it was obvious, the word got around that he’d been in a terrible, he was shot down by Japanese aircraft, crashed and his air, his nose, his face hit the gun sight, there was quite a sharp thing the gun sight, it’d make a mess of you, and he hitting it. And he’d since been operated on, of course, and it made it look a lot better, but he was

21:30 thorough gentleman in the air, and the six times I flew with him, I liked him. Some of the other fellows were, you know, they were alright, but a bit matter of fact and a bit gruff, there was no matey business like existed between your own peers. But it was a hot shot course, and it came to the final test to pass that, because they scrubbed a lot. And they sent, you always operated in pairs in fighters,

22:00 because one man’s your wing man, and he protects the tail of the leader sort of thing, you work as a pair. So you take off in pairs, you don’t always land in pairs. But at, the flight commander said, “Right, you, so-and-so Wilkinson, and you what ever your name is, you’re going up tomorrow morning, in a pair, for an hour, you’ll each have an instructor in the back seat, and when you come back, one of your will be scrubbed.” So that was the nice old morale booster.

22:30 I’ve since met the bloke who told me that. And well, so, he said, “You’d better fly like a bird.” By gee, I flew like a bird, the other bloke was scrubbed, Lloyd Walton his name was, poor chap, he was posted off to be a staff pilot, he died some years ago. So that’s what it was. And then you were told, whether you were to be Kittyhawks, Spitfires or Boomerangs,

23:00 well we couldn’t be Boomerangs, we were sergeants, you had to be an officer. So it was either Spits or Kitties. Well there was more Kittyhawks in action than Spits, so they wanted more Kitty replacements, so I was one of them, hopefully, by passing the course. They, in between the Wirraway finish and the start of the Kittyhawks, they had a week in the bush, by the Murray River, and get fit, you know, fitness camp, no grog.

23:30 We had a mile run every morning before breakfast, and this is bloody winter time, and I turned 19 at this stage, well during the Wirraway course. I forgot to tell you, two of my mates collided on my birthday, one chopped the tail off the other one, one bailed out he’s still alive, and the other one was killed and he’s in the Mildura Cemetery. So we lost the one pilot on our course, and he had graduated

24:00 with us at Deniliquin.

How old are you at this?

I turned 19 on that day, 'cause I was only 18 years and 11 months when I got my wings, which was pretty young.

So how many deaths in training did you actually see altogether?

Oh, well there's only the one at Deniliquin, this one at Den, at Mildura, the Kittyhawks flight, we didn't lose anybody. There was the one ahead of me, I just explained, on the Kittyhawk.

24:30 Anyway, at this camp, we were really fit as mallee bulls, and you had to get into the Murray River, it threw me in and I tried to dodge it was icy cold, there was snow water coming off the Snowy Mountains, and it was cold. Anyway, at the end of that week, the warrant officer in charge of us, and there's all sorts of ranks above warrant officer, but he was in charge and everybody did what they were told. Oh they were Royal Air force, one from Kenya even,

25:00 talk about Empire, they were all sorts of good people. And come the last night, the warrant officer sent a truck into the sergeants' mess in Mildura, and told them to come back loaded with beer and barbeque chops and things, and back it came. Well the booze around this big campfire, and had a sing-song, songs I'd never heard before by the RAF blokes, and oh it was a great wind-up, to a week's hard slog.

25:30 So then we went back to camp, ready to start our intensive training into the real thing, into a real fighter. So I was checked off in this Kittyhawk, being, they didn't have any two seaters for instructors to teach you, you used to have to learn the pilot's notes. So every aircraft has a pilot, a book on it, called pilot's notes, it's all about stalling speeds, engine revs, propeller pictures and all the whole business about the

26:00 aircraft. So I swatted all that up, then an instructor would have the job of giving you a blindfold test, so he put a blindfold over you, and he said "Where's the flap lever?." and you'd have to feel there. "Where's the throttle?." there. "Where's the, the, what ever, the cooling, cooling handle?." and down here, and you had to do it all by feel, and that's all they could do, because there was no second seat.

26:30 So he said, "Right-o, you're on your own, out you go." So I taxied out, Mildura had three asphalt runways, they'd been put in specially for the air force to use. And away I went in this great big beast, and I opened the throttle, bearing in mind it's twice as powerful as the Wirraway, it's got over a thousand horsepower, and these were all aircraft been used in training, that had come back from the war, they'd been used in operations at Milne Bay and Port Moresby sort of thing.

27:00 Well this monster took me off, and I was controlling it as best I can, and it's such a long nose that you can't see anything until you get the tail up, and you can see straight ahead. So I've climbed up high, and I did some aerobatics that was good. And then after about an hour, to come down and land. Well I got the green light to land, and I touched down alright, but a bit short before the asphalt started there was a gravel lead-in.

27:30 And I hit the gravel and touched down alright, but there was a bump where the asphalt started, and it kicked the nose up in the air, and I came down, I hit it with some power, and I came down and scratched the wing tip on the ground, and the right under carriage hit the ground, and oh God, I got out of it, and neatly taxied back. And there was the flight commander, "Sergeant, I saw that, go and have your lunch, come back, I'll have another Kittyhawk ready for you, and I'll sit in a bloody chair and I'll

28:00 watch you for an hour doing circuits and bumps, and if you do one crook landing, you're scrubbed." Do you think I enjoyed my lunch that day? Not on your life. But that's the way it was. I've met all these fellows since and reminded them, just in joking, "I wouldn't have said that, surely, Ken, would I?" 'Cause they had a job to do and they had to. Anyway, I came back after lunch and the wind had changed, we were on a different runway, as it happened. And there he was sitting in his chair, well I

28:30 greased them all on, I came down, three wheelers for an hour, did about six or seven landings in that time. Thankfully, made the grade there. So, on another occasion on the Kittyhawk, it was a low flying, cross country. And you're only a couple of hundred feet above the ground and it's all desert country, once you get away from the Mildura oasis. And I've thought, I'd better come up and try and find out where I am, because I haven't passed any railway lines or anything..

29:00 So I climbed up and I came across a railway line, so I followed that one, so I headed up and it ran out of steam, it came to the end of the buffers, and there's no, during the war they took the names off railway stations, in case the enemy got here, they could read them. So there was no names on it. So I climbed as high as I could, and I could see the Murray River, so I headed for that. Then I didn't know which, whether to go left or right, as it happened I went left and went the correct way. But I did

29:30 a bit of a heavy landing, and weakened a locking bolt on the under carriage, but it was alright, it just needed minor repairs. So I didn't do much damage to the aircraft. And then, getting close. So we finished our Kittyhawk course, and I, in my log books, reached the required standard, signed by Squadron Leader Lowden.

30:00 Now he was squadron at age 21, he went from flight sergeant to squadron leader in 18 months, I'm told. Yes, at the age of 21, he's a squadron leader. The Chief Instructor, who's Bobby Gibbs, DSO

[Distinguished Service Order], well known fellow, great bloke, I heard he's taken, had a bit of a stroke or something recently, I've met him in recent times too. He was the chief instructor, he was an old man back from the Middle East, I think he was 28 or 29,

30:30 he was an old man. The group captain in charge, back from the Middle East, DSO, he was 24, a group captain.

Was that unusual?

Well, they're just kids, but they came back full of war decorations, aces, shot down Germans, Italian aircraft and they're running the show. So that was Mildura. Mildura was a wonderful station, you know, the first time we were in a proper sergeants' mess. So we weren't treated

31:00 as trainees, we were pilots under instruction, which was different, sounded a bit better than trainees. So they were all graduate blokes, who were doing post graduate studies, you might say. Then we were posted off to have final leave, on our way to the war. So had a week home, came down by train of course, then a week at home, and oh, a few of us went AWL [absent without leave] for a few days, bugger it,

31:30 we're going to the war, we probably won't come back, so have a few more days in the pub. So then we got a troop train. We were posted up to Sandgate in Queensland to do a toughening up course they called it, a hardening up course.

What's that?

Well all air crew going up north, were, in case we were shot down or bailed out and ended up in the jungle, survival, you know, living off the land. We came across a pineapple plantation,

32:00 on one occasion at breakfast time, so we got the fellows to give us some pineapples and we ate them. Navigation, like the army blokes have to, with little compasses. And even a wing commander going up to command a Beaufighter Squadron, which was the highest rank, and we were all run by a sergeant, who was an expert at weapons. He taught us how to, I've thrown hand grenades even. Bren guns we fired, and what's all the weaponry and

32:30 tactics that we might need. And of course, we carried our own Smith and Wesson when we got to the squadron, we had to learn out about firing them.

What about, I think when you were at Mildura you were doing shadow shooting?

Shadow shooting, yes.

Tell us about shadow shooting.

Shadow shooting is one of the most dangerous things you can go for. You can only of course, do it on a sunny day. You'd have one, you'd go out in pairs, and one would do a stooge

33:00 for first 20 minutes or so, and he'd just fly between the sun and the water on Lake Victoria. And while he's doing that, you come roaring down with all your guns set, and staff ahead of you, it's good for deflection shooting. See with shooting, you've got to fire so much ahead of the enemy aircraft, it's just like duck shooting, deflection shooting it's called. And it's very, you've got to do all the mathematics in your head, then,

33:30 now they've got gyro guns and it's all together different. But you had to work it out in your head, and you'd get wound up in your gun sight, and forget that you're flying pretty low, and there's probably about seven or eight aircraft went into the water there, they're still there. They've located the sights, and they've sort of got memorials to them, I was only talking about it the other day to somebody. And the Aboriginals have now claimed it as a sacred ground or something, won't let them go in and get some of the

34:00 wreckage, if its still there. But it was a very dangerous pastime, but very, very good training for fighter pilots, in deflection shooting. But the final, I missed this, the final flight of the, at the Mildura, they'd send out 12 Wirraways to act as bombers, and they go in some direction. And then when they came back, they'd be escorted up high by twelve Spitfire,

34:30 and they were coming to bomb Mildura. Now the Kittyhawks and Boomerangs were the interceptors, and we had to meet them and stop them getting through, and it ended up in a great big dog fight, well, how we didn't, there weren't any collisions, I'll never know. I thought, "I'll never get to this war, I'm going to have a collision." So all those aircraft milling around. In fact it wasn't until years later I found out that not long after we finished there, they moved the Spitfires and the Wirraways to Parkes,

35:00 to take the heat off, because the Mustangs were starting to come into action too, and they had to cater to them. So they had Mustangs, Kittyhawks, Spitfires and Boomerangs, and the Wirraways. So it was over crowded and hence, a lot of those deaths could have been saved perhaps if it was less crowded. But oh, it was a heck of a dog fight going on, Spitfires and Kittyhawks, all in together, anyway.

35:30 **Was it at this point that you were told you were going to Port Moresby or Dutch New Guinea, your posting?**

I'm not sure exactly when we were told, I think it was at Townsville, it was after we finished, I think it was two weeks at Sandgate, we had to get in another troop train. We'd come up from Melbourne by troop train, and that was an education on its own. Oh, living in dreadful conditions all that time, however we were young, smoking our heads off. And did this, had a break at Sandgate,

36:00 then we got another troop train to go to Townsville, it took four days to get from Brisbane to Townsville, because it's only narrow, single track, it still is. And it's off, trains coming opposite way all the time, you had to pull into sidings. But we were fed by people at different stations, would have food ready for us, sausages and eggs or whatever, some of them were volunteers, I think, women you know, feeding all the people on this troop train. Because it was busy with

36:30 busy with troops going up to New Guinea, and air, navy blokes. And then at Townsville we were put into a holding depot, waiting for posting. Yeah, it was then we were told what squadron we were going to.

When you were in Townsville and Brisbane, did you see and interact with many Americans?

Oh in Brisbane we saw a lot of Yanks [Americans], yeah, we were at Sandgate, we were just a little steam train used to pull the local suburban carriages around, we

37:00 thought a bit like Melbourne, it was just little tank engines, steam train thing. Oh yes, Brisbane was a very, very dirty place, we weren't impressed with Brisbane, different now, it's a lovely place.

What do you mean dirty?

It was filthy, there was papers all over, and the Yanks, it was a military town, you know, as was Townsville, more so.

What were the reputation of the Americans, in your experience?

Oh not too good, there were some pretty bad fights there, the Australian soldiers and the Americans.

Did you see some?

No, I didn't see them, no, no.

37:30 We weren't there long enough, we were out at Sandgate, and it was like being out at Dandenong sort of thing, by the sea. And we'd come into the city on a Friday night sort of thing, or a Saturday, and then go back to the camp.

I heard that the Americans were, would sometimes say inappropriate comments to the Australian servicemen, did you find that for yourself?

I didn't find

38:00 myself, it did happen, but it was more so our blokes having a shot at the Yanks, because they were whipping off with all our girls, and they were paid so much. See our blokes were paid little. I was well paid, being a pilot, I was getting seventeen and six a day as a sergeant pilot. Where the army private got six shillings a day, I think in those days, or an airman, six bob a day. But the Yanks would get the equivalent of about ten pounds a week,

38:30 and all the flash uniforms and all sorts of, you know, they had ice cream making machines and, as they toured the world, they were rich, rich cousins, you know. So we'd be stealing off the, we were. In the finish we all dressed in American clothing up at the war, it was quality. But at Townsville, we had to wait for transport to get to the war up in New Guinea, and further on. We didn't know where our squadrons were.

39:00 I was posted to 77th Squadron, and eventually we got told to pack our bags, we're going by flying boat from Townsville to Port Moresby. On a Sunday afternoon, we got on this big Short Sunderland Flying boat, the only time I've ever been on one. And I had to sit in, right on the hull of it, and when it hit the water in Port Moresby, all the noise and the vibrations, but it was an experience, a big four engine flying boat. And then we got out of there, we had to go to

39:30 various camps, what they call OBU's, operational base units, which were transit camps really for the air force. Because there's people on the move all over the place, and they had to feed us and put a, give us a tent and a stretcher to kip on, and I think we spent two nights at Port Moresby. Went to a big picture theatre there with Yanks, and oh God, it was some blokes made some funny comments, you know,

40:00 and everyone burst out laughing, a love scene, you can imagine what it was like with all the blokes in the audience.

I'll have to stop you there, because we've run out of tape.

Again.

I'm afraid.

Gee, I can talk.

40:11 End of tape

Tape 5

00:32 **OK, once training was finished, did you have an idea of where you were going to go, or were you just sent there?**

Well, we knew we were going to the war, but we didn't know what squadron at that stage. It wasn't until we were at Townsville in the transit camp we were told where we were to go, because the squadron meant nothing to us, we didn't know where they were or nothing about them. So we went, from Townsville by flying

01:00 boat, Short Sunderland to Port Moresby, and when we got out of the aircraft, we had to be ferried ashore in boats of course. But the air was so oppressive, the tropical heat, you know, we'd never experienced that, it was all together different to Townsville even. It was very, my eyes almost closed, and it took a bit of getting used to, I never really got used to it. Anyhow, we spent a couple of nights at Port Moresby, and then waiting for transport,

01:30 it's always somebody organising it, it's amazing how things happen. But in these transit camps, there were people coming to and fro, being posted to and from units. And they had a piece of paper in their hand saying where they're supposed to go, and somebody would organise it. So in our case, we've about, oh a dozen of us I suppose, all going to the Kittyhawk squadron as reinforcements. Yes, so the crew of us all, we ended up at another transit camp

02:00 at Finschhafen, and we were there, stuck there for a few days. It turned out, some of them moved on, but we, there were five us were kept there, because we were all posted to the 77 Squadron, and we heard through the grapevine, that 77 was in the process of moving from the Admiralty Islands to Noemfor Islands in Dutch New Guinea. So we were kept waiting until til they got a camp all fixed, and accommodation for us, I guess.

When you arrived in Port Moresby,

02:30 **did you know you were going to be there, or?**

No.

You just got out of the plane?

No, we just got, do as you're told, someone feeds you, someone gives you something to eat, it's amazing how it all happens.

Did you know where it was?

I knew where Port Moresby was, but that's about all. We didn't learn anything about New Guinea at school, I don't recall. And then Finschhafen, well, it was all foreign names. But while at Finschhafen, it was rain and mud and slush and mud, but unbelievably,

03:00 we were close to the sea, and I thought I was seeing things, I thought I saw a ship coming in near the jungle there. And when we went over closer, it was an aircraft carrier, a small American air craft carrier, coming into dock in very deep water, right on the shore. And there was an aircraft carrier on our doorstep. The Yanks, it was unbelievable you start to see the might of the American set up. You know, we hadn't been told much about them, only they had army, they had marines

03:30 and they had Kittyhawks and that sort of thing. But when we, from Finschhafen we went to Hollandia, and that was an eye opener. There was three separate airfields that the Yanks had built at Hollandia, another Dutch New Guinea place. And we, we had to stay there a night too, I think, it was a transit camp. Then we were transported off, Dakotas was the means of transport, after we

04:00 got off the flying boats, of course the Dakotas were everywhere to transport, marvellous aircraft. So we ended up at Noemfor Island and somebody transported us to 77th Squadron's camp in the jungle, which had been cleared a lot, a lot of, it wasn't dense jungle where the camp was, it was all cleared. And there were trees, like pawpaw trees growing, with fruit on them, sometimes ate them later. But there were tents all neatly set up, and we were,

04:30 the adjunct or somebody organised us to give us a tent, and told to have a meal, lunchtime I think, then the commanding officer wanted to talk to us in the afternoon. And Wing Commander Cresswell was the commanding officer, he was 24 years of age, I think, this was his second tour. He'd founded, he'd formed up 77 Squadron in Perth, in, beginning of 1942. And he was a dapper little chap, a moustache,

05:00 and non-regulation dressers most of them were, they didn't care about uniforms at the war much. He had a pair of Hitler style jack boots on, and white pants. Anyway, we went into his tent, and he said, we're all NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] the five of us, and he said, "Look, you've joined the best fighter squadron in the Royal Australian Air Force, we've just been equipped with the latest model Kittyhawks, and you've got a proud tradition to uphold." And in one corner of the tent,

05:30 we could see the door of an aircraft. And he told us, “That’s the door of an aircraft I shot, Japanese aircraft I shot down over Darwin one night.” which he did. He said, “Now, I’m proud of this squadron, I formed it, and I want to have a top line quality personnel, pilots, the lot. Now if any of you young bastards dare prang one of my aeroplanes, back home to your mothers you go.” Now that was our,

06:00 that was our welcome. Well I think we all wanted to go home to our mothers after that little burst. Anyway, that was the type of bloke, he’s a friend of mine now, I saw him, I’ll mention it later what I said to him, later on.

Had, did you hear of him before you met him?

No, no, didn’t, no, hadn’t heard of him, we didn’t know any of the Kittyhawk commanders, you know. We were so busy learning to fly, learning how to use the aeroplanes as a machine, a war machine, and you didn’t hear all these things.

Because he’s a bit of a

06:30 **hero now, isn’t he?**

Oh he is, yes, yes. I know him well, I rang him up the other day when I heard he was crook. So you wouldn’t believe after having that pep talk, every fighter squadron had a Wirraway aircraft, it’s the only two seater aircraft in a squad, purely for fellows like us who hadn’t flown for six weeks. And we’re a bit rusty, you do get rusty. So the Wirraway was to go up, ’cause many of the pilots were qualified flying

07:00 instructors as well. And you’d go up and have a couple of circuits, then you’d go up in a Kittyhawk. Well the Wirraway was not serviceable, the tropics knocked them around a bit, the hydraulic seals and all that sort of thing. So they put us into brand new Kittyhawks. Well one of my mates that joined with me, he forgot to put his flaps down coming into land, he ran right off the end of the bloody strip, into a petrol tanker, whoof up she went, he was lucky to get out of it, with his,

07:30 he was badly burned, he was hospitalised. Anyway, we thought, “Oh God, he’s going to be sent home, he’s pranged an aircraft.” The CO, there was a new CO about to take over, to allow Cresswell to be wing leader, and Sandy McCulloch was his name, Squadron Leader, and he talked Cresswell into letting this young bloke stay on. As it turns out, he was shot down and killed later on, lost, I was on that flight when it happened.

08:00 **How did that affect you?**

Well, we lost two out of 12 on that same day, so it wasn’t nice. But that was a bit later on, in operations. But anyway, I did some formation flying with the flight commander, and I got it down all right. And, but it was very tense, you know, we had to meet all the other pilots, and they were all, we were the new boys, and they were the old boys sort of thing. But there were, in the fighter squadron or in any squadron, you’ve got officers and you’ve got

08:30 NCOs. Sometimes you’ve got NCOs leading the officers, it’s a strange set up, our air force had. So we met them all and they all seemed to be pretty good blokes, and mostly helpful.

What was the relationship between the old boys and the new boys, how did that work?

Oh, I suppose it was more our feeling, we thought, “Oh well, we’ve got to be careful what we say here, we know nothing, they’re new.” And on my very first operational flight as a flying officer, it was in leading, I was number two to him,

09:00 and we went across the water over to the mainland of Dutch New Guinea on a, what was called a barge sweep, we were looking for barges that transport all their gear, overnight usually, and hid under the jungle trees and bushes along the river during the day. So we were searching around, and I got separated from him, and I couldn’t see him, and we were 200 miles from home, I suppose, oh, 150 at least. And I thought, “Oh my God, if I come down in this jungle, I’m gone, if my engine stops, I’m

09:30 gone.” It was a horrible experience. But suddenly I picked him up and I stuck close to him then. But the, that terrain up there is terrible.

Was that one of the worst experiences you had?

Oh, I had a lot worse than that. But that was my very first flight, we didn’t find any barges as it happened, so we, we ended up getting back to base, I think we strafed a couple of huts, they might have been radar huts or something,

10:00 and back to base.

When you started flying these missions, what was the difference between that and the training you’ve done?

Oh well, you were taking off with bomb loads, a Kittyhawk could carry up to three 500 pound bombs, which was very good for a single engine, single seat fighter, a Spitfire couldn’t do that. And it could carry along, that at a long range. Or it could carry two bombs, one on each wing,

10:30 with a belly tank underneath, which would give you the range. Well I’ve gone four hours fifty minutes in

a Kitty, non-stop with a big drop tank underneath. So they were very good for long range work like that. But most of them, most operators were dive bombing Japanese air strips, keeping them unserviceable, because they didn't have many aircraft, but what they had, were a long way away, and they could stage them through at night, and do some nuisance bombing at night time,

11:00 and get into, we had so many aircraft, the Allies, the Yanks [Americans] in particular. Our runway at Noemfoor had six Australian Kittyhawk Squadrons, 24 aircraft each. It had a Beaufort Squadron, a Beaufighter Squadron of 24, a Boston of 24, that's just the Australian component, plus Dakotas and things. Then the Yanks had their own strip across, a couple of mile away, almost on the same circuit area, and they had Thunderbolts, Lightning, Liberators,

11:30 you've got no idea, just this little island. And not far away was Biak Island, and there was another big American airstrip set up there. All the way up the island hopping, the Yanks just moved in, took a patch, put a metal runway down on it, or in our case, a coral, they put the bulldozers in, in fact ours was built by Australian Air Field Construction Corp blokes, they did a hell of a good job. They, the coral was a good base to level out,

12:00 very hard on the tyres, but good, saved them putting all that Marsden matting down, which used to link together like a Meccano set thing.

When did you find out you missions once you go to?

Oh, it depends. If it's an early morning job, the night before you'd be told, and you'd be briefed on what your basic course is. And some early morning, you'd take off at six o'clock, just before dawn. Sometimes mid morning, some afternoon, but a long range,

12:30 we did a few long range ones, oh a long way, six hours flying for a handle, there's no automatic pilots on a fighter. And in that you'd be landing, one, two, three, four times, four take offs and landings in that. And one of the landings with all your bombs on still, if they'd dropped off, or if you had daisy coloured bombs on, which were anti personnel bombs, you couldn't make them safe. If they dropped off your rack, they'd go up. But normal

13:00 bombs, you could drop them safe, if the propellers didn't spin and arm them, you could drop them, if they fell off you'd carry them on the ground, they should theoretically not go off.

Was the planning well organised?

Well the instructors would come from up high, we would know nothing about that. We'd, they'd come to the wing, the wing would pass to the Squadron, Squadron would gather the two flight commanders in, and then they'd sort out what the mission entailed, how many aircraft were needed,

13:30 to bomb a certain airstrip, or it might be fuel tankers, fuel tank sight, fuel dumps, bomb dumps. Because natives used to pass information through, intelligence gather all this stuff, we knew nothing about that, of course. We were just given the position or place to bomb, or dive bomb or staff, our machine-guns, because Kittyhawks carry six point five, they were very devastating, very good,

14:00 very effective.

How did Kittyhawks compare to the planes you'd trained on?

Oh, they were much faster, and they were a proper war plane, the others were trainers, you know. But these were fitted out to fight a war with, either in aerial combat. But we didn't have any aerial combat, because all the Japs had been shot down, or knocked rotten by the American and Australians before our time, sort of thing. So we saw plenty of knocked up, knocked about

14:30 Japanese aircraft on their airstrips. But they had the capacity to, we might dive bomb them one day, leave a lot of craters, but overnight they could fill those craters in and make it serviceable, you could see, it's a continuous job. And on one night at Noemfoor we experienced an air raid, it was only three Japanese bombers came over. So the Americans, we didn't know what was going on, we heard rifles firing and God knows what, we got out of our stretchers, and my mate and I looked around, and there's anti-aircraft's

15:00 firing and we heard aircraft overheard, and we heard some American night fighters taking off. They had an aircraft called the Black Widow, which was a two seat pilot plus a radar operator, and they could track down the enemy well, and they shot two down out of the three, the Black Widows. So no damage was done anywhere, but that was one air raid. And the devastating air raid,

15:30 only a handful of Japanese did, was the day we, the day before, or rather night become we dive bombed a place called Gullela[?], which we flew a long distance to get to. But unbeknown to us at the time, the Japs had bombed Morotai the night before, which wasn't far away from this place. And Morotai was full of aircraft, ready for the Philippines invasion, you know the Yanks were doing.

16:00 Wing tip to wing tip, they couldn't miss. And we dive bombed the air strip and made it unserviceable, in fact it's written up in air force history books, that 77 Squadron did 100% bombing, and we dive bombed from 22,000 feet. Very, very high, the aircraft we could hardly control them, and G-Force, I pulled out, I blacked out, and I was going to hell of a bat.

Was that the first time you blacked out?

Oh no, no, in

16:30 training many times. But this was a heavy one, cause I was quite dizzy afterwards. And as I came to, I could hear the, this was a place called Gullela, and our mission was to firstly dive bomb the airstrip, and then come around, slow up, come around and first section of four to go and hammer a fuel dump, reportedly in a certain area. Another to do something else, and I was in the last section, and we were to have a general go at any aircraft guns or whatever we

17:00 spotted. And I was number 12, the lucky last, always the worst position to be in, 'cause the anti-aircraft guns were lining up better on the tailenders, anyway nothing got me then. But I heard a mate's voice call up that he's in trouble, his engine's, he'd got a glycol come into his coffer, that's when the liquid glycol is hit, it leaks, and it hits the manifold, hot manifold and turns it into a vapour,

17:30 a choking vapour. And it was getting him, and he said, "I'll fly towards Atom." which is the code name for Motorai, not far away, probably 50 mile away. And so we thought oh, he'll be right, old Smithy's OK. And later on, he said, "Oh it's too bad, I'm bailing out." And they stopped the war virtually, they sent a hundred aircraft to look for him, a hundred fighters went out looking, no sign. So we don't know whether his parachute

18:00 didn't open or got caught in the, or whatever. But I heard his last words, in, in dreadful radio static situations, the worst I've ever heard. Because there was a volcano erupting nearby, I don't know whether, not erupting but blowing fumes and things, it was, the smell in the air was dreadful. Even though we were in oxygen, there was certain bits of it getting through to us. Anyway so poor old Smithy went, and anyway by the time I slowed down

18:30 and came around over the water and back towards land, looking for something, I saw another Kittyhawk in the water, the tail sticking out near the, near the, in the shallow water, and I thought "Oh God." So I, I, anti-aircraft fire, light stuff started to fire at me, I could see the traces sort of swirling, it's a horrible feeling, you think they're going miles from you, suddenly they're racing past you. So I spotted where they were, so I went down and strafed them, and knocked them rotten.

When friends died and so on, how did you deal with all that?

19:00 Well, it's not nice, but the show's just got to go on. As it happened that first section, this fellow, the first one were killed, he was in the first section, so he must have been hit by anti-aircraft in the engine when he was diving. But at least his bombs OK. Now the rest of them went in, and they got a fuel dump, set fire to that, blew that up, so we did a lot of damage. We lost two pilots,

19:30 and when we got, when we landed at Morotai to refuel and find something to eat, and re-arm, 'cause we had another job to do on the way home to hit a radar station. So we were bombed up, and scratched, I don't know where the food come from, scratched up and drank out of our water bottles, hot water you know. Oh, more than four hours flying per day, air crew were issued with a, a ration pack in a sealed tin,

20:00 you had a nice little tin of either tomato juice or orange juice, some sugar coated almonds, and a few other little goodies, chocolates, you know, to survive on. So we had one of those on that flight.

When you come back from a mission and two pilots are missing, or gone.

Well when we got back.

What, do they, do they commemorate those pilots, or they just get on with business?

Oh, well put it this way, we sized up the situation when we landed

20:30 at Morotai after this, and sort of lost two, and two more reported their aircraft hit. And one had a bullet go about a foot behind his head, some shrapnel, a bullet or something. And another had shrapnel go to this tail, so they were alright, the aircraft were alright. Well, we said, "Oh well, bad luck about Smithy, bad luck about Bud Palme." that's all you say, you knew you got to get back into the aircraft and fly out, and go over the enemy again, just that day, never mind for the rest of the nine month tour

21:00 that you had to do. But when we did that job in the afternoon on the way back, landed again on the way back to refuel, and I don't, at an American base, Middleburg Island, top of Dutch New Guinea, and then to Noemfoor about five o'clock at night, in the afternoon. So we took off at six o'clock from our base, and got back at five o'clock in the afternoon, there were no union rules, no hourly rates, no overtime. And had very

21:30 poor food, plenty of cigarettes, Camel, Chesterfields, you name it, we were issued with a packet a day. Anyway, we were debriefed over the whole operation by the Intelligence Officer, and who asked all sort of questions, "Who saw them last?" And "What were the last words?" And in the end, the Officer would say, "Now what was the weather report?" 'Cause they'd pass that onto the weather people, and most of us were, "Buggered if I know." didn't think about that. But then you'd get back

22:00 and have a shower, you were allowed to have one shower a day, the water was put on, beautiful drinking water, filtered coral water. And then we got to the mess, and looked at a vacant chair, a vacant hole's in

the eating department. And Keith Smithwick and I would train throughout, since we'd met in the first at Somers, and we'd pal up, he was an Air Training Corp kid from Northcote. And he was nice, and his whole family worked in the brewery, they were all coopers, and he was an

22:30 apprentice cooper, a Victorian brewery. And I missed him quite a lot really, I didn't know the other fellow so much, he was one of the older hands. But Smithy was a good one, he had a fresh face and the last time I saw him close up really, was when we re-fuelled on the way out to the target, he, me being the last out, I'm just waiting, had my engine running, and he taxied past me, waved and smiled at me,

23:00 you know, it's sad. And I, years later I met his, a couple of his brothers, and his niece oddly enough, a friend of my daughters. But that was the hard part, then you've got to say, well, "Jesus, there's a war on, this is going to happen." So we lost nine pilots I think, while I was with the Squadron. So that was the

23:30 worst that I experienced. We did a hundred percent damage to the runway, and, plus a fuel dump and, so that's how you measure up the value of lives in those days.

Do you remember them more when you have more time, because it sounds like you didn't have time?

Oh these things go through my mind often, you know, particularly since I retired. When I was working, I was too busy to, I guess with the work problems most of the time. But when you get together, all my close friends are all air force fighter pilots anyway,

24:00 and we talk about things, but not sadly, we just think about the bright, the funny memories, remember that night we all got boozed, or some bloody thing. You, you've got to be light headed, light about it, because you don't know when the next. I've always been a bit of a say, you know, it can't happen to me. And I used to rehearse every night in the, lying in the stretcher, I was a bad sleeper even then, still am.

24:30 But I'd be rehearsing bail out procedure, I'd think of, oh everyone caught in a flaming aircraft, that's your worst thing. I feared being trapped in a burning aircraft, or being taken prisoner of the Japanese. 'Cause we were told by intelligence people before we left Mildura, only give, if you're caught, only give your name, rank and number, that's all you can give, under the League of

25:00 Nations, well that was. In the finish when they could see the war was coming, the same fellows came up to see us in the war front. They said, "Look fellows, we're getting close to winning the war, if you don't tell them everything. Tell them everything, what squadron, who your mates are, anything at all, because if you don't, they'll torture you, so why go through that, they're going to kill you anyway." so that's a nice old attitude.

25:30 But we went on all sorts of missions, my nearest escape was being shot down, I was hit by the... We were doing a mission, dive bombing, four of us, led by Wing Commander Cresswell, I was number four, this was in my fairly early days. Not far from the, our base, but about 15 minutes flying onto the mainland, there were three Japanese runways all close together, but they'd been knocked about with Japanese aircraft

26:00 all over the place. But they were, a lot of Japs were supposed to be there, thousands of them, and they'd shot down our flight commander, and he escaped, he got over the sea and bailed out. But it was a hot sort of a target, their anti-aircraft were pretty good. So our job that day was to drop, dive bomb their aircraft, anti-aircraft positions, and put them out of action. Well number one went down, we all split up in a line astern, put a bit of distance between us, ready for,

26:30 and we carried two wing bombs each and a belly bomb, 500 pounds underneath, and 250 pounds under each wing. The idea is to drop the wing bombs first, and then go back for a secondary attack onto something else. Well number one, I think, went down, I saw a puff of anti-aircraft smoke, oh a fair way behind him. And number two, and the puff was closer, and number three was even closer, and

27:00 number four, and I thought oh God, and I was roaring down, just getting, lining up, in fact I'd just released the wing bombs, and simultaneously there was a hell of a noise and a bang, and I thought the tail was blown off. And I was put into a spin, a high speed spin, I still can't work out how aerodynamically it can happen, but I was in a spin, and I wasn't coming out, and I wasn't all that high, and my Tiger Moth instructor's voice came through my earphones, I'm sure of it, I've written about this.

27:30 And, "Get your power off." so I pull the power off, and I came in, I just cruised over a bloody rise on the ground, just got out of it. But I still had a 500 pound weight, and I was pulling about 5-G [measurement of gravitational force] in the finish, and that weighed about 2,500 pounds then. So I called a wing commander, and I said, "I think I've been hit, could you have a look underneath me, before I got into another attack." 'cause it was flying alright, I thought I'd lost the tail. He said, he had a look around, "No, there's

28:00 nothing, you're all right, there's no sign of any damage, so go back and drop on whatever you…" I found a little bridge, an old bridge going over a river or something, and dropped the bomb, but it didn't go off, it was a dud. So it turned out, when we got back, there was a bloody explosion and the noise of the blast was so close, it detonated the secret IFF set I had on, each aircraft had, Identification Friend or Foe,

28:30 it stands for, have you heard it before, IFF? There, blips on the radar, to let our people know we were

friendly. Now if you were forced down enemy territory, there was a detonation set-up on a two buttons to press simultaneously, and it blew it up. Well the consequence of the flack going off, blew that thing up, so that was, it didn't damage the aircraft.

In your experience, how fierce was the resistance that you, the anti-aircraft?

29:00 Oh the Japanese had some very solid anti-aircraft, they didn't have aeroplanes hammering at us, but they had very tough anti-aircraft fire. Another, further along the coast a place called Sorong, Shell had an oil field there, prior to the war, Dutch Shell. And the Japs had taken that, of course, and that was a prime target. On two occasions we had the whole wing up, stepped up in five thousand feet, and you know, that's 70 odd Kittyhawks,

29:30 all dive bombing at different targets and things, and there was anti-aircraft belting away at us all over the place, and fortunately none of us were shot down. So wherever we went, we were always met with anti-aircraft. And if you were close to the ground, of course, the lighter machine-guns would have a go at you.

How much did luck play a part?

Oh plenty I reckon. I reckon plenty. So I, apart from that incident I just described,

30:00 I was never closely hit by anti-aircraft fire, yet I experienced plenty of it. But of course, when you build a Kittyhawk with that long in a dive, you know, over 400, 450 mile an hour, flat chat, almost uncontrollable, but you're getting away from the anti-aircraft guns. And then after you'd made an attack, you'd jink, what they call jink, up and down, stir the

30:30 porridge as we called it, make the aircraft going crazy positions, so it makes it hard for them to aim at. So I think I led a charmed life.

Did you have a routine before you flew?

Oh yes, there's a low-down procedure for checking the aircraft out and everything.

31:00 But oh, I used to pray the night before, my oath I did. And my mate, he had his rosary beads out, I said, "Give us a loan of them." just jokingly. So, no, "I'll loan them to you for two American dollars or something." he'd make a joke of it. But you'd be thinking all these things privately, sometimes you'd talk to your close mate about things, and he'd be feeling the same. And my mate

31:30 was a married bloke and his wife was pregnant. And he went missing on a travel flight down to Port Moresby, he went missing when the baby was almost due. Fortunately he turned up all right, he was safe and sound, he'd landed on an American airstrip. And as I say, he's still alive today, but only just.

Did you see a lot of pilots using a lot of lucky charms and praying, was that part of the culture?

32:00 Well, nobody discussed praying I don't think. But lucky charms I don't recall. Most of the fellows were happy-go-lucky, some blokes a little bit morose, or, you know, different personalities. Some were outward going blokes, and some were bullshit artists, characters, great fellows I met, some funny fellows. And a couple of them could be a bit funny you know,

32:30 you wouldn't be close to them. But as I said before, there were times when NCOs would lead the section, you know. And I've been an NCO leading a section, with a good mate I joined up with, he was a flying officer and he was unfortunately killed on that trip. This was a convoy, protection from, we were operating from Morotai,

33:00 and we had to cover a small, four of us had to cover a small convoy, which was going to land Australian artillery on a little island off Tarakan, and they were going to shell it before the invasion took place. Anyway he struck engine trouble, and I told him to bail out, he glided towards the fleet, and bail out, and they'll pick you up. And I had a beautiful RT [Radio Transmission] communication with the Yanks, who's destroyer was in charge.

33:30 And they said, "Right, we're ready to pick your mate up." Well he got into a spiral dive somehow, and he got out of the aircraft too late, 500 feet and bang, in he went, and he was gone. And he was such a clever, this was the bloke was Dux of Hampton High. He was in the Squadron, joined three months after me, because he was to be a Boomerang pilot, but they, because he was a commissioned officer, and they had too

34:00 many Boomerang pilots, so he was put back onto Kittyhawks. So I joined the Squadron three months before him, so I was one of the senior pilots when he joined, as a section leader. Had my own aircraft, after three months, you're sort of given your own aircraft, that's when you can paint things on or whatever, it's a big deal.

How did you feel when, when these people died, did you feel they died for the good cause?

Well you didn't think that way. My first thought was "Oh God, he's my,

34:30 not only my mate, but he's my number two, I'm in charge of this outfit." not that I could have saved him,

but. You know, I felt very personally, because I'd known him for so long, and I knew he was a good bloke and all the rest of it. And I'd have to... anyway, what had happened to him, with these long range drop decks we had on, and anti-submarine bombs on board, looking for subs and aircraft was our mission,

35:00 in case they attacked. And after a certain time, your drop tank would finish up, you didn't have a gauge in the cockpit to tell you how it was going, other petrol tanks you did, you'd know when you were getting low. But, so when it ran out, the engine would stop and gurgle and make awful noises, and your heart would jump around. But you'd switch the fuel cock to another tank, and put the fuel booster pump on, and

35:30 whoosh, she'd come good again, oh it happened many times, it happened to me, it happened to everybody. But I think that's what happened to Bert, because mine happened about five minutes later. Because being the leader, I don't touch the throttle, once I've set course, I don't touch it to make it easier for the other blokes to formate on me. Because the leader, once he's set, he leaves it go. So I wouldn't have used as much fuel, 'cause mine coughed out about five minutes later and I just did boom, out she'd go.

36:00 But poor old Bert went in, and so we came down, I called the other two over and we searched all around but all we could see, you'd see marker dye from his Mae Wests [life jacket], where it had gone off in the water, all green fluorescent stuff, I could see bits of his Mae Wests floating in the water. And the Yanks even stopped their destroyer right alongside of it, which they shouldn't of.

What were his Mae Wests?

Oh his life saving, his life jacket, type of thing, which are full of all sorts of things, razor blades, fish hooks,

36:30 chocolate, ours were inflatable and kapok in them as well for floatation, but they also contained all these things, dehydrated food, and sea market shine and shark repellent, cause if you're in your dinghy, you also sat in your one man dinghy, which was hard on your bum, you sat on the bottle, a CO2 [carbon dioxide] bottle, I still feel sore on the left hand side. And so, we think he

37:00 well I don't know what he did. I think maybe, as the aircraft got into a spiral dive, and that's not good when you're at low altitude, because you need a bit of time to recover altitude to get out of it. And I just think he might have got into this, kind of being strapped up tight or I don't know what, and maybe his engine caught again. And for an engine to catch in that situation, this could make it worse, 'cause it would wind him up more. So,

37:30 it's only a theory but I've written to people all round part of America on this subject, I've got replies from one of the American crew who witnessed this thing. And Australian army blokes, I just fluked getting in touch with them, through seeing a photo and an article a few years ago. But they've all given me different, different views, so in the finish, I, we in the air saw the better view than the lot, really. But I still don't know whether, why

38:00 he didn't even, with all his cleverness, he was a good pilot, and he should be alive today.

Was it something that burns, it sounds like you really wanted to know what happened?

Oh yeah, well I just can't work it out, because I knew him so well, so clever. I knew his brother, his brother was a commando, he was a member of the same club I belonged to, and it just didn't add up. And of all things, that morning we had a bit of a difference of opinion, never had a blue

38:30 ever in our lives, and he, I said, "Bert, would you get the, ring that and get the weather information so I can work out the course." on the Dalton computer. He said, "Get the bloody thing yourself." I said "Hey, Bert, I don't run this air force, I'm a flight sergeant, you're a flying officer, I know, but I'm leading this show, and that's what the bosses say, and you're my number two, will you please get that." "Sorry, Will. Sure." Something

39:00 he told his tent mate that night, and his tent mate lives not far away, he's dying of bloody cancer. He said, "I'm not coming back from this trip." he had a premonition. Strange, isn't it. So, he should be with us today, old Bertie. Good looking bloke, handsome, in fact I've got a photo of him in that album. So, if I just divert there. When I came back from the war, when I'd finished my tour, I made a point of

39:30 going to see his mother, just down the Hampton and sister and grandmother, his other brother was still away in the army. And they had a wonderful afternoon, Sunday afternoon tea on, they had a big spread and she wanted to know all about what happened. And she said, "But." But see when there's no body, they can only post you as missing, sometimes missing believed killed, but in this case they just said missing. And she said "Now Ken, you've told me all that, but when's

40:00 my Bert coming back?." And I said, "Oh Mrs Krause, he's not coming back." "But they said he's only missing." I said, "Yeah, well they had to say that because they haven't got final proof." And oh, and she burst out crying, and his sister cried and his grandmother cried and God, it was dreadful, and I'd just turned 20 at this stage. However, that's the way the cookie crumbles. I found out quite

40:30 by accident, by using a, having a micro, what do you call it, a magnifying glass on my brother's memorial table at Ambon, where he died as a prisoner of war. Listed, there's some Royal, RAF names

mentioned, wing commanders, squadron leaders, and then I noticed Flying Officer Krause is there. And I looked further and I find Sergeant Smithford, those two I've just mentioned, neither bodies were found, and their memorials are kept at Ambon,

41:00 which is part of Indonesia now.

That's great Ken, we've just to change tape again.

Have you?

41:09 - tape ends.

Tape 6

00:31 **Rolling. Yeah, I'm interested to find out more about the operations you took part in. You said on the oil field at Sorong, the Shell oil field.**

Yes.

What was your specific target in that?

To, it was some, we'd be set to aim at the anti-aircraft positions aiming at us. Others would be set to lob bombs on tanks,

01:00 in other words, different, and barracks, and I think my job was anti-personnel that day in certain areas of jungle not far from there, that would be the living quarters, in theory. And so we'd aim for that, so small separate targets in the one mission would be, oh no that was a large scale mission, that one. But other targets could be radar stations, as I mentioned barge sweeps.

01:30 As it turned out after the war, a lot of this, the Yanks bypassed all these places and left, sort of garrison, we were doing the garrison work you might say. Well they did all the spectacular work, marching up to the Philippines where Macarthur said he'd return. And he did and he, we were left with sort of secondary targets, we were losing a lot of men on targets that could have been left. It's all very well to say that years later, but

02:00 we didn't know that at the time. But the Japs were trapped there, they were starving, they were eating each other, cannibalising in certain areas. And at Boheme [?] where we used to dive bomb these three runways, they were growing vegetables, we used to drop phosphorous bombs on their vegetables, poison the bloody cabbages. So it was a, you can't win a war unless you keep your supply lines up, and that's what happened to the Japs. The ammunition ships were stopped, their food ships were stopped,

02:30 and they lost. And you've got to have aerial superiority and you've got to have food, an army marches on its stomach, the old hackneyed phrase. But squadron life, of course, in the tropics was not an easy thing. There was a lot of sickness. Fortunately we, not many of, I don't recall any of our pilots or ground crew getting malaria,

03:00 although I got dengue fever, which is a different mozzie, but that was bloody awful, there's no cure just rest and on a stiff bed in hospital on a stretcher for about six days, and I was really, temperature to 104, very, very ordinary. However, we had things like ringworms and tinea, you know, we weren't meant to live in those climates, we were right on the equator then, and it was damn hot.

03:30 Had a beautiful island to swim in, but you had to be careful of coral snakes, if they bit you, you had ten seconds to live. I never saw, a dead one. But you know, there wasn't any leave. Air crew were given home leave halfway through their tour, they allowed a week for flying up and down sort of thing, to and from, a week. And then a week at home, sorry two weeks at home. But the ground crew, they didn't get any bloody leave.

04:00 So they had to do a 15 month, I think it was, tour, and they didn't get any leave, so a lot of the blokes were troppo, there's no question about it, you've heard the word "Troppo?."

Sure.

Yes, there is such a thing, and I felt a little bit that way.

You felt that you were going a bit troppo?

A bit funny, you know. The heat, the heat and perspiration, and no fun and leave, we didn't have much grog, and very little beer or anything. It was rigged up,

04:30 what do you call them, not squash, volleyball, volleyball nets and things, that, that kept us fit doing that, and that was good fun. And the occasional swim, at Noemfoor, there's the only place where you could swim. But we had to rely on somebody giving us transport down to the beach.

Were there any women at all?

Oh, a few air force nurses and army nurses. Army nurses were allowed in the front line.

05:00 But we got pally at Morotai with some air evacuation nurses, we were allowed to take them out to the pictures, you know. You had to wear your revolver, because the Yanks were around, and they could be a bit, go off a bit funny when they saw a woman. So the matron made us go armed, but you know, just take them to the pictures, and having a talk and take them back, and have a cup of tea and that was it, back to our camp.

05:30 **How did you and your colleagues deal with the absence of women?**

Oh there wasn't, I didn't have a sort of a girlfriend, steady girlfriend sort of thing, it didn't bother me a lot. But some of the fellows were married, and some of them were engaged and that sort of thing. I was on one mission there, the same thing where Eisner was shot down, and there was a Sergeant Brown, he'd just joined the squadron,

06:00 on his first mission. He was a fairly young bloke, a bit older than me, but he was married with a little baby. And he went in on his first mission, he's flying number two to Wing Commander Cresswell, and somebody hit his slipstream and just went into the drink, bang, like that, killed, on his first very mission. Wife and kid, very sad, I hardly knew him. Laurie Brown I think his name was. A couple of them went in on their first. One of my flying instructors, had been at Deniliquin, I only flew with him once,

06:30 and he had a dreadful reputation for being a screamer, and he was. Well he joined the Squadron, and I'm a senior pilot at this stage, still a flight sergeant, he's a flying officer, and when we're introduced, he was a different bloke altogether. See they were frustrated, they wanted to get to the war, but they were flying instructors, and they used to take it out on the pupils. Anyway, his name was Ken McFadden, and he called me Ken, "Pleased to meet you, Ken." Well on his very first mission at Morotai,

07:00 a bomb fell off his rack somehow, and exploded, which shouldn't have done, and blew him up, and aircraft, and killed another fellow, having his 21st birthday party, 25th birthday, working on a Beaufighter, a ground staff bloke, and injured a couple of others, you know. Now the bomb falling off, it should have held off, fallen off with the forks still in it, the arming forks should have been in it, so we didn't know what,

07:30 whether he's pulled the wrong lever when he's raised the undercarriage, he might have pulled something wrong. It's a mystery, but he was blown up, so we had to bury him that afternoon. So I went to a couple of funerals of dead mates, but a lot of them were killed away from the, into the sea, or you never saw them again. So the life in the tropics was very, very poor.

What was your relationship like with the ground crew?

Very good,

08:00 extremely good. I mean we relied on them for our lives really, and oh, we worshipped them, we were good. I mean they, even though I was an NCO pilot, they had to call us 'sir', even though we weren't officers, we were, which I, "Forget the bloody sir, only call us sir when there was another officer around." sort of things; "Call me knackers or whatever you like." So that's the way it was. But I, the engine fitters,

08:30 they'd be major blokes, the engine fitters, air frame fitters, radio technicians, armourers looking after guns and bombs, you had a heap of blokes. And the engine blokes, they'd, we'd allow them to taxi aircraft round, move them from one revetment to another, or the revetment to the engineering workshop, something like that, we trusted them to. They couldn't fly them of course, but we trusted them. And I saw cases where,

09:00 when you came back from a raid, your engine fitter and air frame fitter would come out, and sit on each wing tip, because we were narrowing in our taxiing space on roadways, we couldn't weave. So they'd have to guide us, OK, thumbs up, or thumbs down to stop. And one day I just happened to be down the strip having a cup of tea in the Salvation Army tent, they were there right on the front line, marvellous people. And

09:30 one aircraft was missing, it didn't come back. Yet the two ground crew were waiting for them, and the fellows cried. Very sad. And another occasion, one of our ground crew, I mentioned troppo before. We were about to move from Noemfoor to Morotai, and the ground crew, most of them had gone on by ship, and only the skeleton crew were left. And the pilots

10:00 to fly the aircraft when ready. Now to keep the batteries in order, we used to run the aircraft each day, start them with a battery car, or wind them up with a crank handle, which was a bit difficult, but they did it, to save the battery. Well this chap, he'd been up there for a long time, heck of a nice bloke. And I was working on my aircraft doing something, and I heard this engine start up, and somebody yelled out,

10:30 "Hey, quick, get an ambulance." Turned out this fellow had wound up the engine on the thing, the pilot was in the cockpit ready to fire up, and when he pulled the handle out after it started. For some reason, he put his head down and went to look down the big air scoop in the Kittyhawk, there's not much room between the propeller and that air scoop. And the air, air scoop hit him on the back of the head, killed him, straight off. So we got

11:00 an ambulance turned up, and his mates were so upset, they couldn't pick him up, so another pilot and myself picked him up and put him in the ambulance, or helped the ambulance bloke. So I think we lost five ground crew blokes, two were drowned, this bloke with the propeller, another one was electrocuted, the other one I forget now. You know, but they were, living in that hot thing with the, not a good

11:30 type of food, it was bloody awful, mostly tinned stuff.

And none of this was through enemy action?

No, they were ground crew, no not through enemy action, no. Two drowned, and they were in belly tanks lashed together, so they were going out getting fish, and they capsized and drowned somehow. But the pilots were all, they were mostly enemy action.

Tell us about the other

12:00 **operations you did? What were the other major operations you did, combat support operations?**

Well in Borneo, that's where I finished, just before the war ended. We did the first time we worked with the Australian army, and I only did six operations before my time was up. In fact they were short of pilots, and they asked a few of us, three of us, would we do another month. And we thought "OK."

12:30 so we all volunteered and we all made it. So I did six missions in that time, which were oh, one was, turned out to be a, you've heard of the Death March, the Sandakan Ranau Death March Well we hadn't heard of it, but were briefed to fly along a road, we weren't carrying bombs, only machine-guns. We were told to fly along this road, from a certain airfield Keningau, I think it was called,

13:00 up to a place called Ranau. And they said, "Look, look for any stockades that might contain our prisoners of war, we think they might be in there, so for God's sake, don't fire on anybody, unless you're sure they're Japanese, so they must have known something. Well I, we came along, didn't find anything of military value, or no POW [prisoner of war] signs, and we came to this place called Ranau. Well you've never seen a beautiful, a more

13:30 beautiful looking place, rustic bridge over the river, and just lovely. And it wasn't til after the war we found out that was the end of the Death March, Sandakan to Ranau, it just looked such a beautiful place, and to think it had such a horrible name in the war. Oh an another case, Kenningow, we were set over there to, there were reports of aircraft, Japanese aircraft flying up from South Borneo, you know, from Kuching up

14:00 to this particular field. And in fact it wasn't, it was sort of a dirty grass runway, and we could see fresh oil tracks on it, it had been used, it hadn't been bombed. And we were looking, flying real low, no anti-aircraft fire at us. We were looking under the trees, it wasn't really jungle, it was more cleared place, nothing, no sign of any aircraft. And the cloud cover was about a thousand feet, and dotted with

14:30 little fine weather clouds. So we couldn't see anything. Anyway, it was getting a bit dark, we had to come back over the mountains, back to Labuan, we were running short of fuel. And when we got back, people rang us, they reckon the radar had tracked a Japanese aircraft in, it must have been flying above the cloud, just waiting for us to knick off, and it must have landed to keep some supplies to them. So that's the closest we ever got to a

15:00 Japanese aircraft in the air. On another, I think it was the first operation in Borneo, I was scrambled mid-afternoon, we were sitting yapping away in the tents, and suddenly the scramble, "Wilkinson, you're to take Flight Sergeant Tate as your number two, here's an army map, it's one mile to the inch." I'd never used one before. We used the, quarter of a million inches to the mile, we were used to in the aerial maps.

15:30 "You're to fly at a certain spot, and the bomb line is such and such on this army map, it was drawn, and there are reports of Japanese floating down the river on rafts, so go for your life. But for God's sake, don't get our blokes there to the west of the bomb line. So you can hit anything on the east of the bomb line." Well, when we got there, I said to George, "You go down south, and I'll go up this way." Well, I saw something moving

16:00 in the bushes, and I fired, and it was bloody buffalo, reared up. Then I got a Jap as he came to the door of a hut, but the bloke, the other bloke he had a field day. He found the Japs floating down the river in rafts, and he said, "When I left them, the river was full of, it was red." I said, "Gees, are you sure they were bloody Japs?" This is when we got back, talking, on the way to the briefing. He said, "Oh yes, bloody oath they were, they were shooting at me,

16:30 they had their rifles up." And I said, "Oh." And intelligence Officer quizzed him at length, in fact, I thought "Gees, we're in the shit, we've shot our own men." But they had Japanese caps on, he got a heap of them, Georgie Cape he's gone to God a few years ago, a retired engineer.

So this was termed army co-operation?

Well in effect, that was an army co-operation job, yeah.

It's interesting.

We did that in, it was only

17:00 borne out in Labuan that we were able to do that, and I felt good working with our own blokes, knowing that Australians were on the ground, and we are protecting them. And on another day, we were sent out to have a go at a pillbox that was holding them up. And they had, I think, I don't know whether the air force would have run it, an Auster Aircraft, ever heard of an Auster aircraft? They're very light artillery spotters. And it was directing us to the pillbox,

17:30 so we went in and strafed it and destroyed it. So it was good working with, giving air support to the ground, Australian.

Is that because you felt you could see the immediate results of your action with the army?

That, the other, I suppose were more strategic

18:00 bombing, we were a long way from any of our own fellows, and we were bombing targets which were Japanese targets. But there were a lot of Australians nearby. And on this occasion, we were working in conjunction with Australians, to destroy the common evil. And in the background, the navy were there too, probably firing a few shells, as well. So it was a bit patriotic, I guess, I felt good about that. So life was, it was,

18:30 I spent ten months up there, it was enough, it was, you know, the diet was all wrong, and I wasn't a good sleeper, I was always tired. I feel in myself, fitter now than I did then in a sense, and I was only, I turned 20 in Borneo. But we were, some funnies, there's always some funny things happen, you see the humour. One thing happened in Borneo, I'll never forget.

19:00 We were in the air crew mess one morning, we weren't flying, and they wanted a big refrigerator. They had a KVA Electric Generators, you know, in these places that worked refrigerators and lights. And they had this big heavy thing to be moved. So all the NCO blokes, we were the bloody labourers as well, we were trying to shift this thing around. Next thing we could hear the sound of a Kittyhawk, coming very close to us. And we thought, "Oh it's one of our blokes, beating the

19:30 camp up." And next thing there's a noise, it's hit the ground, not far from us. Well we rushed outside to this thing, but the first thing I spied, it was a, the pilot drifting down in the parachute, I thought oh well, that's good news. Next thing, my best mate, he'd been having a bludge on his stretcher, instead of helping us, he was flat on his back asleep, and this aircraft hit about 50 yards from him, with a bomb, 500 pound bomb on it still. He didn't know what had happened,

20:00 he didn't have a stitch of clothing on, and he hot-footed it around the tent and on front of, most of the Squadron areas without a stitch on, going for his life, running. So that was a funny sight. And next thing from the left comes a Parachute Corp, well he's in charge, leading a team of blokes, he wants to save that parachute silk, so the vultures don't grab it and steal it, because silk was very valuable. So it was a bit of a pantomime. But it got a bit serious, well the pilot

20:30 was all right, it turned out the aircraft caught fire, fire in the cockpit on take-off. He was able to get out, come around do a circuit at a thousand feet, and he couldn't last it, he had to roll it over on his back and drop out of it from a thousand feet, so he's pretty lucky to get out. He did well to do that. So the pilot was saved, but then we wondered about the bomb, what's going to happen about that bomb. Fortunately it had hit in a bit of a hollow, so that if it did

21:00 go off, the blast would have gone sort of upwards. But our tent was the nearest one, in fact, the burning rubbish, burnt some of our tent fly, so that was a bit of a nasty, could have been a terrible thing, but turned out to be a bit of a laugh for my mate. So in Borneo, it was not long after that happened, that over the public address system, we heard

21:30 the call, "Flight Sergeant Stillman, Flight Sergeant Gaw, Flight Sergeant Wilkinson, report to the orderly room, you are posted home." We thought you bloody beauty, so we pulled our guns out, went over the jungle, only from here to the wall to the jungle, from our clearing. I fired a first shot, and it went from here to a tree about 20 yards away. I fired a second shot, and it stuck in the barrel,

22:00 How would I be trying to fight my way out with the Japanese? It turned out the ammunition was crook, you know, in the tropics, it affected the ammunition. We should have changed it from time to time, but we didn't. We never had to use them before, and didn't. So we got on a plane, a Dakota, an Australian Dakota which took us to Morotai, an American navy Dakota took us to Biak. And then we had a night there, we had a big feed of something or other, at a big American

22:30 camp. And the next day we saw an aeroplane we'd never seen before, a DC-4, a four engine Dakota Skymaster as we know them out here. And it took us all the way non-stop to Brisbane, ten hours and 2,000 miles, and it was Yankee, it was Yankee Transport Command, coffee and sandwiches served on board. And we hit the big smoke at Eagle Farm, which is now the Brisbane Airport. And found the sergeants' mess in Brisbane,

23:00 and went and had a few ales and made a mess of ourselves. So we gradually got back, we went AWL in Sydney for a few days and lived it up there. And got back to Melbourne eventually to Mum and the

family, and that was the end of my tour. And that was just a few weeks before the war ended actually. So I reported to the Cricket Ground, the personnel depot at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, they sent us on six weeks leave, which was the normal thing. And after that, you had to

23:30 report, and I told them I wanted to stay in the air force, so they. I'd been recommended for Commission at Morotai, and I'd heard nothing more. We were made to do all sorts of menial tasks, guard and orderly sergeant and that sort of thing. The rest of the time, you went home and lived at home, sort of thing, wasted a few months, I did, of my life. And then one day, an orderly room sergeant, a ground staff bloke, said, "Sweep that floor."

24:00 And I'm a rank higher than him, he's telling me to sweep the floor, and he's got a warrant officer telling him what to do. So I did this and on smoko I went up to the Tech Library and found the gazettes, the Commonwealth Gazettes, looked them up, and there I was, I'd been an officer for months and didn't know it. So showed the paper thing to the sergeant, and he said, "Leave it to me immediately." and I went and got my uniform at the equipment store, and my sister sewed all the gear on, so I became

24:30 an officer all of a sudden. By then, eventually I was posted to Ewan Quinty, which was a school, it was closed as a full time war time training establishment. It was doing refresher courses for single engine pilots, so I was sent there just before Christmas '45 for a refresher. I thought, "Thank God, I'm going back to flying." I had one flight of two hours, and went on

25:00 Christmas leave, the CO said, "Oh you shouldn't have come here, you should have come, wait til after Christmas, 'cause I'm standing the station down." Anyway I had to go home and come back. And there was a posting back to Laverton, to do a Flying Control Officers Course, so no flying. So I did that two weeks course, I think, and you know, it's air traffic control they call it now. Which is the worst job in aviation, in my book. So after that I was posted to take over Townsville,

25:30 which was a very big airfield there, still is. And during the war, it had been a huge base for Americans and Australians. But it had quietened down, there was a lot of civil traffic, and two air force transport squadrons were still there. So that was an experience, I was a young bloke, 20 still, and I had four NCO pilots on my charge, and two clerks in the tower. And two crash crews, petrol tanker crews, maintenance,

26:00 engine, aircraft maintenance crews for transient aircraft, it was a huge operation for a young fellow I thought. Anyway, we were on shiftwork, we had to man it 24 hours a day in the tower, and I had some near squeaks on the job. I was on duty one night, and I got word from operations that an American Skymaster was coming in about nine o'clock at night. So I ran the jeep up, I told them to run the jeep up the highway, up the runway to make sure

26:30 there's no cattle on it, because sometimes they'd break fences and got it. So I gave them clearance to land, and as they were coming in on final air with flaps down, his landing lights on, out of the corner of my eye I could see headlights approaching the duty runway. And I didn't have time to grab a microphone, I grabbed a big barrel alder, flashlight I mentioned earlier, a signalling light, a big one. And I whipped it onto red, and hit the aircraft with it, and a red beam shot out, and he said, "Say, what's going on?."

27:00 I said, "I'll tell you later." Anyway, he opened his full motors and went round again. And it turned out a Japanese, not a Japanese, a navy staff car had crossed the runway, the duty runway. And I said to one of my blokes, I yelled out, "Go and get that bloke and bring him back to me, that driver." And it was a young navy bloke, he couldn't have been in the navy too long, a driver, and he was shivering and shaking, he's in front of me and the young flying officer. And I didn't

27:30 know how to put a bloke on a charge anyway, no one had taught me that. So I told him, "Do you know you nearly caused the death of 50 people?" "Oh I didn't know sir, why?" I said, "Look, you should know, that you should get permission, a green light to cross a runway at night, or a red light will tell you to stop." And he said "Oh well, I didn't see any lights." Anyway, I gave him a hell of a fright, I got his name and number and everything, but I said, "If this, if I'm in trouble on this,

28:00 I'll have to take it further." Well I told the Yank pilot when he got back, and he said "Oh well." he didn't proceed with it. I said, "I'm sorry that's the reason why you had to go round again, and waste some of Uncle Sam's petrol." But that was, could have been nasty. And another occasion at Townsville, I wasn't on duty, but one of my staff was, on night duty. He gave a clearance to an Air New Guinea, a New Guinea Airways

28:30 Dakota to take off in the dark. But 5.30 Saturday morning, I was in the bed, I think I'd had, been out to a mess function the night before, I wasn't on duty for a while. And I had a phone, air flying controller had a phone in his room, because he was always on call. And he rang up and said, "Oh sir, look you'd better come over, I've sent a jeep, I've got a problem." and I said "OK." So someone came and picked me up in the jeep and over I went. He said, "Oh, I went this Guinea Airways clearance

29:00 to take off, and when he got airborne, he radioed back and said there's a bloody big something on the strip." he said, "The wing just missed it, I'll have to put in a report on this." Well it turned out it was a car parked on the duty runway. And I said to the duty, man on duty, our man, "Didn't you send a jeep onto check the." he said "No, I didn't." I said, "Oh Christ, we are in trouble, aren't we." Of course that could have killed a heap of people again, that was on its way to Port Moresby

29:30 that plane. Anyway, on further investigation, the car was full of Guinea Airways admin officers, executives, all boozed, they'd fallen asleep on the bloody runway, so not a word was said, so I didn't say anything. I just put my report in, and nothing further happened about it. So it was a hair-raising job, that flying air traffic control. I didn't have the pressure that the fellows have nowadays with the aircraft

30:00 landing every minute. During that war at Townsville, at the same place, there was an aircraft movement every minute, just about all the day and night around. So it was a very busy place, but things had slackened off there in 1946. So from there, I applied to join the Interim, Interim Air Force, they were asking fellows who wanted to stay in, to join the Interim, so I signed up for that. And then I was posted to,

30:30 I turned 21 then, I should have said I became engaged to Marie who you met, in April, I went down on leave in April, and became engaged. And in July, August, I was posted to Point Cook to take over there, as flying control officer. Because the fellow there in charge, was switching over to the navy, the Fleet Air Arm. So he showed me the ropes there, and Point Cook was a very busy place, even thought it was peace time. It was central flying school,

31:00 where instructors are taught to be instructors, so they had one of every aircraft there, of course had everything from Lincoln Bombers to Mustangs and Mosquitoes and all sorts of things. I had one flight in a Wirraway. But it was a busy, and also TAA were just starting up, Trans Australian Airlines, and they were doing circuits and bumps all day and night, so it was a very busy place. And we didn't have a control tower;

31:30 they had one, but it was condemned, it was dangerous. So they were going to build a new one, but in the meantime, we were giving directions from a room at the front of the tarmac, and we couldn't see the approaches of the runways and things, it was deadly. And I reported it, "This is a dreadful, something bad's going to happen here if we don't do something. Why can't we use the old tower in the meantime, patch it up or something?" Anyway, nothing was done. In the finish, one day I gave a Lincoln,

32:00 a four engine Lincoln bomber permission number one to land, followed by number two a Beaufighter, a Bristol Beaufighter, twin engined aircraft. And then, and that's all I knew was in the area. Next thing the noise of aircraft opening up full belt, there's the Lincoln and the Beaufighter, and two light aircraft who were using Point Cook as well, didn't have radios. So they were in trouble too, so they were full, someone's going to get killed here,

32:30 and why should I take the wrap for this. Anyway, I was about to be, having been engaged, I thought, "Oh bugger it, I'll go back to my old job." So I decided, I typed out my resignation to the group captain, and explained I wanted to get back into a civvy role, and he accepted it, and I was bit sorry really, in a sense, but that was the way it was, that flying control put me off.

What year was that?

That was October 1946. Just before that

33:00 photo was taken there. So then I went back into civvy life to Hoyts Theatres Limited, they had to take servicemen back, of course. But they had to, they were very puny sort of jobs, clerical sort of things. Anyway I lasted at that, but I thought that's not my bag, I'm not accounting minded. I want to get with people, you know, selling and that sort of thing. So I wrote letters and did this,

33:30 trying to prove myself, and eventually I got a job. But it was travelling in the country, and I was away all the time, and we were about to have our baby, she was just born actually, Jan, who you met. So it was a good job, car supplied which was very nice, but it was mostly country, and Tasmania was the territory, but it was a good education, but it was tough on Marie and Jan, so I gave that away. And I worked in Naval Intelligence, as a fill-in job, not knowing they'd put me into Naval Intelligence,

34:00 which was very, very interesting, I could see things happening around the world you didn't read about in the paper. And it was very good, in fact the boss wanted me to stay there. But I had a job in selling tee'd up, but the bloke didn't want me to start until the New Year sort of thing. So I worked for, selling, what do you call it, anodising, electro, plating of aluminium

34:30 air craft parts, and anodised name plates, a couple of years I did that. But that wasn't a long term thing. So I finally got into the safety thing, I was sitting in the mess after lunch one day at Laverton, I'd been flying. And 'cause, oh I forgot, I joined the Citizen Air Force in 1950, when I was selling these name plates, 1950, 4th of June. And

35:00 I didn't think I'd get in, I didn't tell Marie that I'd even applied. I went down to Laverton for medical exam as requested and passed. And next thing a brown envelope arrived, and saying you are, not you are serving, my old rank was back again, and you are to report at 0800 hours for flying duties, you know. Oh when Marie saw that, oh, she wasn't too happy, "You said you wouldn't be flying again." I said, "Oh it's only for two years, it's for King and Country" it was just before

35:30 King George died, yes just before he died. Anyway, it was the best four years of my life really, it was a second job, got paid for it, I was flying the best aircraft that Australia had, and met some wonderful blokes. Four of us started off and as replacements for fellows that had to, who were moved interstate on their civilian jobs. And unfortunately,

36:00 well we started off with a few hours refresher on a Wirraway, and then I went solo, and then shortly after that on Mustang conversion, so we flew the beautiful Mustang aircraft. And later on we were the first citizen squadron to be equipped with Vampire Jet fighters. So we, single seaters first, and two seaters later on, when we had the cadets being trained to take our place. So we did some trips over to

36:30 Tasmania, and over to Mallala, opening airfields that were being commissioned at Whyalla. I was the first to cut the ribbon at Whyalla, and we stayed the night at Mallala and flew back the next day. Oh we had a practise defence of Sydney, we flew, we had a mixed bag of Vampires and Mustangs there. And we operated like a wartime fighter squadron.

37:00 All camped on a stand-by alert, places in the middle of Richmond Airfield. The Mustangs were doing standing patrols, and the Vampires were used as intercepting Lincoln Bombers and went out to sea and came into attack Sydney or Newcastle. So that was a very interesting exercise, I've got photos of Operation Fly High that was called. That was in 1953, I think. And, 19-

37:30 see we were supposed to do two years, but they didn't have replacements ready for us, because the cadets were not up to the required standard, so we did nearly four years before I got the bye signal, so March 1954 I finished. We looked on it all of us, as the best years of our lives, you know, no enemy shooting at us. We were all war time, Second World War blokes,

38:00 flying, having flown the range of aircraft, Spitfires, Hurricanes, Kittyhawks, Typhoons and all sorts of things. There's a certain atmosphere when we all get together in the same room still, we all carry on and talk about things. It's boring to others, but it means something to us. I guess it's because you're stuck on your own, I suppose,

38:30 in a piece of machinery that's travelling along at a rate of knots. When we back in the peacetime effort, they'd converted the air speed indicator into knots, incidentally, and the maps had to be changed to nautical miles, to coincide. But in that squad, I had a couple of Tiger Moths too, which I occasionally flew, and oh, I loved the old Tiger. And great mateship, and so from

39:00 there, I finished. I concentrated, sort of promoted in the safety field, which I was in by then, into sales manager, and then the company was growing all the time in, in the field of industrial safety, you know, respirators and goggles. We were the first company to put, Australian made, safety boots and shoes to the new specifications on the market. And we ended up buying the

39:30 factory that made them. I didn't own the company, I just worked for them. But we then grew and grew and got into the marine field, into life jackets, which were a very important part of our mix. As we could see that not only was it safety but the boating industry was booming in Australia, and also government was bringing in regulations that they have to be used, like to be put in each boat.

40:00 So we went on there from strength to strength, until, I think in 1982, I started to get pretty crook, I was feeling crook, it turned out to be a heart attack, I didn't realise until, kept going and it was wrongly diagnosed at first. Anyway, we were holidaying up in Queensland at the Gold Coast with a

40:30 couple of friends, another couple from here. And we were at a restaurant one night, and I got these dreadful pains and things, I should have gone to hospital immediately, but I didn't realise, I thought it was indigestion, but it turned out to be a massive heart attack. So my mate who was with us, he had a car, and when we came home, my wife let him know that something was wrong with me. We didn't even know where the hospital was at Southport, but he got me there.

41:00 I think another five or ten minutes, and I might have gone. But they, I spent three weeks there, stranded, I couldn't fly or drive or do anything for a while.

We've run out of tape.

Have we, run out again?

41:17 End of tape

Tape 7

00:33 **If you could take us back to Ambon, and just describe those times?**

Well on Ambon, of course, I knew my brother was a prisoner of war, and as far as we knew he was alive, and hopefully well. And our squadron and another Kittyhawk squadron had the range to bomb Ambon, and did, and some of our aircraft did. And I thought, "Oh gosh, if I'm ever picked to go on this,

01:00 I might kill my own brother." and I didn't like the idea of that. And but I was only ever briefed to fly on one mission to Ambon, and as it turned out, there were four of us, and the weather was so bad we couldn't get through, so we had to bomb an alternate target. So I didn't ever see Ambon, I believe it is the most beautiful place to look at, a lovely island, but I didn't see it, but it had such misery in it, what we later found out. As an aside,

01:30 when I was granted my own aircraft, I wondered, “Oh what will I paint on the side, I’d be the right thing to paint something.” Now as a youngster, of course, I thought in a certain way, and my brother who was a prisoner at Ambon, he knew I wanted to get into the air force. So if happened to be flying over him low, and he sees “Wilkie” written on it somewhere, he might think it’s me. A childish thought, I guess, but,

02:00 so I got one of the ground crew blokes who was a good sign writer, and I paid him one pound and he printed, sign wrote “Wilkie’s Wonder” on the cowling, so that aircraft could have gone to Ambon, flown by another pilot, but certainly not flown by me. But that’s was the reason why “Wilkie’s Wonder” came into being. Oddly enough, when I was in the tower at Townsville, I was looking at

02:30 all the history of aircraft coming through, but I didn’t find that, I didn’t see a record of that particular one A-29-806. But I later found out that it was ferried back from the war, but only got as far as an airfield called Jackie Jackie or Higgin’s Field the Yanks called it, right up the top of Cape York Peninsula, which I’ve landed on in passenger aircraft a few times.

03:00 And it went unserviceable there, and it was said not worth repairing, convert it to spares, just leave it there. Anyway.

How did your brother, how did you know your brother was in Ambon?

Oh well we were told officially by the army, before, when I was still a civilian. He knew he was a prisoner of war, that’s all. We never got a letter and he wouldn’t have got any of our letters, probably.

03:30 **Did you know how he ended up there?**

How he finished there.

No, how he, how did he end up in Ambon?

Oh the whole battalion, his battalion were sent to, hopefully defend, as a defence perimeter around the area. The 2/22nd went to Rabaul, 21st, they were all goal force, and they had a hopeless task. They were a battalion of men without decent equipment, and

04:00 they had some command troubles in the first place, they changed CO’s just before the Japs landed. ’Cause there was a bitch going on between hierarchy about what was happening. And the fellow that virtually got the sack, believe the whole battalion should be taken back to Australia ’cause they were not equipped enough to fight a proper war, whereas the bloke who took over, said they could. And anyway, he survived the war that chap, but the fellows wouldn’t march with him

04:30 even, so something went wrong, horribly.

So before you were in the war, your brother’s a POW?

He’s a prisoner, yes. He was taken February ’42, he was taken.

How did that affect you entering the war, did you fear that for yourself?

Oh I wanted to get in and kill Japs right and left, yeah, and even more so when I found out what happened, how they... We had his death virtually

05:00 recorded in a book. A nephew of mine is a retired colonel now, he’s the little boy that witnessed me getting my wings, he lives up in Canberra, terrific bloke. He’s, he was born in 1940, so what’s that, he’s 64 coming up. He was doing a course in Singapore years ago in the army, when he was a captain or something. And one of the books on the text book, was the “Nights of the Pseudo.” it’s all about the Japanese shot up in the,

05:30 I think Bertrand Russell, the well known bloke was involved in it. And it’s got an article on Ambon in it, and lo and behold, the only name mentioned in it was Wilkinson, Private Wilkinson, it’s mentioned a couple of times, I’ve got it out there, I’ll show it to you later. And they, even to the end, weeks before the end of the war, the Japanese were making our men, the survivors, they were so sick with beri beri and malnutrition, make them to carry bags

06:00 of cement on big treks, and bombs, shells that sort of thing. And they didn’t have enough one morning, so they went into the tent, went into the hospital tent to get more, and then they said something about, “Private Wilkinson was, they beat him with a stick, undefined. When they pulled the blanket back, Private Wilkinson was already dead.” we didn’t let our mother see that book, but I’ve given a copy to my kids. “Nights

06:30 of the Psuedo.” The fellow that did the beating was hung, thank God. But when we heard that he died six weeks before the war ended, he got very close. And he was a fit being in the country for so long, he would have been very, very fit. And he was shorter than me and a bit stocky, and a happy, he was, auburn haired, he was going bald, he was when he was alive, he was about 31 when he died, single. But pleasant,

07:00 easy-going and we were looking forward to him coming home. And had he survived it, he probably

would have been a dairy farmer, because he was taught all that business, and he probably would have got a dairy farm block, you know, which they did for ex-servicemen after the war. So, when I heard of his death, oh God I was irate, I felt like going to Japan and killing every Japanese I could find.

Is that a major reason why you joined up?

Why I joined up? Oh no,

07:30 I was, I would have been in the war, I would have been in it anyway. And my other, see, my other brother, second eldest brother Jack, he shouldn't have joined up really, but it was his son that I've just mentioned, he had the little boy and he was married, he didn't need to join up, they weren't calling up married people with kids. But he volunteered, and probably when, 'cause his brother was taken prisoner, maybe. But he was, he'd been in the Militia before the war, that's right, so he had some

08:00 army experience. And so he was a reinforcement to the 2/3rd Machine-gun Battalion, who'd fought in the Middle East, I think, Greece, and they were butchered in, by the Japs on the way back. They landed in Java and a lot of them were lost there, some of them taken prisoner, so they needed a lot of reinforcements to get the show going again. So he did a stint in Morotai, which is a, I've been there, it's the end of the world place.

08:30 And he was wounded in the finish at Aitape, that's up near Tadji in New Guinea. Towards the end of the war, he copped a hand grenade or something, just up near his heart there, and he survived all that. And he had a terrible dose of malaria, and he had hook-worm, you know those worms you get through your feet, it's a dreadful place to live up there, it really is.

So at the time, the people in the army knew what was happening in Japanese

09:00 **POW camps?**

Well I don't think they knew too much, because one thing we know should have happened. I believe there was moves afoot, they'd formed a special, I think it was called 200 Squad, and they gave them some Liberator bombers and personnel, navy, army, commandos, with the idea of them doing special mercy missions, type of thing. Now in Borneo, the thinking now, I've read is, that they could have

09:30 dropped experts into that Sandakan place, and taken it over from the Japs, cause they were pretty weak themselves, it wasn't heavily defended, but they'd left their run too late. And the Japanese slaughtered most of our blokes and the British prisoners of war, before they even started the march to Ranau. It was unbelievable, so there was a lot of ill-feeling that we should have done more to rescue those fellows with our highly trained commandos.

10:00 And we would have lost some, but we would have saved a lot. But they're the things of war, the follies of war.

Do you wish somehow you could save your brother, or?

Oh yes, yes, he was such a, he hadn't harmed a fly. He'd had a dreadful run of depression as I mentioned earlier, and then he's got to live up there on a little hut on a farm. And hand milking in those days, it would have been. And we saw him

10:30 maybe once, he saved up enough money to buy a motor bike, and he'd drive down from up near Echuca, up that way, dairy country. But Mum would write letters, and I'd write him little notes and things, and oh, we just loved to see him, he was such a kind hearted soul. But to end up like that, it's bloody hard. So I suppose I'm the luckiest of the three of us, I'm still going. My other

11:00 brother lasted until he was 79, but he died, he got a brain tumour, and went.

Your mother never found out the details of him dying?

No, no, we didn't let her near those books. She died in 1974, we knew about that then, but we didn't let her see that, it would have killed her. So our family, I guess we were well represented in the war. I've known of worse

11:30 situations. I remember doing business with a chap, he worked for the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works, when they were building the Apia Dam many years ago, this would be in the '50s. And he had one arm, and his Returned Soldiers Badge on, naturally I had mine, there was so many you dealt with all returned blokes. And I said "Who were you with" and so on. He said "Oh I was bloody lucky." he said "I lost three brothers." He said "Mum,

12:00 it sent Mum to her grave, early grave." And he got home with one arm missing, so. Yet I know another family, three boys went. But they were all in non-combat situations, they all came home again. So the ones that were in the front line situations, had a much greater risk of course.

So it was very common for you to know people with brothers in POW war camps, and stationed around

12:30 **the world?**

Oh well, not so common really, no, not so common, I don't know why. I can't think of anybody off the

cuff with relatives. I've since met many air force blokes who served with 21 Squadron with me after the war. One was a Lancaster pilot shot down on his third raid, and he was a prisoner of war for a while.

13:00 **But others knew of your brother and painted, and helped you paint the plane sign?**

Oh yes, the fellows in the squadron I told about him, of course. The one thing I, an interesting thing, shows you how a small world it is. This good mate of mine, Len Stillman, who we got our wings on the same course, he's five years older than me I might add. But we met at Deniliquin, and didn't get close there, his wife came up and stayed at a pub there for a while, while we were training.

13:30 When we got into the squadron, we were living in the same tent, so you really got to know each other. And I'm writing to my mother one night, and he's writing to his wife and mother, and I said "Len, where did you come from, where, what suburb?" He said, "Oh, country town, you wouldn't have heard of it, Alexandra." I said "Alexandra, my people had a farm at Alexandra before I was born." He said "What?" he said "Oh God, I'll write and, what are your parents' names?"

14:00 And I said "Dick and Ethel Wilkinson." Well his mother wrote back, she and her husband taught my parents to dance, would you believe. Yeah. His Father was involved in, in a local transport company, you know. Well it turned out they, his Father used to take my eldest brothers to school in a coach, in a horse driven coach, when they were on the farm at Alexandra. And that's my best mate, he was best man at our wedding, of course.

14:30 And we're still friends, but as I said he's in a bad way, and his wife is in hostel.

If we can go back to the, the bombing of Sorong, and, what was that time like, that mission?

Well it was the first time I'd flown in a mass formation, and Wing Commander Cresswell was leading the whole show as wing leader, the whole

15:00 wing was up, three squadrons, around about 70 aircraft. And I wondered in the awe of getting all that many aircraft up in a tropical fighter strip, because the aircraft boiled if you didn't get them off the ground fast and get cold air going over the cooling system. Anyway, we all got up and circled and headed off to Sorong. And we'd staged, I think it was, 10,000,

15:30 one lot were at 10,000 another at 15, another at 20, so two lots were oxygen, 15,000 and 20,000 were on oxygen. And, so they kept their distance, and they were all briefed to attack different targets. And in our section, in our group of 24, we're all flying in sets of fours in battle formation. And not tucked in close together, but wide, when you're on long distance flights you get out a bit,

16:00 so you could relax your flying a bit. But one of our aircraft, we were at, I think, 20,000, no, sorry, 15,000 feet, and one of our aircraft broke away, and started to weave all around the sky. We thought "Hello." then we realised he's got oxygen trouble, he's run out of oxygen and he's suffering from, we used to call it anoxia, they've given it some new name now, but we're all put through a decompression chamber as part of our training, to

16:30 know the oncoming of this. It's happened to me in later times. But it turned out to Flight Sergeant White, he came good alright, he went down a bit, once you get to 10,000 feet, you're safe, you get your senses back again, you're getting sufficient oxygen. So we thought we'd lost him though, before we got to the target. But when we all headed off and started diving at different intervals and, of there was aircraft everyone. And anti-aircraft puffs of smoke

17:00 all over the sky, and they didn't hit one aircraft that day, oddly enough. They had 70 odd to have a go at, and there was some heavy, heavy anti-aircraft there. On Sorong, one of our pilots Tom Lucas, I went to his funeral a couple of years ago, oh he had a close go. He was shot down at sea level, and anti-aircraft, probably a 40 mill hit his engine at sea level, he was going a fair pace.

17:30 He was able to pull up to about a thousand feet, just very close to, over the water, he was, but not far from the shore. He pulled up, rolled over, bailed out, in the drink, into his dinghy, he's covered in sea marker dye, and his number two was a Dutchman, we had some Dutch Kittyhawk pilots getting a bit of experience with us. And the Dutchman, he could speak English, but he broke into Dutch and started talking, calling rescue in Dutch, the American rescue Catalinas.

18:00 And anyway he settled down and stopped panicking and spoke in English, and an American Catalina dived, landed in the water, right under the noses of the Japs, being fired on by the Japs, picked him up and he was back that night with us at his camp. Covered in, he had the dye stick to your skin for weeks on end, the dye of the sea marker. But there's a lucky, there's a. There's a classic case of that was a lucky fellow, my mate who I lost earlier when his engine failed, he had all the time

18:30 in the world to get out, and he didn't. So, so Sorong was a hotly defended target, because of its oil. In Borneo too, you could see over on the coastline a place called Miri, M-I-R-I, the Japs set fire to all the oil wells when they vacated, when our blokes took over, and they just burnt for, oh I don't know how long, they eventually put them out, because its full of oil up there, the Sultan

19:00 there, he's the richest man in the world, the Sultan domiciled up that way.

You had Dutch people in, you were working with, and other, and various personalities.

Yes.

How did you all get along?

Well the Dutch, they were from 120 Dutch Squadron, which was based at Morotai, they took over from our 86th Squadron at Morotai a year or so before. And they had the best war in the business, they were nowhere near a Japs, and they used to fly their aircraft, I stayed three days

19:30 with them, so I saw all this. They sent a beach craft communications aircraft down to Townsville or Brisbane every week, and load up with fresh meat and beer, and oh they had a great old time. And they'd come up and fight their war with us, and we were fighting the war for the Dutch really, and they're getting experience. Some of them were nice, we met some nice blokes, I remember their CO was a Major Morenbrecker [?], he was a nice bloke. Another fellow,

20:00 Mick Sussman, he was a good bloke, but a couple of them were surly. Now when I went down to stay with them, that's another story which I was nearly killed on. Travelling down to Morotai escorting a Dutch bloke, and he led me into, another pilot and myself into a big black cum-nim [cumulonimbus] cloud which you avoided at any cost. And this Dutchman's going to bore straight in, well now you're taught to stick to your leader all the time, so I bored in and the other Aussie turned back, went back home. Anyway,

20:30 I, goggles fell off, oxygen mask, it was 19,000 feet, just passing a big high mountain range, and everything went wrong, you know. Circumstances, goggles, my sunglasses fell off, the glare, I and I got into a spiral dive in cloud. I was fortunate, the good training I'd had in our air force in instrument flying, on instrument, our gyros had toppled, they were useless. And I got out, on the bat and ball they call it, and

21:00 it did a mechanical damage that buffeting, to the tail plane control the trim tab rod snapped. And when I eventually got through the cloud and the Dutchman got through too, and when he'd landed about five minutes before me at Morotai. God, I was really lost for a while, I couldn't get my bearings, cause there's nothing to, there's no civilization there, it's just crocodiles and mud and slush and gold and copper, and all those things they get there

21:30 now. And it turned out, when I was diving in to lose height into Morotai, when the air speed hit 250, the stick jumped out of my hand again, which happened before in cloud, and I thought, "Oh something's wrong." So when I used to back it below 250, it was alright. So on the ground, I taxied in and the engineering, Dutch engineering used to come, and said, "How's the aircraft, all right?." and I said "No." and I explained the problem and he said "Oh." So he found this little rod that

22:00 affects the elevated trim tab rod which the pilot controls from the cockpit, to make it easier for flying to trim the aircraft to fly better, it had snapped in the turbulence, it was so bad. So you just didn't go into those clouds, I shouldn't have gone with him I suppose, but, so I broke one rule. But the training that we got, I always say, even though it was war time, we got top quality

22:30 training in the Royal Australian Air Force with the emphasis on instrument flying, because in New Guinea the weather can turn so quickly.

What was the weather like, and what precautions did you have to take for it?

Well sometimes you'd go out on a raid and the weather's alright, on the way back, the weather's clamped in behind you. Sometimes you'd have to come down to sea level and hope that you'd get back and, and fly your course, hoping you'd get pretty close to your island. And you might be

23:00 down to 500 feet and raining and everything, they were shocking conditions. In fact, when we were flying back from Morotai to - they were sending another five Dutchman up to get experience with us. And I was the only Australian, so a Dutchman was going to lead us all back to Noemfoor, we'd have to land at Hollandia first to refuel. And we had to have three attempts to get through the weather it was so bad, it was shocking. The

23:30 second attempt was a, oh, we turned around, he made the right to turn back and head towards Morotai again, it had clamped in. And we were in line abreast, five of us, juggling and buffeting the turbulence, flying very close formation, so you wouldn't lose sight of each other. And I stole a quick glance at the altometer and it was all set at sea level, and I saw 100 feet and we were still going down. And just then, the sea

24:00 came into view, we'd broken over the sea, which is, you know what the sea level is, but you don't know what the land level's likely to be. So that was close. And then five of us, no, eight of us in that formation. When we got back to Morotai and found the strip, it was just a single one of those metal runways, and we had to split up in gaps to give ourselves a chance, and the circuits we had to do at 50 feet. Well in training you're taught to do

24:30 low level circuits 'cause you can't, you lose sight of the runway and everything. And with the Kittyhawk flying slow, the nose is stuck up in the air, with wheels and flaps down. And we've got these, eight in the circuit, oh God, it was a battle, I lost sight of the runway for a while, and I lost sight of the bloke in front, I was glad to get down. But we all got down safely.

What about the weather when you weren't flying, was it hot and oppressive?

Mostly hot and oppressive. Most nights, it rained.

25:00 Even at the picture theatre, we had like army hats, like digger hats and we had capes, rain capes, which could be turned into a waterproof thing to put on your stretcher or your palliasse on the ground. It acted as sort of a cape, but the rain would pelt down, you couldn't see the pictures, you know, it wasn't cold,

25:30 you weren't cold, it pelted down, tropical. Nice day, next day the sun would come out, it'd be all steamy, 'cause at that place, Noemfoor was almost on the tropics, on the equator.

Did you see a lot of illness because of the weather and dengue fever and so on?

Well I'm the only one I know of that had dengue fever, oh blokes had, on some blokes. I remember one poor bloke had to be circumcised up there,

26:00 great big bloke.

How so, why?

Oh, oh it was nothing to do with the tropics, I suppose just a natural thing. Oh there was different diseases, there were insects all over the place. Someone saw a death adder come out of our tent one day, I didn't ever see it, but you know there were scorpions, horrible, not a good place for white men to live.

26:30 But the hospital parade was always, got somebody there with tinea. And oh, they gave us vitamin tablets, vitamin C tablets, ascorbic acid they call it, vitamin C every day, a capsule, and a salt tablet we had to take everyday because we were perspiring all the time. And oh prickly heat was another problem, prickly heat. And I got sunburnt once, and, oh God I suffered, and I had to fly with sunburn, and wore our harness and straps so tightly,

27:00 because in combat you're throwing the aircraft round and oh, it was agony.

What effect did the tablets have on you?

Salt? Well they were supposed to stop, to replace, or to stop prickly heat and that sort of thing. But the more perspiration you'd do, you're getting rid of a lot of salt out of your body, which has to be replaced.

And the vitamin C?

Vitamin C because we weren't getting proper vegetables.

Did that affect your skin, or?

27:30 Well the only thing that affected our skin, was the Atebrin tablets that made us go yellow.

And why did you take those?

Why? To stop us getting malaria, and it worked as far as I was concerned. In fact they had one of our aircraft, our air force aircraft fitted out for spraying, it was spraying I suppose Agent Orange near us, but DDT [pesticide] over the swamps. 'Cause every night, I hate mosquitoes, even now when a mosquito comes near me,

28:00 I hate the things, I've got to put Aeroguard or something on. But up there, the Yanks had something, like a black hand grenade and you unscrew a thing on it, and release a pressure thing and you do that around your tent and it's pretty good.

How did you, what was the dengue fever story, how did you get that, and what happened?

Well I had to go down to Ley, the flight commander at Morotai said, "Wilk, pack your parachute and dinghy and everything,

28:30 all your gear, and take enough for, you'll be away for a few days, you're going down to Ley tomorrow." I said, "Oh, what for, not a holiday is it?" He said, "No, you've got to go down, I've booked you on a transport, and get down to Ley and there's a Kittyhawk there, it's been pranged and it's been restored, and it's ready to be tested and flown back here." And I said, "All right." So off I went on my own, I'd just lost my mate I just mentioned, the one in the sea, and he might have thought this would

29:00 give me a break, God strike me, a break. Well I got to Ley to find out, I found the hangar that there, 33 Transport Squadron had just moved out of it, so there was only a few air force personnel there, there was a couple of blokes working on this Kittyhawk, a warrant officer. I said to him, "Oh, where do I kip, where do I, how long will this be before it's ready?" He said, "Oh, it'll be a few days yet, I'm short of a few things,

29:30 in a few days, so you won't get a bed at the air force, there's not much air force left here, we'll put you onto some army bloke." I can't remember how it took place, but I was billeted with a top secret army crowd, and I couldn't have done better, because they were great to me, they were all officers, they made me use the officers' mess with them. And me as a flight sergeant sat on the left of the CO, the

major, and he wanted to know

30:00 all about the air force and turned out they were a secret organization that went behind Japanese lines, gathering information and coming back, and a lot of them were lost, of course. Oh they had kayaks and things.

Were they like the SAS [Special Air Service] of their time?

A bit like the SAS, they were part of the Allied Intelligence Bureau, I'd never heard of these blokes. Anyway, they were marvellous, and as it turned out, the aircraft took a bit longer. I had to sleep

30:30 with the sergeants, the army sergeant there, I couldn't sleep in the officers area. But I used their mess and that, there beer and fresh meat. 'Cause Ley was a big army, big hospital there, army hospital, and they used to, army nurses come over a couple of nights, and have a lunch, dinner with them sort of thing.

Was that good?

Yes they were nice people, good people. Anyway the aircraft took a bit longer to be ready,

31:00 and so they took me out to Nadzab in a jeep one day, a couple of them, Nadzab was a very big base which I'd heard of, but never been to and that's inland from Ley a bit, I think it had two or three runways there, and that was a big base where the Yanks trained a lot of their pilots there from America, before they went further up towards the Philippines operation, oh their Thunderbolts and Lightning, Blockhead Lightning, it came from Nadzab. So I saw the

31:30 sights and they took me to our cemetery there in Ley, even in Ley the number of Australians killed in that operation, which includes surrounding Salamaua and places like that. But that, even then, this is 1945, May '45, not long before the war was to end, and all the crosses are marked out beautifully and the lawn and everything. We, the graves boys had got cracking there and started it off. We lost a lot of men in New Guinea,

32:00 I don't think people realise how many.

When you saw the American Army, Navy and so on, and the Air Force, was it as mighty as it sounds?

Oh it was. If I can just finish this bit about Lae.

Yes, sorry.

The aircraft became ready, the warrant officer notified me, and I went down to test it. And the army blokes said, "Oh look, give us a bit of a beat-up, do some aerobatics in it, we'd love that." So all right, so I jump into the aircraft, and instead of going testing things

32:30 first, I just jumped in, all the temperatures right and off and did the beat-ups and things. And thought, "Oh I'd better go and do some readings and things." I don't know, pat on the knee. And the first thing I look at, ten miles out to sea, and oil pressure zero, and, "Oh, Jesus!" So I turned around in a hurry and headed back to the airfield and told the tower I'm in trouble, could be in trouble, could have an engine seizure and zero oil pressure. And then, I forget

33:00 that the aircraft had the guns taken out of it so was very light, and no ammunition and guns meant that about 100 watt each, so you've got half a tonne less sort of thing. And when I had to land towards the sea, and it floated and floated and floated, it wouldn't sit down. So I had to put the motor on full power, on a zero oil pressure and go around again, I expected it to blow up or seize or something. Anyway, I came in, I made sure I got it down alright. And they found out,

33:30 the oil gasket had blown up. So the warrant officer said, "I don't know where I'm going to get a Kittyhawk gasket down there parts." he said, "Oh leave it to me." he scrounged one from somewhere. So I was there for two weeks all told. And I think I picked up the dengue there, 'cause nobody got it up the other place. But on the flight back from Ley, right back to Motorai was a bit of an exercise.

What were the symptoms of the

34:00 **Dengue fever?**

Oh just ran a horrible temperature and shivered and shook and perspired, and the squadron doctor said, "Oh, you've got either malaria or dengue." so I was admitted to a field hospital for the air force, you know, proper field hospital in a tent and a stretcher, with a hard seam across the back, where your back aches the most, you know. After about six, about a week and a doctor, flight lieutenant said, "Alright,

34:30 you can get back to your squadron now, you're fit for flying again." well I felt bloody awful.

Were you scared at the time that it might be something worse?

Oh no, if they said it was dengue fever, I believed them. Well the only worse thing it could have been is malaria. But malaria I think would have responded to quinine or whatever, and the Atebrin I took should have stopped that anyway, which, as it happened it did. But it didn't stop dengue. But I said, "Well, sir,

is there any transport

35:00 for me to go back to squadron?." He said, "Oh no, you'll have to get your own way back." So I walked out with my kit bag and stood on the roadside in a war zone, and two American Negros came along in what they call a weapons carrier, truck, small truck. And I thumbed them and they stopped, and I said, "Oh look, I'm in trouble, I've just been discharged from hospital, can you take me back to my squadron?" "Yeah buddy, Aussie, you know where's your squadron?" I said, "Oh well, it's down

35:30 that a-way somewhere." And they took me back, and I thanked them very much, they were terrific. But, then that squadron had moved its camp, we had to condense things, 'cause it was, we were on the way to Borneo. And in fact, the ground crew had gone, a lot of them by ship. So there was another island chase ahead of us.

What was your relationship with the ground crews?

Oh very good, very good, all nick named basis or first name. Oh, they had nick names, they had Zombie,

36:00 poor Zombie was killed, he was electrocuted. No he was burnt, burnt. No, they were good. And they used to say, "Every time you blokes take off in an aeroplane, you've got ten fellows sitting, ten men or women, sitting on your wings, because it takes ten people to keep one of your blokes flying in the air." You know, there's cook, there's catering people, admin people, shiny arses we called them, but they all

36:30 had a job to do. Doctors and orderlies, it's a big organization.

How did they feel about being called 'shiny arses'?

Oh we didn't call, unless we got wild. And I saw one put on a show in our… this Flight Sergeant White who I mentioned before had oxygen trouble. A bit before this, he'd been out on a long range mission to, I think Hackettobato [?] in the, in the Halmahera Group,

37:00 which is a long distance raid you had to refuel on the way out and refuel on the way back sort of thing. And he was late getting back, and we thought he'd gone missing. Well he came back and our adjunct, our squadron adjunct happened to be down on the strip, he normally didn't come near the aircraft or the pilots, he was always based back at the camp, a couple of mile away. And anyway he's there and the CO was there. Anyway, Ted White turns up and as usual he borrowed the flight commander's

37:30 jeep to go out to the aircraft to get his heavy gear, dinghy and parachute and put it in the jeep and bring it back. And he pulls up with this gear, and the adjunct steps forward and says, "Flight Sergeant White, you are under charge for driving a vehicle without a permit." And I won't say what Flight Sergeant White told him, but it started with F. And the CO said "And that goes for me." He said, he addressed the adjunct and said, "I don't want to see you

38:00 addressing my pilots ever again, get out of this squadron situation, back to your camp where you bloody well belong." He was a flight lieutenant told by a squadron leader. A bloke of this, it turned out he'd been hit by anti-aircraft fire and rolled over on his back, and he managed to stagger back and he's given this treatment. It's no wonder we all thought "What an animal." And the same bloke got off with a hundred pounds of my mate that died in the water,

38:30 he was minding it, poker winnings or something, and it never went to his family, so we didn't go for him too much. But that doesn't mean they were all like that.

So not everyone got along?

Our engineering bloke was a funny bloke, he took off, he went missing. He went troppo, they reckon and took off somewhere, I think they found him at Morotai. See up there, it makes them go funny, there's no question about it.

How many people would go troppo?

Oh I couldn't put a figure to it.

39:00 But I know even me, I should have been a young, fit bloke well I used to feel a bit funny at times.

How so?

Oh, well I was a heavy smoker. At 19 I was smoking about 30 or 40 Camel cigarettes, all those American cigarettes a day for one thing. And the Yanks just, we were on American rations at that stage, and they used to give us a packet a day free of charge. And they pilots, or air

39:30 crew, they would allow a nip of bourbon whiskey per day, per combat mission. So being Aussies, we'd save it up, we didn't want to take it before we flew, we'd save it up for a party. The doctor would mix up some medical alcohol with this all this stuff, and make a bit of a, put some lemon squash with it, make a bit of a brew, so we could let off steam for a night. But they were few and far between. So there was just no outlet for young fellows

40:00 to play their sport properly, or to go to a party. You'd just read or write letters and play cards a lot, we'd

lose a lot, I lost 50 pounds one afternoon, it doesn't sound much, but it was about six weeks' pay then. We were playing blind, we'd helped, all helped unload a beer ship that morning, we got boozed, we broke the bottles over, and the CO was there helping. And that was another thing they did for the NCO pilots

40:30 which we were very dirty on. They made us in off-duty moments go and unload ships, as wharf labourers, stevedores.

That's great Ken, we've just got to change tapes again.

40:40 **End of tape**

Tape 8

00:36 **So just from where we left off, what, what did you do when you weren't flying?**

Stevedores. When we weren't flying, they made the NCO's, this is just at Noemfoor Island, because they didn't have a jetty, being a coral island, the ships, liberty ships, freight ships had to anchor off shore. And LST, Land Ship Tanks and what not, would go out and help unload the stuff,

01:00 but they were short of labour of course, so they got us to unload. We were unloading bombs or boxes of ammunition for our aircraft, sometimes other things. And the Yanks, the crew, the seaman would say, "But hey, but you've got a pair of wings on, and you've got rank on your sleeve, why are you doing this?" "Oh well, we're told to do it." "It wouldn't happen in our army" And one night there was a problem, we were sent out to unload a small ship and finish at midnight.

01:30 And one of our pilots, a mate of ours, he was a warrant officer, he was a rank above us, and he was in charge in part of, as a warrant officer he was treated like an officer, he didn't have to work. And came midnight, and our relief hadn't arrived. And we said, "Oh well, we've finished our time, we're not working any more, we're going to knock off for a smoke, and they can start work when they turn up." And our warrant officer didn't stick up for us really, he should have done something.

02:00 Because we had a corporal standing over us telling us what to do, it was all lopsided in the air force, I tell you what. I don't know why, but I became a spokesman and I said, "I'm not, we're not going to do this sort of thing." this is how I was commissioned I found out later, because I stood up for things a bit. And the corporal said, "You've got to, I'll report you." I said, "You report us if you wish, we finished at midnight and here we are, we're ready to go home

02:30 to sleep, we might have to fly tomorrow." Well he reported us all right, next thing we're all called up before our group captain, who was in charge of the three squadrons, Group Captain Arthur, DSO, DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] and bar, Middle East veteran, he'd been our officer in command at Mildura when we left, he gave us our pep talk. Well, he was on the corporal's side. He said, "You were told to work on that ship until you were relieved." And again, the warrant officer

03:00 our mate, shut up and didn't say anything. And I said to the group captain, "But sir, we were told to work til midnight, and the shift, the relief hadn't arrived, so we'd done our job, we were tired and wanted to get back as soon as we could." He said, "But you were told, and you did the wrong thing, you should have stayed there until your relief actually arrived, this is a war we're fighting." you know. Anyway, he said "You're all on 28 days

03:30 CB." that's confined to barracks, "That's apart from flying, of course." So we weren't allowed to leave the island for 28 days, it was a joke really. And oddly enough, following on from that, that same group captain, Group Captain Arthur, he was a very serious looking chap, 24 years of age, 25 years of age he was. And not long after this, I was called up by the flight commander one morning, and he said, "Pack your bags Wilkie,

04:00 you're going as number two to the group captain to Morotai, he's got to go there for some reason or other, so you're it." I said, "Why me?" He said, "Don't ask bloody questions, you are going." So maybe the CO wanted, I don't know, but why was I picked to go, a flight sergeant. So.

Did stuff like that frustrate you?

Oh no, no, I just couldn't understand why, with all the pilots in the squad, why was I picked to fly with a Grouper, a DSO

04:30 and ace, he'd shot down five or more enemy aircraft, he was a great pilot. And he said to me when we got there, "Right Wilkinson" or Flight or whatever "You go and find yourself some." sergeant of the mess or whatever, "And I'll get in touch with you when I'm ready to fly back." Well we were there for two nights. And while we were there, I remember one night I was having a meal in the sergeants' mess, and I was with a lot of air crews, air gunners, and navigators and.

05:00 I said, "Who are you fellows with?" And they said, "Oh, we're from the black cat squadron, Catalina." I

said “Where have you been?” They said, “We went up Hong Kong Harbour laying mines.” They’d gone, their base was down at Korumburra in Australia, and they’d been right up to Hong Kong, staging, re-fuelling on the way to mine Hong Kong bloody Harbour, unbelievable. Look, I’ve seen so many interesting things in life, all young blokes. Because a Catalina could fly for 24 hours non-stop, some of them fitted with

05:30 more tanks could fly for 36 hours, it was simply unbelievable.

When you were confined to barracks, were you actually confined to barracks?

No, we, where could you go, there were no nightclubs or no, it was, he just had to give some sort of a penalty, and that’s the bloody, I thought it was a joke. As a matter of fact, we organised a very big reunion in 1991 at Mildura, the only one, it was the first one ever done, and we got 450

06:00 odd people. And I personally rang him, I knew he was in Darwin, because a friend of mine from our course lives in Darwin and knew him well. And is said, “Sir, my name is Ken Wilkinson, you wouldn’t remember me, I was Flight Sergeant Wilkinson. When you were my group captain at Noemfoor, you put me on a charge for 28 days.” and he said, “Oh, I can’t remember.” I said, “Look I’m just ringing to see if you can make a point of getting to this reunion, ’cause you were the OC of the station, and we’d

06:30 love to have you there. Your well known friend and predecessor Peter Jefferies, he’s coming from Queensland.” And he said, “Well look, I’ll do my very best.” and he did. And I went up to him at the Green Hotel at Mildura and shook his hand, and said, “I’m the Ken Wilkinson that rang you, you put me on a charge.” and he said, “Oh I wouldn’t do that Ken, would I?” you know, it’s all forgotten.

How many hours in a day would you actually be flying?

Oh sometimes not at all, sometimes. On those long distance flights,

07:00 we didn’t do many of them, six hours in the one day which was a lot for one pilot in the tropics, to be flying in a hot aircraft, you know, the metal was so hot to touch even, until you got up in the air a bit and it cooled down. And the glare, if you were above the clouds, and we were a lot, the glare was so bad, we had American issued Polaroid sunglasses, beautiful, they’re not in fashion now, the metal framed sunglasses. And we were issued with those, pilots, air crew, and you couldn’t, oh I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

07:30 For mating on the group captain on that tour, I nearly went to sleep, I dozed, fortunately I steered away from him, I wasn’t too close, but oh God, the glare was unbearable.

What flight suit did you have for those planes?

Nothing, you just flew in your trousers and shirt, there was perspiration, the stitching would be rotten with the perspiration, the Australian made issue. But we used to knick the, get sweet with the Yanks and get their beautiful quality polished cotton

08:00 trousers and shirts, their underwear, terrific, oh they lived high off the hog.

Because these days you hear fighter pilots have special suits for G-force and so on?

Oh yes, we didn’t have them then. The first G-suit was tested by a, not a principal, was tested by one of our, former member of our Fighter Squadron, Clancy’s now gone. So many fighter pilots had heart troubles they found after the war,

08:30 including myself, I was one of them. G-force had a lot to do with it. But he, I saw a documentary on the RAF after my heart trouble, and it said that if you do four to five G’s as a Royal Air Force pilot, you’re heart moves about four to five inches, so you can imagine it’s a strain on the whole body and the artery system, distribution system. And anyway,

09:00 we didn’t know G-suits; G-suits were never heard of. They were being played around with towards the end of the war here, and the present top quality G-suit is still based on the Australian design, I believe. A Professor Cotton in Sydney had something to do with it.

And the cockpit and the instrumentation compared to training, that was improved in the Kittyhawks?

Oh, the Kittyhawk had a bit more than the Wirraway, because you had, it was a different type of engine,

09:30 it was an in-line engine, liquid cooled, liquid and air cooled engine. Whereas the Wirraway had a radial engine, it was all air cooled. So to control the flow of the air, you had to handle the, raise those cooling gills I pointed out on that photograph. And the starting, I’d had a Kye gas, Kye gas primer pump, to prime the engine with petrol. And I’d had a

10:00 lot more things in that, an inertia starter switch, you’d hold it that way for a while and you’d hear something winding up an inertia thing, then when it’s full throttle, go down, hoping it would engage the propeller, and you’re feeding petrol to prime it. Most times you got it started, sometimes you flooded it and put too much.

What about the VHS radio?

VHF [Very High Frequency]?

The VHF. Yes.

VHF, we, we didn't have them on the Wirraways, it was on Kittyhawks we had them, they were standard issue

10:30 on combat aircraft then. And they were good when they worked. They had four channels, and channel C was the air field frequency, the control tower. And channel, channel D was the homing frequency, if you got lost, you wanted to home in, you'd press to get over to channel D and they'd give you a bearing for home. And channel B, I think was our operating frequency, and channel A was used for,

11:00 from memory, mass aircraft. If there was a big operation involving a lot of aircraft, they'd all switch to channel A, I think that was the go.

How often didn't they work?

Oh, when you lost the, the crystals or whatever was in them, they just went dead. Bang. And I've been in a bit of trouble because of it, and not in the war but in peacetime situation. But they were a very good aeroplane, 'cause being in line of sight,

11:30 I've heard 500 mile distances, voices from 500 miles away. You know, I've been over north for 30,000 feet say, and I've heard fellows at Morotai, I knew by the code name they were using, which was probably 500 mile away, and hear them clear as a bell, fellows high up. But if there was any mountains in between, that would upset you.

And when you weren't flying, was there a lot of water activities on the island?

12:00 Well we had a, when somebody, the CO or the flight commander, they'd have a jeep each, and they'd pile us up and take us down to the beach, a mile or so away, a good sand beach. And it was beautiful coral sea, coral reef and water, there was sand on the beach, but you couldn't stay long on it, the sun was pelting down at you. But that was a bit of relaxation, we've got photos of everyone and that.

12:30 And the volleyball I think I mentioned before. Oh we found, we were exploring on one occasion on Noemfoor Island, and we found this beautiful tropical pool, it was, looked a dark blue in colour, something you'd see in a Tarzan film, you know. And there were vines, you could swing out and drop, it was just near a Japanese hospital, former Japanese hospital, there were skulls lying around the place. But we found that,

13:00 and we went and had a couple of swings in it, an idyllic little place. But apart from that, there was bugger all, we'd write letters, play cards and, of course, the lights went out at ten o'clock. Even though it was a front line system, we could, as there were no big bombing raids, we had lights on in the tents until ten o'clock.

Was there beer available at this time?

Very little. When a beer ship

13:30 came in, you'd get, airmen and NCO would get two bottles of beer a week while it lasted. Officers got two bottles of beer, a bottle of gin, a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of sherry, I think, they got the lot. But a lot of them sold it, they traded it. You know, a bottle of beer would bring, you could get a beautiful pair of white and navy sheets. See we didn't have sheets, we just slept in blankets. You only needed two blankets,

14:00 nights could get a bit cool at times, you'd have one blanket on the bottom and one on the top usually, and you had a mosquito net, you had to have a mosquito net.

So there was a lot of trading?

Oh the amount of bartering, oh God, the Australians were expert at it. I sold my flying boots for 11 pounds. When I went on leave, I took them back there, 'cause we weren't allowed to use flying boots, because they found out early in the piece, that when a bloke's bailed out, the jerk of bailing out, it'd flick your boot off and you'd have to flop through the jungle without any footwear.

14:30 So we had to wear army style boots, black ones, air force style, but they had metal slugs in them, horseshoes, and they'd scratch the wings and everything, slippery, dangerous. So our equipment officer was a good man, and he went over to the Yanks and he did some barter arrangement, and he got us all a pair of beautiful desert boots, suede uppers, rubber, rubber soles, wonderful. In fact I wore them for a couple of years after the war.

They say in war, the feet are one of the main things to

15:00 **keep happy?**

Oh yeah, my oath. I suffer from pretty ordinary feet, but they were good.

So were cigarettes and so on a form of currency over there?

Oh God yes. As I say, we were issued with one packet a day. Now if you were near an American PX [American Canteen Unit] store, you could buy a carton from them, or get a Yank to buy them, a carton, to the value of three and four pence, that's 34 cents say for ten packets,

15:30 practically nothing. But on the black market there, there was a black market there, where you buy a case containing 50 cartons, so you're looking at 50 multiplied by two, 500 packets of cigarettes for 30, 30 dollars I think it was, 30 dollars on the black market, where as the real price should have been about 20 dollars. And you know, the one packet a day was enough for me.

16:00 So I'd buy some on the black to... Smoked like a chimney, even smoking on the way to the targets, probably think it's the last smoke, you'd wind the canopy shut, there were breezes everywhere, the smell of petrol in the cockpit, and you'd make sure you'd reach over and put your, it was an aluminium floor, put the butt down and stamp on it quickly. The CO and everyone smoked, we weren't supposed to, of course. Smoking, but nobody knew the dangers of smoking.

Who was running the black market?

16:30 Oh some bloke who had access to an American PX store. He'd buy it on the legitimate, but the legitimate price is 30 dollars or whatever it was, and he'd sell it for 20, 50. He makes a cool 20 bucks, and a carton was, you know, about that high off the ground, Philip Morris. And cause, American cigarettes were the top cigarettes, I still kept a taste for them, right to the end. I haven't smoked since my heart attack, but I was still a Camel smoker,

17:00 and Marlboro and all that, American blend.

Were there illegal stills, as well?

Oh yes, yes. Nelson Hume was the... some of my mates, or my mate knew a bloke from Alexandria who was with the construction squadron, air force nearby. They invited us over there one day, and they had a whiskey still dripping away, made of stuff someone had sent up from home, some fruit or something or other, potatoes,

17:30 or whatever. And you could see this drip, this copper, they, being engineers and what not, they'd accessed the copper tubing and petrol pipes from wrecked aircraft, and this little drip of alcohol is coming out, hot, but they waited til it cooled down a bit before they drank it. On one occasion when we were getting close to moving from Noemfoor and most of the fellows had gone, and we found some supplies of sultanas, and

18:00 dehydrated apples and things like that. So we found, it's amazing what you find when you scrounge around. A big demijohn made of glass, and we put all the sultanas and currants and things in that, whatever we could put in that, some water, and put some sort of cork on it, and let it ferment. And you could see it boom, boom every day, we looked at it, see it getting ready. On the other one, an earthenware, a big earthenware demijohn with an

18:30 earthenware screw top on it. We put all the apple stuff in that with water, and well, we didn't know what was happening with that, we couldn't see. Anyway, one day we weren't flying, we'd run our the aircraft up to the back of the camp, what was left of it. And we decided to open the brew up. Well we couldn't open the screw of one, the pressure had built up so much. We got it off in the finish, most of it blew up and hit the top of the tent we were in, some of it was left, a sort of a cider.

19:00 Now the other stuff had brewed up, it was still bubbling, and we had to strain it through our handkerchiefs, into those American mugs, you ever seen those aluminium drinking mugs? Hold a hanky, tip the stuff and stop the sediment and muck, and hold your nose when you drank it, it was so bad. But oh God, someone said they, it would burn a dunny down, clean the dunny, you'd put some petrol down every time to clean it out, you know, the drop thing.

19:30 And there was a hundred octane, must have, Kittyhawk petrol they poured, and down it went, and 'whoosh' and blew the thing all over the joint, hit one bloke on the leg. And I was sound asleep, I'd taken a knocking, and it woke me up the explosion. And one day I was having a shower, some native Mary's [women] went past, and we chased them in the raw, oh God, it was a shambles, it was a funny, let off steam, nobody was hurt.

How much opportunity

20:00 **was there to let off steam?**

Not much at all, no. Not much. I think they tried to do certain things. On one occasion when the flying was a bit, we were running out of targets at Noemfoor, they sent us, the pilots off to spend a night in the jungle with American, oh third rate troops, I'd say. They knew nothing about anything, we knew more about army work. They were smoking on patrol, they were yelling out, the noise

20:30 they made, and we were frightened that the Japs would be firing at us in no time, because there were Japs on the island, quite a lot. And we sent, stayed out all night with them, just with a blanket and a sleeping bag sort of thing. Not even a sleeping bag, a mosquito net. And then we had breakfast with them. Well, we were used to the old Australian cooked breakfast, but the lined up the maple syrups on pancakes,

21:00 oh God, it was an experience. But they were not shock troops, they were very ordinary.

The people, the soldiers themselves, were they any good?

Oh good blokes, good people, but they were not trained to be jungle fighters like our fellows were.

How far away were the Japanese?

Well Noemfoor wasn't a big island, was not a big island. I couldn't tell you how many were left there.

21:30 But they found a Japanese doctor in, watching the pictures at one of the shows one night. Somebody said, "Oh, that's a strange looking bloke." and they quizzed him and surrounded him, he'd come in from the jungle to watch the pictures, so they captured him. There was talk that they thought this little island was being reinforced from Manokwari, across the road, off Dutch New Guinea mainland. To the extent

22:00 that they sent us, this WO [Warrant Officer] that wouldn't stick up for us before, they sent me as leader and he as my number two, for a dawn patrol one morning, to circle around the island, to see if there was any landing craft going away, if they had landed any troops, to go out a bit and see if there was anything going back. 'Cause they wouldn't have had too much time to do the return journey, you should be able to pick them up if they were doing it. Anyway, we didn't see any signs.

22:30 So we did a couple of circuits, and I said to myself, silly me, just a youngster. I said, "Come on." I said to myself "We'll go over to the mainland, it's only 15 minutes, we've got plenty of petrol." Didn't have any bombs on, but we had the guns. I said, I said to myself, "We'll keep low over the water." So I waved to my number two to get down, he didn't know what was in my mind, I just said, "Get down." so he got down. And over we skimmed along the water to this place,

23:00 I knew the course off by heart, trying to catch the blokes working, Japs working in their gardens, you know, early in the morning, about half past six in the morning. Anyway, I didn't see anyone in the garden, we circled around, and I'm breaking all the rules in the book. Anyway, I circle around and I'm in a certain spot, near the, where the coastline was, and I saw a heap of Japanese looking up at me. And of course by the time I got around and got my guns into position to make an attack, it took a bit of time

23:30 and altitude to get up, I came down and I let them have it, right in the bushes where they were, so I must have, I would have got some I reckon.

How did it feel killing the enemy like that?

Loved it, knowing what they were like, it didn't bother you, it didn't bother me one bit. Number one, I don't know whether I did kill them or not, I think I would of, must of, but. 'Cause there was a fire of six machine-guns belting away, about 660 rounds

24:00 per minute each, there's a lot of lead flying around. However, we formed up and went back to base, and landed and everything, and I just told the operator, "No, didn't see anything." 'cause I was a long way overdue, but nobody queried me about that. Anyway we were having a spine bash in the afternoon, and the acting flight commander came up and said, "Hey Wilk, the armourers have reported that your guns have been fired, what did you do

24:30 this morning, you didn't report anything that you'd fired your guns?" So I had to level with him and tell him. He said, "Oh gee's, you've broken every rule in the book, what about if Warrant Officer Hunt had been killed, how would you feel? What if you, you could have had two blokes killed on an unofficial mission?" I felt bloody awful about it, I didn't do it ever again, I thought I was taking the war to the bloody Japs double handed.

Did they take any further

25:00 **action?**

No, no, they didn't. No, in those days, underneath they'd probably think, well there's a bloke with initiative, probably with an all-out war going on. They'd rather see that than some bloke hiding, holding back, you know. Anyway, no, didn't stop me being recommended for a commission, and only two of us got commissions while I was there. And he was a flight sergeant, we jumped the rank of warrant officer, which I

25:30 wanted to be. In fact that was an interesting. At Morotai, it was not long after I'd lost my mate in the water, we were having a cup of tea in air crew mess in the afternoon. And the flight commander, Jeff Anglis came up, and he said, "Oh Wilk, the CO wants to see you in his office, in his tent." And I thought, "Oh good, I've got a pair of American underpants on, old shoes, and a American hat tilted up with "Wilkie" or something on it.

26:00 And I said, "Oh God have I got time to go and ." he said "No, no, he's dressed up like you." See it was different, it was different to being back home in the. And he was a good bloke, he was a temporary CO, Andy Taylor.

How much American equipment did you get, it seems that?

Oh, I'll just finish this little bit.

Yes, sorry.

I clicked my heels, I couldn't salute because I didn't have a proper cap on, and I said, "You wanted to see me, sir?" And he said, "Oh yes Wilk." he said, "I'm going to recommend you for a

26:30 commission, do you have any objections?." And I thought, "Oh all my mates are going to give me hell, because they're all NCOs." and I said, "Oh no sir." And he said, "Well you've been leading aircraft round the sky, I think you should get a commission, so I'll recommend it." "Thank you sir." So I clicked my heels and I was off. And I went and told my mates, well they gave me hell, "Bloody crawling bastard." "Air Training Corps whiz kid." you know, I felt awful.

27:00 I'm sorry I volunteered. Anyway, they didn't go, I'm glad it happened now, because it helped me later on in service life.

Were they serious, or were they just?

Oh it's chiacking, you know what blokes are like, they give you a hard time. I, I, being the young kid of the Squadron, I, I was picked on, had many things chucked at me, you know "Bloody kid." "Hairy arsed lad, you should

27:30 go home to your mother." you know. But there I was getting a commission, so I must have done something right.

Do you think they were jealous?

Oh no, no. Rank really wasn't a thing, we were, had to be sergeants, flight sergeants, and you got automatic promotion up to warrant officer. See six months as a sergeant, you were a flight sergeant, providing you don't do something wrong. Had I been 12 months as a flight, I would have been a warrant officer, all being well. And then,

28:00 but it depends, every six months the CO reviews you, or 12 months might have been, and to see if any of his men qualify for recommendation for a commission. Because in my personal papers I've got now, I can see where, in the early days I was not recommended, and then I see where I was recommended and the reasons why. And then the air commodore had to approve that, so it goes through the channels.

As time passed though, you were proud to be?

Oh God yes. 'Cause it helped too,

28:30 when I wanted to get back into the Citizen Air Force, when I joined up in 1950. Citizen Air Force I was already a flying officer, got my rank back and my number back, and away we went.

And back on the equipment with the US [United States], you used a lot of the same hats and boxes and so on, why was that, and how did that happen?

Well our equipment, our clothing was a poor quality. You know, the

29:00 dyeing was ordinary, the quality, it was like wearing a canvas shirts, you know. Thick stuff in the tropics, and it rubbed on you, you didn't want to, it rubbed on your nipples and it made you sore. But the American stuff was so smooth and. I mean I got a pair of American pants once, and there was a little bit of paper in the pocket of the trousers, "If you're ever in Alabama, or wherever it is, please look me up." it was the girl that knocked them up.

29:30 So, but oh, the Yanks did it well, and I think a big eye opener up there, the equipment, the boats, I'd never heard of a landing craft. But up there, the war couldn't go on without heaps of landing craft, that island warfare, or any warfare. There were big ones, LCI's, Landing Craft Industries, the ones that were protecting when my mate was lost, we were covering, I think three of those. They had all army and

30:00 their fronts opened up and out rolled the troops with tanks and everything. There were LST's that carried tanks, and there were smaller ones, they had so much water craft. And then you looked at the aircraft they had, the Lockhead Lightnings and Thunderbolts. One day, 300 Thunderbolts landed on our airstrip, they were passing through on their way to the Philippines front for warfare. And oh, one took off the next day and blew a tyre on take-off. One

30:30 under-carriage went straight through the cabin of a Dakota, had the crew been in it, they'd have both been decapitated, but it was empty. And he ended up in the shallow water, he got out of it alright, lucky to get away from the sharks. And, if they had a prang, they'd just write it off. We'd be scratching around, repairing it, looking for parts. They had a tip at Morotai, all fleet, air army, navy, aircraft, we'd just scramble all over them, just for fun and have a look at them. Drummond

31:00 Bartletts and Drummond Avengers and, they'd get them off the aircraft carriers and dump them, and get new ones flown in. Where as we couldn't afford that, we had to patch them.

But the soldiers running the equipment, they weren't much different to Australians, where they?

Oh no, they're, they're all ordinary blokes, sort of thing.

They knew what they were doing?

I guess so, I didn't have many dealings with them on that, in that regard. I met a number of their fighter pilots,

31:30 Thunderbolt pilots and Mustang pilots. They were getting Mustangs late in the piece there. And coming back from the war at Morotai where we landed in the passenger aircraft, we saw our first Super Fortress, we'd never heard of them. This was just a short time later when Japan was bombed by the service, it was huge, it was a sight.

Were you close with those American pilots that you talked to?

Oh yeah, we were,

32:00 even though we were NCOs, sometimes we'd, it was a common thing we'd wear officer rank on our shoulders, if we wanted to go into an officers' mess somewhere at a strange place, nobody would know the difference. Our officers wouldn't, they'd encourage it. In fact, some squadrons tell me, one of my mates was a Spitfire pilot, he trained with me but he went to a Spitfire Squadron. He told me the other days, he asked me, "Did you wear officers' rank when you were flying officer?" And I said.

32:30 "No." He said, "Oh we all did, our CO made us, in fact the CO of the Squadron he wore the rank of a flying officer, he downgraded himself." 'Cause if you were taken prisoner, the Japs would treat officers better, well we weren't told that, which makes sense, doesn't it. All air crew should have been commissioned NIS[?] as they are now, and as the Yanks were. The Yanks couldn't believe that we. At one stage, this other fellow was commissioned in our squadron flight sergeant,

33:00 when the flight lieutenant, flight commander went on leave, his mid-officer leave, this flight sergeant was temporary flight commander, in charge of 12 aircraft, that's the way the system worked. It was whoever had the experience, got the guernsey. So it was a funny air force, but nowadays it's all. It's an interesting thing, I've, I've heard it said that our squadron of 24

33:30 Kittyhawks, could do the damage of one Hornet flown by one pilot could do today. We'd need 24 pilots, 24 aircraft against one pilot, one aircraft. There'd be a different cost factor, but. So the manpower requirement nowadays, is nowhere near as great.

So the equipment, the Americans just gave it to you?

Oh well, I don't, it was a lend lease arrangement made with the

34:00 governments, I don't know how it worked, but we were desperate for aircraft, Australia had nothing, not a fighter to put into the air when the Japs hit Pearl Harbor. You know, they formed up Wirraway squadrons, but they wouldn't be worth two bob. I mean some Wirraways did go into action at Darwin, and they were all shot down, they didn't have a hope. One of the fellows in, one of the sister squadron, he shot down a Japanese Zero with a Wirraway once, he was

34:30 the only one on record. He had to come out of cloud as the Japanese bloke happened to be in front of him. His guns were all armed and ready, and he pressed the button and he was firing in the right direction and shot him down. That's the only one on record, a fellow by the name of Archer.

During the war you went on leave back home, tell us about that?

Oh well, I think I threw the bags, kissed Mum and the family,

35:00 because the brothers were all away, and sister Shirley was in Sydney living, her husband was at the, in the air force, in the ground staff, and Dad of course working long hours, in the war days. Well, to be quite honest, I, I was a bit of concern to my mother, I think we all were, because we just wanted to be together in the bar of the Hotel Australia to relax. And

35:30 'cause you walk in there, it was in the bottom bar it was known, all air crew blokes, officers in the upstairs bar, NCO blokes down below sort of thing. Had a lot of pleasant sessions there, and we'd knock off and have a decent lunch, we were so hungry we'd eat two lunches. And then we'd find another pub for more beer on later, and do a pub crawl and buy sly grog at night. At times we took our girls out, at that stage,

36:00 I'd started to go with Marie a bit, I think. And then after the war, I looked her up and saw a lot of her and then we became engaged.

So you wanted to go out more then?

Oh we took the girls out, the social picture theatres and dances. That was the, there was a good dance place at St Kilda, Palm Grove, well known, well organised, a big band, Bob Gibson and his Orchestra, in fact

36:30 I heard him the other night when an old recording was played, top class, he was equal to an American orchestra. And we used to dance to him playing, and he had a girl and a fellow singing. It was a, a good place to go to. There was no grog served, it was a purely a soft drink place. 'Cause in those days, it was six o'clock closing, and if you wanted to drink after that, you had to pay four shillings a bottle for grog on the sly market.

Did you go back to the war after the leave?

37:00 Yeah, you got two weeks at home, then I had to go back. We flew, oh one of the roughest passenger rides I've ever had. We left Essendon at about eight o'clock in the morning in a Lockheed Loadstar, a twin engined, twin tail aircraft, like a Lockhead Transport bomber, but it was a transport version, and it was a hot February day, very late Feb I think. And we flew in an eastern direction to Charleville, and in the afternoon we took,

37:30 headed to Townsville, and it was rough. And the tail swished on that type of thing, and all the passengers were air crew blokes, there was a flying boat captain, he was sick, a wing commander. And there was only a young air gunner and myself that weren't crook, all my mates were crook, it was rough.

Were there air sickness pills at that time?

No, no, they had a bag, I think they had a bigger transport ship they had a bag. I was eating sandwiches while the rest were, Mum's sandwiches.

38:00 And then we got to Townsville, oh we were sent to one of these transient camps to wait for the further transport. Air crew got priority air transport, because they wanted us back in a hurry. And oh we found a pub, I forget, there was slaughtermen, Townsville was a filthy place, it really was during the war. And they were bare footed slaughtermen from the meatworks, there was a big meatworks there, treading on your

38:30 shoes, trying to get to the bar ahead of you. Very rough indeed. But we were only there a night I think, and then back to our Squadron, might have had a night at Elena.., can't remember that.

In Melbourne and Townsville, was beer a big, big part of the culture?

Oh yeah, yeah.

And smoking?

Oh smoking. I mean, when you pulled your cigarettes out, you wouldn't pull one out just for yourself, you'd offer them around to your friends. And they would

39:00 do so in turns, and so you would be smoking heaps.

Did you go back into combat?

Oh yes, yes. I was still at Noemfoor when I went on leave. Most of my combat was at the first island Noemfoor. You know, as I say, short range and also long range missions. Then at Morotai, not so much, you know, more convoy cover in there. Giving air cover to convoys.

39:30 In fact, this mate that I lost, we were on a cover one day, we were given a point marked on our grid reference map, they changed the codes each day. And we got up there, we were just near Mindanao, just off the coast of Mindanao, flying over the water, and there was no convoy, fine day, good weather. And I had a look at my fuel pressure, and "O." saw the needle drop. So I whacked the fuel booster

40:00 pump on and it picked up again, and I thought "Thank God." I thought I was going to have a close shave. But not long after that happened, I heard on the RT our other, another section of four of our fellows was not far away, looking for a convoy. And one of them lost his motor, his engine stopped, but he was successful, he bailed out. He was a comedian, he's still alive, but he's lost his speech and everything, he's funny man, one of Australia's

40:30 funniest characters. He bailed out his, did everything copy book, stalled the aircraft, climbed, had everything ready, wires disconnected, stepped out of the aircraft, blew his mates a kiss and jumped off the wing, parachute opened into the drink, into his dinghy, and he was two days floating around, and drifted 80 miles in that time, surrounded by sharks and God knows what. And we'd written him off, you know, two days and he'd

41:00 die of exposure or capsized, eaten by the sharks. Anyway, we heard on one morning, that four Australian Beaufighters were having a last search for him, and if that was no good, that would be the end of it. And the last Beaufighter was about to return to Morotai, and the skipper, the pilot said to the navigator, "Will you give me a course to base." And he said "Skip, can you just fly this course for another minute, I just want to

41:30 do a compass check." At the end of the minute they picked up a mirror flash from our mate, we had little special mirrors we were issued with, you get the sun on them, you can flash.

That's great Ken, sorry we just.

We've run out again.

41:42 End of tape

Tape 9

00:31 After the mirror flash, they sent out word for rescue, and an American PT [personnel transport] boat was sent out there, and got there in a hurry, 'cause they could go pretty fast. Well, they got our mate on board and he did the Highland Fling, he was such a funny bloke, he could dance, he could do anything. And American navy boats were not supposed to have grog on board, but this one had some grog, and whiskey which they fed to our mate who hadn't

01:00 eaten for days. He'd drunk a bit of his water, a little bit of his water, and it went straight to his head, so they got him back, he passed out with, what's the word, exposure, and they hospitalised him for about a week. And after that, they said, "Right-o, you're going up on another, flying again." he got engine failure on that first flight in the circuit area at a thousand feet, the engine chopped on him. He got it down, a beautiful stick landing, and he said,

01:30 "Oh, you can keep your bloody air force, I'm going home on leave, right now." And he came back from his leave, and he's got a great big suitcase of goodies, his mother had a lovely jewellery shop in Brisbane. He bought back all the old dead stock and things that he knew he could flog to his mates and things, but all good stuff. I bought a kangaroo skin wallet, a good wallet for 30 shillings, which was a couple of days pay, a day and a half's

02:00 pay really for me, but we didn't have nothing to spend our money on, it was mounting up in our pay books. And I bought that and I was happy with it. When I got back to the mainland, I saw them in a shop for ten bob. So I've seen him many, many times over the years, see him every time I go to Queensland, and I remind him of the fact, I said, "You charged me 30 shillings, I could have got it for ten shillings." He said, "A man has to make a living." He's just a

02:30 funny, funny man, but he's been struck with a couple of strokes and affected his speech, he talks another language. He knows what you're saying, but he can't talk, however that's my old mate. Right.

There's a few questions I want to ask you about your, your period in the southwest Pacific area.

03:00 **Well tell us what you thought about the Japanese, I mean, I know you did say that you hated them, but can you give us a broader understanding of how you saw the Japanese at the time?**

Well, I think it was simply a matter, I had to be highly trained as a pilot to be able to do my little part in the war. And so much time was spent in training to start with, that I had little time to think of the war ahead of me. I just,

03:30 they were the enemy, and Germans were the enemy and Italians were the enemy. Full stop, no question about it. So I have no, I've shot a thousand Japs and killed them, I've nothing in my conscience to worry me. That was the way it went. But other than that, you, we didn't know any Japs personally, sort of thing. And I was just thinking of my brother being in a prisoner of war camp, not knowing he was being

04:00 tortured. In fact, an army air liaison officer who was camped with us, he said,"Oh don't worry about the boys at the Ambon there, under the care of the Japanese Navy, they're a better breed than the army." But it proved to be just the opposite, he was completely wrong, however. So nothing more to really say than, the war was war,

04:30 and that was it.

Would you say that in contemporary view, that the way you viewed the Japanese, was in a way, the way people now view, say Arab terrorists for instance? I'm trying to draw a parallel here.

Yeah, yeah. I just can't understand how people can just, well murder, fight their own people all the time. At least

05:00 we were fighting another belief, and they were fighting our belief. They wanted to conquer, they wanted to get raw materials and everything to feed their great ability to make things, and they are good it. And nowadays you see the unfortunate, people killing each other because they're different sects of the same religion, basically. It gets back to the old Protestant, Catholic business, which we have mostly

05:30 grown out of, which is deplorable.

So its, is it the same sort of suspicion you view what's happening in today's world, with terrorism?

Well today, it's a bigger world, you know, we just knew the world as an atlas that we saw at school, in a book. But now we're hit with TV [television] and computers and God knows what. With everything that's going on the world. You know,

06:00 this morning, we're told that 420 odd Muslims have killed each other, you know. The paper when I got it, read it at lunch, said it was only 100 and something, but it's happening so quickly, and I just can't understand how people can kill themselves. Of course, we haven't experienced a civil war here, and we find it very hard to understand. But I think it can come here, if people are allowed to start extolling their own ideas in the place.

06:30 They get a leg in, and anything can happen.

You're probably aware that there's been reunions with Italians and Germans with Australian soldiers.

Yes, yes.

Has there been any such event with the Japanese, to your knowledge, in any way?

No, I haven't heard of any. It's, it's, it's strange. We were away last, a week ago down in Paynesbourne [Waynesborough?]. We went to a restaurant there one night, and we saw, before we left the place we were staying,

07:00 a luxury boat pull up at the jetty nearby, and some Japs get onboard with some Australians, and off they went, the Japs had suits on, and off they went. And oddly enough, when we were sitting in the restaurant which was right on the waterfront, the same cruiser pulls up and the Japs come off with the people, and get a table in the restaurant. And my wife said, "Have a look at this, this is amazing, isn't it. You're, they killed, they killed your brother." I said, "Well they didn't kill my brother, their grandfathers killed him, and they just

07:30 don't know." And in fact, she went over, I thought she was going to say something to them, but she didn't, she said, "Oh, do you like our waterways thing?" And it turned out they're here, buying cheese and milk powders and things from the Gippsland area, you know, so at least we get their money, that's something. We can buy something and help our own standard of living.

It's pretty strange, isn't it.

It is.

You fought them 50 yeas ago, and then they.

It is, it's hard for us to. Well see, Weary Dunlop, such a wonderful Australian,

08:00 he forgave them, after what they did to him and the rest of the fellows under him. And, but some people will sort of, forget but never forgive them. But I don't know. I've been in a hotel in Sydney years and years ago, and a lot of old Japanese, my vintage, fellows who could have been at the war. And I'd had a few drinks, and I sailed into them and, "I used to dive bomb you bastards." you know, and didn't pull any punches.

08:30 And they, "Oh yeah, oh yeah." took it. But we were told when we left Mildura, by this group captain who put me on a CB charge, he said, "You're going to fight a terrible enemy, they are vicious, they don't go according to the rules of the war, Geneva. If you see them running along the beaches, shoot them in the bloody kneecaps and make the bastards die slowly." that's the way we were sent to war, by a young man who

09:00 earned his spurs in battle against the German.

Who's this, by the way?

Group Captain Arthur, Wilf Arthur. So when you see them now. I mean, my kids go to school. And my old school Caulfield Grammar, go to old boys dinners, luncheons there, and there's Japanese kids, there's Chinese kids, there's all sorts, we're a different, it's a different world. I would just like to think that our school kids are being told about their,

09:30 that the freedom that they enjoy today, cost something. It cost lives, not money, lives. And all those fellows who died, all they want would them to understand that, and make sure they never let this country be attacked again by anybody. In other words, keep our defences strong and nobody will come near you. People say Australia is sort of a big country with a small population,

10:00 but it's not an easy country to take, I shouldn't think. Try living in the middle of the desert there, there's no water, you need water, you need food. But if you've got a strong defence, you know, quality aircraft, quality ships and all the rest, we can keep China at bay even, I believe. That's if the Yanks help us with atomic bombs. But oh, I worry, the other day when I saw something about China had let go a missile in one of the

10:30 Pacific Islands, I thought, "Oh God, they're getting closer, I thought it would happen long after I'm dead." But they've only got to make a move, and they've got one point three billion or something, and they could swallow anything. Maybe. Then again, you've got the goodies with the atomic bombs, as I say the goodies, and they might have to use them in self defence, who knows.

Well if the war starts, we might have to call you up again?

Well the uniform won't quite fit.

11:00 **It's actually, it's actually happened in England, I can tell you that off camera later.**

Yes.

But now on the topic of mateship, that was obviously a very, very important aspect of your service.

Very.

How did you bond, I mean, in the environment of the tropics and under the pressure of operations, how did you bond with your crew and the ground crew as well, can you tell us more about that?

Oh it's, it wasn't sort of noticeable, I suppose, at

11:30 the time, but you just relied on each other. Pilots formatting on each other, you had to watch they didn't hit the other aircraft, or there's one form of bonding. You had to respect the other fellows ability and training, and knowledge. And you relied on the leader to get you back, because he was doing the navigation, you try and do it the best you can, but he's leading, and you're concentration on formatting and you've got a broad

12:00 sense of it, but you're relying on him to get you back to base. And with a ground crew, it was just one of those things, you relied on them. If one, not that you thought this way, but anyone could put a nut out of place or something, he could spell your doom. So we respected them to the extent, that just after the war we used to have a reunion of 77 and ground crew and air crew pilots came along. But it fizzled out

12:30 as we got kids and growing up, we didn't have the time to spend at these things. That came when we all retired really, there was lots of reunions.

So it was a strong bond between the ground crew and the aircrew?

Yes, very strong.

Why did you eat separately though?

Oh that was the rule of the service. The airmen had their eating mess and their living area, then the sergeants, and flight sergeants and warrant officers had their sergeants' ess, as it was called. Then you had the,

13:00 well normally you have an officers' mess. But in a fighter squadron in the Pacific, I don't know what happened in Europe, but a Pacific fighter squadron, you had an aircrew mess in the fighter squadron. Not the bombers squadron, I stayed with, I had a meal with the bomber squadron at Tadgee one lunchtime, and I had to go to the sergeants' mess, I wasn't allowed into the officers' mess. But back in my squadron, I dined with the

13:30 officers, because there was so few of us, I suppose, compared to a Bomb Squadron with so many bods. But oh no, the comradeship is so good, from aircrew and ground crew. And the whole, I can describe a feeling, twice a year we have an EATS lunch, at the Air Force Club, the Empire Air Training Scheme Lunch, and it's only opened to those who served in the Second World War as aircrew, plus flying instructors who might have been,

14:00 come from civvy [civilian] life, you know, to be instructors. And the atmosphere in that room is unbelievable, I can hear the roar or engines, I can hear, knowing that all those fellows be they pilots, navigators, wireless operators, gunners, they've all experienced the thrill and joy of flying, and most of them have experienced the operation side of being shot at and shot down, being prisoner of war. They've seen the

14:30 good part and they've seen the bad part, but through all, they all bond together, and the Padre, our Padre who was a bomber command pilot in the war, he says grace and he says "God Save the Queen" as well, Empire men. Call us old fashioned, but that's the way it is, and that's the way we think, as a general rule. Things are changing.

Of the Empire, these were quite important symbols at that time?

Yes, yes.

Now, when you were serving

15:00 **in, in Dutch New Guinea, the western part, which areas were you serving off. You said that island,**

Noemfoor.

Noemfoor Island, that's right. And you were at Morotai as well?

Well I landed there for a few days, 'cause I was escorting the Dutch pilots back. But that was only a temporary, that was a non-operational flight, though I nearly got killed doing it a couple of times. But then I went to Morotai, which is in the Halmahera group,

15:30 the top island there, that's Dutch East Indies, it used to be called, now Indonesia. And then I, the third island was Labuan, which was called, which was under British North Borneo in those days, now its part of Malaysia.

Before you go onto Morotai or Labuin, I'm interested to know how you saw the Dutch, the servicemen, the Dutch servicemen. I understand they were very.

They were quite arrogant, very arrogant.

Well give us a quick.

16:00 Well I didn't have enough to do with them to cause me any bother. Their engineering officer fixed my aircraft problem, so that was good. So most of the fellows that were flying were all right, they had Indonesian pilots as a matter of fact, NCO pilots then. And they treated them terribly.

How, how did they treat them?

Oh just the way they spoke to them, the way addressed them, "Go here." not nice to listen to. Because our Australian way of doing things was a lot different.

16:30 **Would, did you ever come across Australian Aborigines by any chance?**

Not in the war. Oh, I don't know.

In the forces, anywhere?

No, there was one Kittyhawk pilot, Aboriginal, Len, Len Waters, I met his widow up at Canberra a few years ago.

The Black Magic, wasn't he?

Yeah, yeah. I didn't know him, he was in a different wing on the same island, actually. But they were down one end of the strip, and we were up the other, and our camps were a long way from one another. I didn't know him.

17:00 **It's just interesting how you said that, how the Dutch would treat the Indonesians. If, at that time, during the Second World War, if a white soldier or an Australian, a white Australian spoke to an Aborigine that way, how, how do you think the reaction would be taken?**

Oh I don't think he would, the average man would really, because we, we're used to chiacking each other.

17:30 I mean in America, you had the, you know, the white slavery business, and I don't think we looked upon our Aboriginals as slaves, like the Yanks did. You know, I don't look down, I think they've had some wonderful people, and it's a hell of a bit unfortunate, they've got problems in their own system, which you've got to breed out of them, I guess, in time. Alcohol being one of the major problems. But they don't

18:00 want to do certain things, and unless you want to do something. This Len Waters the pilot, he wanted to, he was a engine fitter in the ground staff before that, and he wanted to be a pilot. He had an ambition, like Reg Saunders in the army, he was commissioned, an Aboriginal and did a great job. So they can do it, it's just a matter of them being steered in the right direction, and once steered, following through.

Now you did mention before as well,

18:30 **mind you I'm going on, sort of like a general theme here on some of the things you've brought up before. About you know, people going troppo, everyone goes a bit troppo.**

Yes.

And that's in, as a result of a number of reasons which you illustrated. Can you tell us how the topic of sex was discussed amongst your colleagues?

Sex.

Yes.

Oh gee's, all the time. Oh, fellows had books, man, pervy books sort of things, had pictures.

19:00 Well you didn't have walls to print things on. Oh no, fellows would talk sex. As I said, some of them were married, of course. But there were no women around to take out or go out with. The nurses were all, had their jobs to do, and some of the blokes took them to the pictures, that was about all.

What was the pornography like in those days?

Oh just the usual banter amongst

19:30 blokes about different, oh it's hard to say, there were some pretty crude things said, crude and rude. But it was just water on a duck's back, usual talk you've got to hear today in the football dressing rooms, or something.

So how would the nurses, were the nurses, I mean, obviously they must have been commented on.

Yes, they were very nice types of girls, you know, we, it was nice to meet them, I didn't actually take

them out.

20:00 But it was nice to see an Australian girl. At Lae, the army nurses, you know, they were all nice types of people, doing a marvellous job. And the air force ones, were the air force evacuation, they were getting, taking wounded sick people back to the mainland by air ambulance. And, but there weren't that many of them. So we didn't see many white females at all.

But the airmen must have

20:30 **been pretty keen to have one of the nurses, surely?**

Oh the airmen weren't involved. 'Cause there was so few of them, that they didn't get a chance to be near where they lived or worked.

Who did?

Oh we only knew them because of relations with officers. See they were officers, nursing officers, and our officers would make contact with their matron, sort of thing. So the airmen didn't get a look in. But

21:00 it's just the usual jokes that were told, and some blokes had pictures, rude pictures and that sort of thing.

Tell us about the jokes. Because I'm trying to get an understanding, or build an understanding and picture of how people spoke about that sort of topic in those days, as opposed to now.

Oh, it's very hard, I can't recall the sort of jokes. We saw a fair number of pictures, you know, American pictures, you know. There was one there, in fact I've got a

21:30 film of it, I taped it years ago, called "Thank Your Lucky Stars." made by Warner Bros. And they had every star that they had was in that war film, really, done for building up morale. I've seen it about five times, I could see it again. It was all happy music, you know, good singing, Dinah Shore, Spike Jones and the City Slicker Band, and all that type of thing. So a lot of those films, and of course the comments, when there was love scenes on

22:00 the pictures was when all the blokes in the audience, you can imagine what they were saying, oh, some comical things.

What sort of things would they say?

Oh, I couldn't remember. If I could remember, I wouldn't repeat them, I'd say. But they're not meant, they're just meant for blokes being blokes, I guess.

So.

You notice we don't use the word guy much, it's blokes or chaps, or what have you. Guys to us, is a thing that belongs on a tent,

22:30 or American slang for a bloke, you know. I haven't adopted the old guy caper, my grandkids have of course, however. No, it's hard to comment on that, it's just that, we enjoyed the pictures, they were damned good, 'cause that was our main source. Oh two-up schools, there was always a bloke running a two-up school. And, even though it was illegal it was allowed up there, it was part of the morale boosting.

Was there any

23:00 **known examples of homosexuality?**

I can tell you that of all the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of men I came in contact with in the war days, I didn't strike one case of it. Now when I joined the Citizen Air Force, just in the station, RAF Station Lavert, there were one, two, three pilots, officers, one was a wing commander, flight lieutenant, two flight lieutenants and an

23:30 administrative officer, homosexual. They weren't, they were given the chance, they weren't catching, they were just told, it's just like you've cashed a bad cheque and you wouldn't see them again, they were off, discharged. It just wasn't accepted. And that's the way it was then. Honestly, hundreds. At Somers, there was more than a thousand blokes there, not, you know,

24:00 you're living side by side in tents, huts, not one sign of it. I mean there must have been, but they shut up about it. Even at school, you didn't see anything obvious, a couple of kids in my last year used to sit next to each other, we used to call them Ada and Else, but, could have been a bit funny. But it wasn't, they didn't come out, as they say now. So it was not a problem.

24:30 I, after I got out of the air force in 1946, I got married 1st October 1947. And as you heard Marie say, we've been married for 57 years coming up. And then we had our daughter in 1949, and our son in 1952, '52

25:00 had good fun and happy bringing up, and we were able to give them a good education. And we've got two granddaughters and two grandsons. My son kept the Wilkinson going. In all my large family, there was not a, the boys didn't have any sons. So our son had

25:30 two sons, so the Wilkinson name carries on through that. So the grandkids are 27, 22, 20 and 14. So they're all going well.

Before, before you continue on that, I'd like to ask you just a few more questions on when you were in Morotai. You mentioned something about American bombers blowing up

26:00 **for no apparent reason when they were in formation. Can you tell us a bit more about that?**

Did I say that today? Or was that on the phone? I don't remember.

You mentioned that in passing, before?

Today, did I? American bombers blowing. Well American bombers did blow up on the ground at Morotai, it could have been in the air too.

26:30 And I don't know the real reason, whether it was sabotage or just somebody doing the wrong thing, or a weakness in the aircraft. But it happened a few times, on the Liberator bomber, the B-24, so they had a bit of a bad name for that, yet they were a pretty reliable bomber otherwise.

27:00 I didn't have anything, didn't see any B-17 Flying Forts, they were used in the early days of New Guinea, but they were mostly Liberators. And the medium bombers Mitchell's, and the Boston's were used where I was.

When you were involved in army co-operation, that's at Labuan.

Labuan, yeah.

Did you experience much resistance from the Japanese, as in anti-aircraft.

27:30 Not heavy anti-aircraft fire. And if it was light stuff, we didn't get much ground fire there. I mean, they'd have used tracers surely, and I don't recall seeing any tracer ammunition being thrown up at us. So.

This way daytime?

Daytime, yes, we couldn't operate at night. But as I say, I only did six missions there and that was the end of the thing.

28:00 On another mission, I remember a native had given a report that there were encampments of Japanese near a place called Beaufort, which was near a railway station. Borneo was more civilised, there was a railway line running from Jesselton to Beaufort and perhaps further on. So we saw a railway line for the first time in ages. And Jesselton was a big city, it's called something else now, Kota [Kina] balu, or something. And all laid out,

28:30 in true British fashion, the square things. Oh and that's right, one day we had to, sent to destroy a reported Japanese headquarters at this Jessselton place. There was four of us with machine-guns. And supposedly this white building on the top of a hill on the outskirts, and we found it, it was beautiful I wish I'd owned that house, and we sent that up and blew it up. It must have been full of ammunition and all sorts of things, we must have got the right target, I think.

29:00 So, but there was no machine-gun fire, nothing from the ground, when that happened. But near Beaufort on another mission, the native had given a map, where he reckoned some Japs were camps in their tents and what not. So we dive bombed that, we're just bombing a heap of trees, you know, in the jungle, hoping that there was something underneath it. You can't see the results of it.

29:30 So our warfare was quite different to that experience in Europe, where they saw trains running along, and they could shoot the engine and blow it up. Things were hidden so much, it was a different type of war all together.

And barges, you didn't encounter barges?

Oh a couple of times earlier, when I was based at Noemfoor. Operating on the New Guinea mainland, you'd find the odd barge under a tree.

30:00 That's what kept their supplies rolling, the Japanese they were cut off everywhere.

How did you deal with the barges, what sort of weaponry did you have at that stage?

Guns.

Just machine-guns?

Machine-guns, yes.

So you sunk two barges?

Yeah, oh well, helped, you know, you'd be with others and you'd need a few bullets to fire through, they could do a lot of damage. Depending on what, some of them were made of wood, some of them were made of aluminium.

Were they heavily armed,

30:30 **these barges?**

Oh well, being under trees they couldn't sort of get at us. We could just see them at times, and just fire small bursts, you didn't have much time, under the trees. So it was pretty close quarters stuff or long range firing your guns from a fair range. They were harmonised the bullet pattern, and all it needed about 300 yards, so a thousand feet ahead of you, is where the bullets meet. So you didn't have much time to get rid of

31:00 the bullets, and get out of the dive. But we were, we were happy enough too, when the war came to an end, we'd had enough of it.

That's, that's another question I want to ask you, which I didn't ask before. That, when the, when you came to Australia and you found the war was over, what did you see?

Oh, it was still on when I got back.

31:30 I was back the end of July, it was on for about another three weeks I suppose, I was on leave when it was announced. I went into the city and celebrated. Melbourne and all cities were unbelievable, the celebrations that went on, all strangers hugging each other and kissing each other, it was an amazing scene. That's when the day was all over. Of course, we knew nothing about the,

32:00 we didn't expect it to end so soon, we thought it would go on for another, oh years really. And you were thinking, once you finish your six weeks leave, where to from here. And I think I was to be posted to Mildura as a flying instructor, fighter instructor.

In that celebration at the end of the war, what were you doing? Were you also hugging people yourself?

Oh yeah, yeah, it was terrific for the pubs to be open,

32:30 but the pubs opened later, those that had beer, because it was pretty short. And in the finish, a few of us got locked in a pub, the publican wouldn't let us out, he bolted us in. The pub has since been pulled down in Lonsdale Street, I think it was called the Duke of Edinburgh or something. Oh dear, we were full of high spirits at the age of 20, well that was my age. But people were just dancing in the streets, they were so happy, it was all

33:00 over. Of course, we looked forward to two brothers coming back, and only one came back.

How did the war impact on you? You know, as personally, you know.

I was very depressed after a while after discharge, we, it was a common thing to get very, very depressed. To the extent where I worked, you know, at Hoyts Theatres, they were pretty good, in that some of us would

33:30 duck off and have a couple of beers sometimes down the pub, you know, in working time. And the boss called us in one day and said, "Look, I don't mind you, just let us know if you're going down, and we know where you are." You just got depressed because one minute you were living with hundreds of men in a strange environment, next minute you're cooped up in an office with lights and typewriters going away, and it was so different. And it was a common thing for servicemen,

34:00 to be quite depressed. You know, and I think our system, the Repat[riation] system has been very good, they've been very helpful. You know, they provided, I bought a company, a car to use for work on a loan through the service set-up, the Repat set-up, and we financed our first house sort of thing. And I think our section was pretty good, and they've helped. A lot of blokes suffered, they're out at Heidelberg

34:30 Military Hospital, mental cases, you know, shell shock and terrible. But I wasn't affected by that, but I got, you know, I had some injuries. Pulling out of a dive at one stage, the canopy opened and the metal got half way back and chopped me on the head, and I couldn't duck my head quick enough to get away from it. And fortunately, I had a thick leather helmet on, I hadn't been issued with a tropical air tech helmet,

35:00 they didn't have any at the time. And that saved me from being knocked out probably, because I was covered in blood when I got back, they took the helmet off, the airmen said, "God, have you been hit by anti-aircraft." and I said "No." I'd been hit by this bloody canopy, it was all a tangled mess. I had blood all over the place, I had to have medical treatment, and it concussed me, I was crook, grounded for a few days, when the head stopped being a bit funny. So that.

Sorry Ken, we haven't got a great deal of time left,

35:30 **so I'll have to make, I'm going to have to interrupt you on that note. But just another thing that's of a subjective nature. Did you find yourself dreaming about the war after?**

Not so much dreaming, no, thinking a lot about it. Thinking about, you know, losing mates, thinking of some things I've told you today. It's, it's often on, still on my mind.

36:00 **Well what do you think about?**

Oh just, I might see something in life, that reminds me of something that happened. Well when you're flying around in high speed aircraft and carrying things that cause death and destruction, it's, I suppose it's imprinted in your, in your memory. But I think of the mateship, you know, I don't go around with my chin on the ground, I just, I like to look at the happier signs of life. And I just meet all my

36:30 mates, good people, close mates. I see a few, we've got associations where we all meet fairly regularly. And talk and discuss, we've all been with each other, see our kids grow up, and grandkids grow up.

Could you find that you could, well, firstly I shouldn't refer to it as this, did you have nightmares at all?

Oh not really.

Not really.

Oh well, when I was younger, maybe, but,

37:00 not to the extent, I don't think, of waking up, I don't remember waking up screaming or anything like that. I think I kept my feet, kept my feet pretty well on the ground. My makeup is such, that I, that way I guess. So. But I've had some injuries, you know, which caused me to get medical treatment over the years, the heart business and I've just had a knee replacement.

37:30 The old body is wearing out, but I'm still going strong.

Did you tell your family about the war, your experiences?

Oh well I suppose different, my wife's heard these stories over and over again, I suppose. And I used to, bring the old log book out years ago, people would come and have a drink or something and, my son would say, "Dad, not the bloody log book again." You know, joking. But they all appreciate what we did.

38:00 **What about the finer, perhaps, deeper, sadder aspects of the war, which invariably did take place. I, I mean a lot of veterans don't necessarily tell even their wives that.**

Yes.

Did you find that you could tell these, sort of.

Oh I've told most things, I think, from my war. I mentioned that Japanese hospital we saw, that we played, to show how hardened you get. Someone found a skull of a Jap and kicked it to me, and I

38:30 kicked it back to him, we played football with a bloody skull. You know, you didn't think about the personal thing that that was once a body, it was total war and you lived it, you dreamed it, you acted it.

Were they humans though at that time, for you?

They were skulls alright, yeah. It was, it had been a Japanese hospital, I don't know whether they were Japanese skulls or native skulls, there were natives on the island.

But did you view the Japanese as human beings all together,

39:00 **during the war?**

No, they were just a vile enemy and they had to be stopped and in march. To us, they were the oppressors and they were taking, they wanted to take our land, and they were taking Dutch land, which of course, the Dutch took from other people before them, and so it goes on. But you didn't think of it in that way.

Well, we're unfortunately

39:30 **running out of time, so I'd like to, sort of like put it to you and ask you, if you'd like to say anything for the record, for posterity, for the historical record in any way. Like say a message to future generations, or anything that you haven't told us already, that you'd like to say as a last word.**

Oh I'd just firstly I'd like to say I'm lucky to live such a long, a long life and had such a good wife and lovely children

40:00 and grandchildren and great friends. I'd just say to the younger generation, for goodness sake, keep your powder dry, that's what Drake said a few years ago, many years ago. Because somebody at some time will want this land, it doesn't, it might not look now, but somebody is going to want that iron ore and all these riches that this country has, so just keep your eye on things and be careful. That's all I can say. As an old

40:30 airmen digger, so that's about it. An airmen without a dig, without a shovel. Is that about it? Yeah. End

of story.

41:00 Life hasn’t been easy at times. Very happy at times, but everybody has their shares of ups and downs, and we’ve been able to weather the storm, storms plural.

I’d like to thank you very much, because we’re almost out of tape. Thanks a lot.

A pleasure.

Thank you Ken, thank you very much.

A pleasure. It’s been good having you here for

41:30 the day.

41:32 **INTERVIEW ENDS**