Australians at War Film Archive

William McLaren (Bill) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 22nd May 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/166

Tape 1

00:37 **Bill, could you give us a brief summary of your life up to date?**

Well, I was born in Crown Street Hospital, Sydney, 1920, in December, 1924 and we moved, well we didn't move, we lived in Leichhardt at the time. My father worked at Dunlop in Balmain. And the Depression came along and,

01:00 today, you could say he got retrenched. But he had an opportunity to go to Kandos because a friend who had a sanitary, garbage contact at Bankstown, Bill Base, said that he'd put in for the one at Kandos and he'd got it, could Dad go up and manage it, run it? So he went, he said, "The job might be dirty but the money's clean." So he went up to Kandos and he became the sanitary garbage contractor. And I went

01:30 straight on to kindergarten to school there, and I had my schooling in Kandos. And in 1940 I passed the intermediate certificate, then I went to Sydney to get a job. And I stood in a queue of twenty seven blokes to get a job in an iron foundry. Because I was only fifteen years of age at the time and I knew when I turned sixteen I'd get the sack because they'd get a younger man. So I decided to look around for other jobs and I got a job in Donald Hamilton as a clerk. And I went out and bought myself

02:00 a hat and a briefcase and they couldn't get them off me, I used to sleep with them both. Because clerical work was just up my alley, and at Donald Hamilton, there were a lot of ladies and gentlemen there, it was a wonderful place. So I stayed there for sixteen months until I turned seventeen and then I went and met a friend one day who was working in the Union Bank and he said to me, "I want to join the navy." I said, "I've always wanted to join the navy." And it was remarkable, it was 19th February, 1942 and we saw the posters

02:30 up, 'Darwin Bombed'. We both turned around and ran down to Loftus Street to join the navy. Seventeen years of age, both of us. We of course, mind you, we couldn't get anywhere near the place, the queue went up around Young Street. I've never been so impressed in all my life. I thought, "Gee wiz all these people want to join the navy." But we only moved about fifteen spots and so we had to come back another day. When I went back to the … Don Hamilton, he had been a naval man, he said,

03:00 "What do you want to be Mac?" I said, "Well I'd just like to join the navy, I want to be an able seaman or an ordinary sea man." He said, "No, I'll tell you what," he said, "Larry Machattie's the warrant recruiting officer at Loftus Street." He said, "His son is a supply assistant." He said, "If it's good enough for his son, it's good enough for you because," he said, "in all my twenty seven years in the navy I've never envied anybody but the supply assistants."

03:30 So when I went in to see the fellow at the time, to enlist, he said, "Well you can be a cook or a steward or a stoker, we'll take you in straight away. What do you want to be?" I said, "I want to be a supply assistant." He threw up his hands in horror and said, "Everybody wants to be a bloody supply assistant." But eventually I was rejected as medically unfit because … as a supply assistant. I went back to see Pinch Martin and he said, "What did I say Mac, what are you going to be?" I said, "A cook, a steward or a stoker but," I said, "I've been rejected medically unfit."

04:00 He said, "Why?" I said, "Pitted tonsils." He said, "What's that?" I said, "I don't know." So we went to my father who had been a naval man, war naval man, and he said, "Go and see a specialist." So I went, Dr. Beavis was a specialist in Macquarie Street at the time, and about the best ear, nose and throat man. He said, "I'm not taking these tonsils out." He said, "There's nothing wrong with your tonsils." He said, "Some people have deep pits and," he said, "some people have prunes." He said, "Smooth as smooth." He said, "There's nothing wrong with your tonsils," he said, "You've got no

04:30 trouble." I said, "Well I can't get into the navy unless I get my tonsils out." So reluctantly I went to St. Vincent's in Lewisham and had my tonsils out at my father's expense. I went back to the … after that I went back there and I had another examination. I didn't tell them about the previous one. And he put the spatula down my neck and he said, "My God," he said, "What have you been doing to your throat man?" I said, "I had my

05:00 tonsils out." He said, "We can't send you to Melbourne in this sort of weather," he said, "With tonsils like that." He said, "No, you're unfit." So I went back to Pinch Martin and I said, "I've been rejected a second time even though I've had my tonsils out." He said, "Oh, it's time to use our strength Mac." Pinch was a chief gunner's mate and Larry Machattie was a warrant recruiting officer. But Pinch knew a lot of old ships, and Pinch said to Larry "Come on Larry, this bloke wants to be a supply assistant," he said, and he said, "You'd better get him in." So I went down

05:30 and they accepted me, and drafted there, to Rushcutters. And I joined the navy that way. Twenty four hours later I was wondering why I did it all. I wanted to get out. It was too late, I'd been sworn in. And I had four years in the navy. And I came out of the navy and went back to MacDonald Hamilton again. Stayed there until 1951 and then I joined the bank as a

06:00 junior clerk even though I was twenty six years of age. They were apparently very, very short of my age group. And I had city service, suburban service and then I went to the country to Urbenville. And that was my first country appointment as an accountant teller. And then I went from there to Glen Innis and to Barham,

06:30 and my first managerial appointment was at Narrandera in 1966. And then I came back to Sydney in 1968 to start again. Then I went to Caringbah branch, managed Caringbah branch. And then I had this operation and I had sixteen months off the bank. I went back

07:00 there and started again in '86. And after the … after I retired I did a little bit of community service, I did some meals on wheels. And presently I'm still sort of interested in the RSL [Returned and Services League]. I'm secretary at the National Australia Bank sub branch of the RSL.

07:30 And that's about the only interest I can manage today. And the only reason that I'm still the secretary was that I was elected completely and utterly unopposed. Have been for the last five years because nobody wants to do it. And I would like to sort of … I know, I know, we're all getting too old. We're all around about the eighty years of age now and there's just nobody to sort of take over from us.

08:00 There's a couple of young Vietnam boys but they still work in the bank or are still employed by the bank. But that's about the resume of my life up to day.

Well that's an excellent summary, thank you. That's explained it succinctly and clearly and it's given us a few pointers along the way as well, so thanks for that. Now some of the questions may be a little bit repetitive and may be going over the same ground seemingly, and the first of them probably contains

08:30 **ingredients of what you've already spoken about but could you tell us when and where you were born?**

Crown Street Women's Hospital, Sydney, on 15th December, 1924.

Can you tell us a bit about your parents, your mother and your father?

Yes. Mum was third generation Australian and my father was a Scotsman who had immigrated to Australia in 1922.

09:00 And met my mother and married her shortly after he came out from Scotland. And he sort of, he died when he was fifty-three. He was a bit … I don't remember him in life at

09:30 all very much because, as I say, he was a labourer. He worked pretty hard life. And it's a bit of a difficult question to sort of tell you much about … other than the fact that he was a returned sailor in the Royal Navy.

Can you describe the personalities of your parents?

He was a very good and a very … man with a great, keen sense of humour. He was a very clever man

10:00 in many ways. He was good with his hands and his head. And he had a very, very good sense of humour. And he had a sense of the absurd in that … being in many ways. And he was a very popular man, I know that. But he, as I say, the early years were a little bit hard to sort of understand because all I knew was that we lived in McCauley Street. And I've been back to that little place where I was brought up

10:30 before moving to Kandos and I was not impressed, even though they could get a half million dollars for it today. But it was a very, very long three bedroom place, apparently, but the front door opened onto the foot path and it's quite a remarkable thing to see. I went across the road and I thought, "How can people live in this?"

This is when you went back there in recent years?

Went back, yeah.

And can you tell us a bit about your mother's personality?

11:00 Mum was a very, very placid, at time, implacable woman. When I used to do things wrong she said, "I couldn't go to the pictures." I wouldn't go, I didn't go to the pictures. I used to tell her that, "She should have been a Scots woman because she used to try to save sixpence by not letting me go to the pictures."

But she was a wonderful person. Very, very warm and homely and not

11:30 a great cook like her sisters. It was remarkable, her sisters were great cooks. But she was a trier and I loved her very much. We were a very happy family.

Now how many sisters and brothers did you have?

I had one sister, one sister only. She's six years younger than me.

And what can you tell us about your formative years? You know, growing up as a child?

Well,

12:00 my formative years were pretty aimless. I … Kandos is a very, very quiet town and there wasn't anything there until … I always say I found my Lord in 1938, Lord Baden-Powell, when the boy scouts started. They started a boy scouts group. It sounds as though … people frown when I say I found my Lord, they think he's a bit of a religious crank. But Lord Baden-Powell made a big impact in my life.

12:30 And the group scout master was an Anglican priest, Godfrey Kurcher, he later ended up as Archbishop of Melbourne. But he was a wonderful man and even though he didn't … was sectarian at all, the group was very ecumenical and he didn't influence us in any way. But he was a very, very, very fine person, and the scout

13:00 masters were wonderful people.

So in what ways do you feel that scouting helped to shape your personality?

Well being a foundation member, I happen to be gifted, virtually, with this patrol leadership. I was leader of the kookaburra patrol, patrol leader. And I sort of suddenly sort of appreciated that because I started my qualities from there I think because I took it very, very seriously indeed,

13:30 being a patrol leader. And of course, the kookaburras, I wanted to make sure they were the best patrol in the troop. But I had a lot of opposition because also the other patrol leaders, it was a really remarkable … first Kandos was a wonderful, where we were the only troop in the area. We had twenty

14:00 four in the troop including the group scout master and the two scout masters. And we had a cement coloured band around our scarf. And of course, we had the … to the tune of Men of Harlech we used to have our scouts at Kandos, "Eat your britches, pull your socks up, save your stitches, live up to your motto which is, always be prepared." I can remember that song we used to sing very bravely. "Always

14:30 stick together, cementing friendship ever, comrades true of royal blue, our honour when we surrender, and raise our standards to the breeders, lurgy face he'll never see us, God our steadfast, God our friend, always be prepared." And I'll tell you what, it made a big impression on my life, the fact that you had a purpose. Up until that stage we used to make our own fun. We used to go up to the mountain and climb the mountain and go

15:00 down the other side of the mountain and find out what was on the other side of the mountain. But the scouts, we used to have our camps and our things in the scouts made it all difference to me. And I think the boy scouts were the greatest formation … formative organisation in my life.

You mentioned earlier that it brought out qualities in you, what do you think those qualities were?

Well, seriousness, something to aim at. I was pretty aimless, I was a little bit of a nuisance.

15:30 The policeman used to see me and kicked me in the bottom for scratching names the wet cement on the steps in the … I respected Bob Blackstone, the constable, but I used to always cross the street whenever I saw him come. I used to go on the other side and he used to cross over deliberately to sort of try and … and we'd do zig zags down the street trying to sort of stop pass one another. And he said to me one day, he said, "I'll catch you one day, Billy." And he said, "And I'll put you in the

16:00 lock up," and he said, "You'll stay there for two days."

But apart from writing your name in wet cement, what other sort of pranks had you got up to?

Oh, stealing fruit, used to sort of go and rob the orchards and peoples … everybody had fruit trees in Kandos, even though we had very, very small rainfall we … and of course, I'd steal the grapes or the fruit because there was nothing else to do and it was good fun.

16:30 **Apart from inscribing your name in wet cement, what sort of tricks did you used to get up to?**

Steal fruit from all the neighbouring back yards and just sort of make nuisance of ourselves. Like for instance, one day I can remember, we, Harry Rimmer, my friend, his mother had a beautiful parrot, beautiful

17:00 silver crested Galah and we found a sparrow, a dead sparrow in Herb Brown's back yard, because we used to make cat traps hoping to catch … because Frank Buck used to make a big influence, bringing back a live buck. We used to go to the pictures and see Frank Buck with the whips and making the lions

jump through the hoops and going out and capturing lions. And so we used to emulate this and try and catch cats. Cruel little beggars, if the RSPCA [Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] had known about it that would have given us jail.

So how did you catch

17:30 **cats?**

Oh, we used to dig pits and put fibro over them, not realised that the cats could … and of course, we had to stop it because Herb Brown trod on one and broke his leg one day. And they found out that we'd dug the pit and found out … so we had to stop all that.

So the cats were never trapped in the cat trap?

Never, never. The cats were never trapped, they were too smart for us, the cats knew they could walk on our pits any time they wanted to. But

18:00 we let Mrs. Rimmer's parrot out because we found this dead sparrow and we tried to sell this to Mrs. Pearman, our third class teacher, or fourth class teacher.

Why did you try to sell her a dead sparrow?

Because we painted it up with some yellow paint and some red paint and we thought … I got down behind it with a … Harry had the bag around it and I was saying, "Sweet cherry, hello Mrs. Pearman, sweet cherry, hello Mrs. Pearman." And Mrs. Pearman said, "Look

18:30 I'll give you sixpence to take the thing away, will you, take it away." So we took the … got the sixpence and spent it. Got home, Mrs. Rimmer's got the police looking for her parrot, which we never found. And of course, Harry got a hiding and I got off scot free because … I never told my father and mother about that.

Okay, so Harry got a hiding and you got off scot free?

But it put me off birds for a long time,

19:00 all kinds.

All kinds. So what sort of other tricks did you get up to?

Oh well, not much. We used to play up on the teachers a bit. Not much. Well I suppose it was the normal natural boyhood, but there was nothing vindictive about these things. It's just that we used to get so bored and you used to have to go and do something. So Mum used to put an axe in my hand and she'd say, "Go and finish the kindling." And

19:30 so I got a bit obsessed with the axe which stood me in good stead for later years. But I used to sort of, when the neighbours started to say, "Our fence is disappearing," they said, "Enough's enough." So I had about enough kindling for about three and a half weeks there.

You chopped the neighbour's fence down?

Yeah, oh well, of course, mind you, the palings used to fall out with a bit of a tap. And I got obsessed with the axe and that's why when the boy scouts came along, that took a lot of my time, I used

20:00 to go round, used to go hiking and camping and that's what filled it … it saved me from a life of minor crime.

So there was always plenty of fire wood in the scout camp?

Oh, we used to keep the fire going day and night.

So did you start with the cubs or did you start with the scouts?

Only had the scouts at the beginning. It wasn't many years before they had the cubs and the… Kandos was a funny town. There were a lot of people that didn't like the

20:30 militancy of the…. Or the perceived militancy of the boy scouts.

The perceived militancy of the boy scouts?

Yes, because it was a very, very strong labour town with coal miners. And of course, they always thought that they were preparing us for war. And when the group scout master, Pard, as we used to call him, Father Kurcher became padre, senior padre

21:00 for the Middle East, and he joined up in 1940. He went over to the Middle East as the senior padre. And he used to write us a letter every month to be read out at the meetings about the Middle East. And of course this got us very interested in talking about war. And of course, a lot of the people said, "You're a lot of right wingers, red necks." And we weren't into anything like that because the perception in a country town was one … in particularly a country town

like Kandos which is a very socialist town and very militant socialism, was rampant there.

So it was basically a union town, was it?

Oh well yes, because there was a coal mine and a cement works there. And later on when Davis opened, they had a lot of militancy trouble down there because of the … Matter of fact, they had a big strike, we used to click out teeth about it.

They had a big strike at Glen Davis when they were doing the shuttle because the pit horses, the pit ponies had halitosis. So they went out on strike because the pit ponies had halitosis and they said, "You've got to do something about the pit ponies breath."

They striked over bad breath of horses?

They used to strike over worse. And of course, mind you, the funny thing is if you went to Glen Davis the smell of kerosene oil in the air was unbelievably over

powering, yet they were worried about the halitosis of the breath. I mean, I can imagine, I can remember going to Glen Davis and trying to eat a sandwich down there one day and it just tasted of shale oil. It was a real remarkable paradoxical situation.

I've been to Glen Davis in its latter day incarnation and it's quite a remarkable place. It's got a …

Unbelievable, the Wolgan Valley, it a …

Well that's the Capertee Valley, of course.

The Capertee Valley, that's right.

And the Wolgan Valley's the next one across.

Yes, that's one …

The Capertee, of course it's beautiful. Have you ever gone to Pearson's Lookout, seen the mesa?

No I haven't actually, but there seem to be a series of mesas and buttes all the way along that Capertee Valley.

We used to go camping down there. That's where we used to go on camps and we used to spend a lot of time down there. And they'd take us down on the Friday with three days food and come and pick us up in a truck on Monday… And after one day we were out of food because we'd eat three days' food in one day

with this patrol. I used to take my patrol down there. And so we used to sort of live on … we tried to snare rabbits but we didn't have, we had as much success snaring rabbits as we did with cats. But we used to tickle the trout in the little tributaries and islands and little coal rivers and creeks down there used to have a lot of trout. Used to lie on the bank and sort of trickle the trout. And we used to live on, for a least one and a half days, on the trout that we used to catch and just bake in the fire.

How does one

tickle a trout?

Oh it's not hard but it's not easy, it's an art. You've got to sort of lay on the bank, first of all you find out … you see a little whirring of the … because you lay on the bank you see a little whirring of the fins. And you just lay down and you put your finger, start your finger in. Mind you, it's a matter of endurance because they are icy cold, these creeks. And you put your finger in slowly and your hand down and then you just move your finger along to the side

of the trout. And when … sometimes when you've touched him he'd just go, other times, if you were gentle enough, you touched him and you waited a minute and you started to just move your finger up and down, stroking him very, very gently. And remarkably enough, you'd find that you'd seduced him because, or her, because they'd start to … you'd move your finger away a little bit and they'd just nudge and you knew you had him. And you'd very quickly put in your hand and fling it out on the bank.

But you always knew, they just loved to be touched, they loved to be tickled, that was what they called tickling the trout.

So tickling a trout was a way of catching a trout?

Yes. It was a way of catching a trout. And it was a very, very cruel way in many ways because you lured him, or almost seduced him into companionship and the next minute you just put your hand in there and flipped him and put him … We never bothered to gut them, we just put them in clay

or mud, put them on the fire and then when they were baked the clay used to come away and the skin as well and of course, we just picked the flesh from around about them. And beautiful pink flesh, tasted as nice as it looked.

So how many trout could you tickle and catch at the same time?

Oh, we were working at three a day. We were very, very … you weren't … you had to be …. George Rogers was the best trout tickler, I wasn't so

26:00 hot myself, but he was very good. But George could catch two and I could catch one and the rest of them sort of, they would be saying shhh, keep quiet, keep quiet.

How old were you at this point?

Fourteen.

Fourteen. And would you spend all day trying to catch trout?

No, no, no. You only caught them … they used to disappear and you only caught them when you saw them. There was a time, I think, generally … never at feeding time. After they were full, full of

26:30 food, you'd catch them then. Get down to the bank stand there very quietly.

So could you give us a more of a description of Kandos as a town? You've described it as a union town and so forth …

It was a dusty town. You used to be able to sort of … they used to have the gardens in the middle of the cement works that used to be looked after by the man and you'd have a picnic out there. It was a

27:00 nice little oasis, but you'd go up to the azaleas or the big plants and you'd touch them and you could always rub off the cement dust. Similarly, when you went to play football, as we did on the park, we always used to win at Kandos because nobody wanted to be tackled. If they came from Mudgee or Lithgow or Portland or even Rylstone, they didn't want to be tackled there because the drift of

27:30 cement dust use to come over every day and when it rained you'd have this hard flaky skin of cement on the field. And we had to learn to fall, our sports mistress, masters, used to teach us how to fall, how to go down. And even to this day I go down gracefully when I do fall over. But the other blokes, the Mudgee blokes in particular, they had the most beautiful green grass up there to play football on, and they used to throw the ball over their

28:00 head because they wouldn't go down with the ball, they'd throw it anywhere to get … but we used to hang onto the ball because we knew how to fall. But they hated to play Kandos cement works.

Of course, you mentioned cement in relation to the scout, one of the scout songs earlier, so it was predominately a cement town?

Oh, all cement yes. You see, the coal mines were owned by the cement company.

28:30 And they had a cement works at Kandos and another one two miles away at Charbon, owned by a different company, actually, they weren't owned by the same company. But the reason that they had the cement works there is that they had the big lime stone deposits at the quarry. And of course, their idea was to de centralise in those day. I think the town was only formed in about 1916. And I think the idea was they wanted to build the

29:00 cement works on the deposits, the lime stone deposits which was pretty uneconomical because the shipping, the railing costs were very, very high.

And so did the cement dust totally dominate the town, I mean, was it everywhere?

Fortunately, there was a prevailing wind and it used to take it away from the township, the prevailing wind used to take it away from the township, it was a persistent thing. And you could see it streaming

29:30 away from the township down towards … or over the mountain at Cumber, Cumber Mountain, Cumber Melon Mountain. And you'd look up at the mountain and times and you'd see … and you'd think it was snowing.

How eerie, how very eerie?

Well, one night the whole mountain caught ablaze in a bush fire and they couldn't put it out because there was not SES [State Emergency Services] or anything like that and that provided a carnival effect for two months. At night time when the mountain was just a mass of red

30:00 embers, glowing embers.

And the red dust still hovering there …?

Smoke. But fortunately the prevailing wind was taking the smoke away from the town. We were very lucky that way.

But clearly, you're saying that the sports ground was covered in cement dust, so that was one section of the town that was dominated by it?

Yes. Used to have The Flat, 'The Flat' they used to call it. The flat used to get a lot of cement dust around about it. That was a residential part of the town.

Now, what was your father's job in the town?

30:30 He was the sanitary and garbage contractor.

And what did that involve him doing?

Collecting all the night soil and the garbage and taking it out to the depot and burying it. They used to bury it in those days, dig burrows and bury the night soil and the … it was very, very good for mushrooms out there.

And when you say contractor, did he have a team of people working for him?

Yes, he had four men working with him and a big Clydesdale horse.

31:00 **Right. And for how long had he been doing that work?**

He did that work for all the time I was in school, about ten years. And then he … it got a bit too much for him and he sold out to a brother in law of his. And he became editor of the local newspaper and he bought three cars,

31:30 a hire car and two cabs. And he became the first man to have a taxi cab in Kandos and a hire care and became editor of the local newspaper. And he was very clever and skilful at driving and also skilful editor. He was a born journalist, actually. I remember, he became president of the P and C and they wanted to get some money for some cinematic equipment. And

32:00 only about six people used to turn up to the P&C [Parents and Citizens' committee] meetings and Dad said … I remember him speaking to a lady one day from Charbon, Mrs. Moore, and she said, "Don't forget to put a little piece in about Freddy's twenty first birthday. And so are you coming to the P&C meeting, Mrs. Moore?" "I'm not, I don't think I'll be able to make it Mac." And Mac said, "Well, space is a little bit limited this week, I don't know whether I'll be able to get a little Pa in." And she said, "Well we'll try and make it Mac," she said, "I'll

32:30 try and get the Pa in too."

You mentioned cinematograph equipment, what do you mean by that?

Oh, projector.

So he was trying to set up a local picture theatre, was he?

No, he was trying to get official education for the pupils.

Oh, okay. So, in other words, he was setting up a sixteen or thirty-five mil projector to bring films in for the pupils.

Thirty-five. And I remember we got I think two machines. And it was remarkable,

33:00 a revelation, it made me even like school a little bit.

So he did actually screen thirty five mil films to the schools? What sort of films were they?

Oh well, they belonged to the P and C. He raised the money for the P and C. Oh, educational films like … there was one particular I remember, the headmaster used to like us to see it. It was called Danzig, the Danger Spot of Europe. And I can remember this very, very clearly. And he used to say,

33:30 "There's going to be a holocaust, there's going to be a big flare up here," he said, "Because," he said, "The Germans aren't going to … are going to cause us a problem when they take … they want access to the Baltic." And of course, we didn't … it just wasn't making common sense. We didn't know what the Baltic was and we didn't know what Danzig was. And in those days there was a thing called The Polish Corridor, which gave the Poles access to the sea.

34:00 And of course, that was what Hitler wanted, he wanted access to the sea. And the man was prophetic but he was somewhat communistic himself. He was a bit socialistic himself. But I remember Ted Polly and I used to take great notice of what he used to say, because after the war broke out I said, "Well, I wish he'd got onto Mr. Churchill and told him about it." But we were pretty well up on the news. I used to get the paper, used to get The Telegraph of an evening, a train used to come in and I'd get

34:30 The Telegraph of an evening. And I used to take it home, it was only five or six pages in those days, and it was a broad sheet, The Telegraph. I used to put it down on the floor and read it from end to end about the war and the way the Germans swept across. And I said to Mum one day, one night, she said, "Your father doesn't like you reading that paper before him," she says, "You muck it up." I said, "No, I'm taking very good care of it Mum." I said, "Mum," I said, "Do you think the war will still be on when I'm old enough to go?" She said, "Son," she said, "The war will be well and truly over before you

35:00 have to go." And I said, "Oh, what a shame.

So you'd been following the war in the newspapers?

Oh yes. Well we were pretty well … we might have been isolated to a degree. It was only a hundred and

fifty mile from Sydney by rail. But we were pretty well educated. I had a very, very good … we had very good basic educational teachers. But my father had

35:30 a couple of blokes employed and to give you some idea of how they thought about the place. Jimmy and Walter were down at the pub one day, and Dad said, “I’m going down to Sydney at the weekend to get some equipment,” he said, “Do you want to come for a run?” And Jimmy said, “I’ve never been to Sydney Mac,” And Walter said, “I’ve never been to Sydney either.” They were both men of about twenty-six or seven or twenty-eight. And Dad said, “Well,

36:00 come with me.” “All right Mac, we will.” And by the time Thursday come, somebody had told them there were trams and traffic and they’d get killed and they’d get mugged in Sydney. So they both reneged and they said, “We’re not going to Sydney with you Mac, we were going to be sick that day.” And Dad said, “Well never mind, would you like me to bring you something back?” And Jimmy said, “Mac I’d love you to bring me back a Speedball bike,” he said, “And Benetton Wood,” he said, “If there’s a Benetton Wood down there. Just bring me back a Speedball bike.”

36:30 And Walter said, “Hey Mac, that’s a good idea, bring me back a Speedball bike too.” And Jimmy looked at him and said, “Listen Walter, you keep quiet,” he said, “Mac, if there’s only one Speedball bike there,” he said, “Remember, I asked you first.” That was their concept of Sydney, you see, because Fountain, the man who sold the bikes, used to get one in every three months and sell it, and it would be empty for about two months and then he’d get another one in. And Jimmy was under the impression that there may only be one left in the whole of Sydney.

That’s a wonderful illustration of

37:00 **what isolated lives and what isolated attitudes some people would have.**

Well, I believe in Kandos today there are a lot of people who have never been to Sydney who have lived in Kandos all their lives. Not a majority by any means but a minority of people who have just never been to Sydney and never want to go.

So what can you tell me about your schooling?

Well, schooling, I was very interested in schooling until I had to repeat second year. And I had to repeat second year because I was too young to go up. I passed the educational qualifications but … it annoyed me

37:30 because all my other mates went up and I was held back because they said, “No, you’re too young.” Because I went to kindergarten when I was just turned five. And of course, the majority were almost one year ahead all the time. And I had to repeat second year and I lost all interest.

You lost all interest in everything, in all the subjects?

In all the subjects, yes, because I thought I knew them all but I didn’t. I wasn’t a very good scholar, I wasn’t a brilliant scholar by any means. But I lost interest, but

38:00 I was fortunate because I just scraped through the intermediate. I got the barest minimum, I got an A and three Bs in the intermediate certificate. And I was very, very lucky, I was most surprised by the … by this time I’d come to Sydney to get a job in the iron foundry and I shook the paper out with shaking hands and I looked. And ‘McLaren’, and I saw an A which I thought was most unbelievable. An A and three Bs which is a bare minimum, you had to get four. And I said, “Well, I’ve passed anyway.” But I went in, I

38:30 was so proud, I said to the foreman at Humphrey Earls at Petersham, the iron foundry where I was working, I said, “I’ve passed the intermediate today.” He said, “What did you get?” I said, “An A and three Bs.” “Oh,” he said, “That’s not bad is it?” I said, “No.” I was sort of skiting to him. And that afternoon I was called in to see Humphrey Earl. He said, “McLaren,” he said, “I believe you passed the intermediate.” I said, I had to tell the truth, I said, “Well…” not modest. He said, “Where did you get to?”

39:00 I said, “An A and three Bs. He said, “That’s good.” He said, “How would you like to be apprenticed to the foreman?” I said, “Righto.” No intention, because that was the last place I wanted to work. And he said, “Righto.” And I said, “Righto.” And he said, “Good, I’ll just get the indention papers drawn up,” and he said, “I’ll send them up to your parents to get them to sign them,” he said. And I never went back to that place, I

39:30 left two bobs pay there because I wasn’t going to say, “No, I couldn’t go.” But Humphrey Earl was like God. He was sitting on the side of the table swinging his legs surrounded by RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] Butterworth weighing scales and stuff, equipment and making scales to go to the RAAF. And I thought it was very important, I just thought he was God, and I just thought it was too important, and I wasn’t going to say, “No, I didn’t want to.” I didn’t want to be an apprentice in the trade, so I didn’t go back.

Tape 2

00:32 **Bill, what are your memories of the Depression as they affected Kandos?**

Well I know … I can remember the days of the seven and six penny vouchers they used to give you to get rebate at the stores for the groceries. And we, my father was in employment, he was getting pretty good money and we didn't have any suffering. But I can remember that the kids used to follow me around at school

01:00 if you had an apple and say, "Give us the core, give us the core." And I was almost like a school of sharks following you. And we used to have oranges … mind you I used to do the same thing, I'd say, "Give us the peel, give us the peel." We'd eat anything. I remember the days where you'd bring a halfpenny along if you had a halfpenny, and on Tuesday they'd have the soup kitchen in the school. And they used to put them in big coppers (UNCLEAR) in the wash rooms.

01:30 And you'd get a cup of soup for a halfpenny and anybody that didn't have a halfpenny got a cup of soup anyway. But those things, they were good fun and there was no real stress as far as we were concerned because we always had plenty of bread to eat, we always had full tummies. Maybe our parents were worried, but there was a lot of hardship, but the kids seemed to, you know, they just sort of rolled … well there weren't

02:00 any punches, they rolled with no punches, and seem to just sort of got on with their life. And I was just saying, thinking to myself, it was a very happy time really. It wasn't a pleasant time, but it was a happy time.

Wasn't pleasant but it was happy?

Well, a lot of people, my parents, I remember they had a little place called Kerosene Hill and they had to manufacture their own little tent like structures. People couldn't pay the rent so they were put out of their houses and they went across to the

02:30 overhead bridge and they built up a place on the Kerosene Hill. And you'd see hessian with white wash to keep the wind out and pieces of kerosene tin built into little shanties. But I used to love going … and they had kerosene lanterns and kerosene cookers. But I used to love going in there. Not kerosene cookers, they had wood cookers, wood stoves or wood stoked with fires. I used to love going to those places because they were all so cosy. They were like big cubby houses.

So Kerosene Hill was on the outskirts of Kandos, was it?

03:00 Yes, it was … in those days it wasn't too far away. It wasn't on the outskirts, not on a pretty good part but they used to have to sort of dig, they'd dig their latrines and cover them, shaded them with the shade cloth or the hessian and then filled them in every now and then and dug new ones. And there was no worries about sanitation, they used to look after themselves pretty well. But I can imagine, I can remember how people coped so very well because there was a tremendous

03:30 amount of unemployment. The cement works … where they had five kilns running in full production, they only had one running.

So previously they'd have five kilns, and during the Depression era they were down to one, were they?

Down to one, yes. And then the … they only had … the coal was being mined from their collieries for their production. And as they had

04:00 little burning capacity they didn't want diggers, they didn't want the miners. And the miners were out of … it was a rather sort of … I don't know, and there weren't many ways and yet we never seemed to, the kids never seemed to suffer. It never, never disadvantaged us, most of us had plenty to eat and we were all, I don't know, there was a sort of camaraderie too, there was a great spirit of help. Probably put people together

04:30 more than anything else in my living memory.

So there was a community spirit in other words?

A strong community spirit. It just proved that everybody deep down were good in their heart. And the biggest banks in town were the two grocery stores, the co-op and the Royal George because poor old Roy used to … I think he had more money out than the Reserve Bank at the time. And they kept the town running, they were the men that

05:00 deserved the accolades because they used to give credit until it sort of … nothing dried up. I remember, I used to hate asking for credit, Mum used to send me down the road occasionally, not that we needed the credit but she said, "Just put it on the bill." I used to hate saying that because I used to think that they'll think I'm one of those people that can't pay.

You were saying that children followed you around at school wanting the apple cores, I mean, that indicates that quite a few of the children were going hungry from other families.

Well, I think it did indicate that they were pretty much

05:30 opportunists because we'd eat anything at any time, and kids were always hungry, and I don't think

anybody was ever starving, there was never any … I didn't see any fat kids but there were no skinny kids either. So I think it was more or less so much the fact that an apple was an apple in Kandos, and used to get some apples on trees that you couldn't eat, they were so tart, they didn't grow very well up there. They grew well but they weren't looked after. But you got an apple like a Granny

06:00 Smith from the city, and of course everybody's mouth would water immediately, because they weren't expensive but they were scarce.

So approximately how many families were living on Kerosene Hill?

Well, I think around about fifteen or twenty. I think the council did eventually move in and sort of demolish these structures, but I think they were there for eighteen months.

At what point was that?

It would be around about 1932, '31, '32.

06:30 **Now you alluded to the outbreak of war and you've mentioned the fact that war had already broken out when you were still in the scouts, when did you first hear about the outbreak of war?**

Oh, on the day it broke out. We used to get the news at night time along with Dad and Dave. And reception was very, very good in night time, it was bad during the day but it was good at night time. I remember hearing

07:00 Bob Menzies' ultimatum, not his ultimatum, his deliverance of the declaration of war and it, I don't know, it's a funny thing, nobody seemed to be sorry about it. We were all jingoists I think. I was brought up in a jingoistic family, my mother used to sing me war songs from World War I.

Were you jingoistic for the Empire?

Yeah, mad about the Empire.

07:30 The Empire was something … like the more red on the map we could get, the better. And yet we weren't power … the British Empire was wonderful. When we went to Bankstown to live for a while, we lived on Military Road, the Hume Highway, and I used to watch the troopers go up and down on their horses dragging the guns with the cases. They used to pass our house on the road because we were at the corner of Northcote Road and

08:00 Hume Highway. And I used to listen until the sound of the horses hoofs died, because I was only about five or six, or it might have been four or five, wouldn't have been that old, four perhaps. And the plumes, I can remember the plumes in the hats, the emu plumes in the hats and it used to be something that, you know, just like having a set of tin soldiers or something. They were going to the Liverpool

08:30 camp of course. And I thought, "Gee I don't know, we're a wonderful… British boys in blue."

So as a small child this emphasised the spirit of jingoism for you?

Oh, absolutely. I mean, right from the word go. Most of us, the majority of us were very, very Empire minded and very keen Britoners. We weren't even Australians in those

09:00 days, we were Britoners.

So what you're saying basically is, that everyone in the town was actually quite happy that World War II had broken out?

I wouldn't say everybody, because as I say, you've always got the socialists and the communists who are on the other side. And even though the communists didn't like Hitler, they did everything they could to sort of … oh, not in Kandos, there was no outright acts of treachery or anything like that, but in a miners, coal miners in particular

09:30 were very socialistic inclined and they didn't like anybody declaring war but themselves.

Now I'm interested to explore a little more, the way in which the scouts were seen as some kind of right wing militia group.

We used to have little banner flags and things like that and we'd do a march when they had parades, we'd always lead the march. It was the fact that we were marching, was the thing. And of course, it wasn't just Pard going across and becoming …

10:00 which was more a feather in his cap and ours too, becoming the senior padre of the Australian military forces in Egypt and then went on to become archbishop in Melbourne because he was a wonderful man. In those days he was just a priest of St. Lawrence, Christ Church, St. Lawrence Anglican Church.

So how was it communicated to you that unionists, or the miners, felt this way about the scouts?

Well, they wouldn't let their

10:30 sons join the scouts. A lot of them refused, they said, “No you’re not going to join the scouts because it’s too much Baden-Powellish.” And of course, Baden-Powell and all that business in the Boer War, and of course they all associated that with Baden-Powell.

And so they saw this as a kind of Empiric British reactionary kind of movement, I suppose?

They saw it as a paramilitary

11:00 organisation. And of course, we all saw it as anything but that.

Well, it’s not as if you were Black Shirts or anything like that, and in fact, apparently in America there were Black Shirt movements.

Yeah. And we weren’t Hitler Youth or anything like that, no.

So could you talk about getting your first job? You’ve mentioned this in passing on a couple of occasions, can we go back and look at that?

Well, I shook out the paper, as I said, and saw

11:30 my results. Oh no, I’m sorry, I’ve got a bit ahead of myself. I stood in a queue of thirty-seven fellows to get work in the iron foundry, and they picked me because I was fifteen and I was the youngest, and they had to pay me the least. And I was aware of this too, I knew that when I turned sixteen they had to pay me two shillings or two and sixpence a week more, and that they would get another fifteen year old.

So where was the iron foundry?

In Petersham.

And what sort of goods were they manufacturing?

It was Humphrey

12:00 Earl bacon slicers. Now Humphrey Earl might mean nothing to you but to us, on every counter in Kandos, sliced bacon, small goods and you put you shop on the weighing machines. And they made weighing machines and bacon slicers. Humphrey Earl was a household word as far as bacon slicers. And I think, as any manufacturer, he exported everywhere. And as I said, there was stuff going to Butterworth, RAAF and Butterworth. I used to touch with reverence, because it was going to the RAAF and Butterworth in Malaysia.

12:30 But, well, there was a foreman there, Lawson, I can remember him to this very day. And he used to wear his glasses, steel rim glasses done up, tied up, with a broken frame there. And he used to ineffectually kick us as we carried the castings up to the … from the foundry to the machinery shop. And they were all rough and they’d cut your fingers, and if we weren’t going fast enough he used to kick us. And of course,

13:00 we used to laugh and bay at him because we were a lot faster and quicker than he was. He never landed a blow, I don’t think he ever tried to. He tried to but he didn’t … I don’t think he deliberately tried to kick us. But he used to aim kicks at us, and of course, we used to laugh at him, just get the giggles and snigger. But I thought, this is not for me because I used to go to work in overalls, come home in overalls and there’d be blackness under my finger nails and blackness around the rim where I’d been doing a bit of buffing up myself. And I

13:30 used to go down to the back compartments and people used to move away from me because you were quite dirty, because you only had a sort of a trough to do your washing in. A big trough at the back with a cold water tap into it and Solvol soap. And you had carry your own Solvol soap in your pocket otherwise it would get pinched.

So in other words, on the way home in the bus or the train people would move away from you?

I used to go by tram, yes.

So what was your specific job at the iron foundry?

14:00 Labourer, jack of all trades and eventually they put me onto the machines, buffing things up and smoothing the edges. And I wasn’t a very good tradesman either. But the stuff used to blow up, and of course, it’d get caught around … it looked like you had an eye full of mascara. You’d go home and you’d have rings around your eyes, take you half an hour when you got home to have a bath, to have a good clean up. And it would be all on again the next day.

So what was it … okay, so

14:30 **you decided this kind of job wasn’t for you, so what did you do as a result of that?**

Well, I went into, I walked into Union House one day, Union Steamship company on the corner of Bligh Street, Bridge Street and Grosvenor Street. And this thirteen story building, called Union House, was a beautiful … one of the nicest buildings in Sydney, with a beautiful mezzanine. And it had MacDonald Hamilton company, P & O [Peninsular & Orient] agents, Union Steamship company.

15:00 And I went into … I was looking for a job and I went in, it was a Saturday morning, and I went into the Union company. I went down the steps to the basement and I saw the cashier and I thought, “Now this bloke must be pretty important,” because he was handling money, he was handling money and taking manifest money and goodness knows what else. And I said, “You got a job sir?” And he said, “What?” Because he was a pretty pompous man. Monty Bennetts, I can remember to this day, he was a very nice man. “What?”

15:30 He said, “What are you asking me for?” I said, “Well have you got any positions vacant?” He said, “Want a job?” I said, “Oh yeah.” He said, “Well go up to the third floor, to MacDonald Hamilton, up the stairs.” He said, “Go and see if you can see them.” He said, “Go up to the third floor and see Mr. Sewell, the secretary.” And I went around the back way, and of course, that’s how I met Pinch Martin, I’m wandering around the back and Pinch would come up, “What are you doing here” he said, “son? How did you get in here son?” I said, “I came up the back steps Mr. Martin,” no I didn’t say Mr. Martin because I didn’t know his name. I said, “I came up the back steps, sir.” He said, “Well don’t come up

16:00 the back steps again.” He said, “You come in the front way,” he said, “You come in the proper way, you’re seen to be seen.” He was very stern and he’d been a chief gunner’s mate in the navy for twenty-seven years and he was head messenger. Oh, a wonderful person, a man … the salt of the earth. And he said, “What do you want?” And I said, “I’ve come to see if I can get a job.” “Mm, do you have an appointment?” “Oh,” I said, “What’s an appointment?” He said, “Well, do they know you’re coming?” I said, “No.” “Sit down there lad,” he said,

16:30 “I’ll go and see the secretary.” He went and saw Mr. Sewell, the secretary. I’ll never forget, Mr. Sewell came and said, “Sit down.” And he was a little man, he just peered over the desk. And he said, “Mr. McLaren.” And I looked around to see if my father … I’d never been called “Mister” in my life. He said, “Mr. McLaren?” And I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “If you get a job here,” he said, “You’ll have to keep your nails a lot cleaner than they are now.” I said, “Oh I

17:00 will, I will.” I said, “I’ve been working in a foundry,” I said, “And I haven’t had a chance.” “Well,” he said, “If you get the job you’ll have to have clean nails, remember that.” And I went away thinking that’s… A week later I got a letter saying that - “I was employed at twelve and sixpence per week and I was to start in a weeks time.”

And what was the job?

A kind of junior clerk. Well,

17:30 I must admit, MacDonald Hamilton, I’ve never been so happy in all my life. They were a mob of ladies and gentlemen, and they polished me. I was ready for polishing because the scouts did it and MacDonald Hamilton did it too. And as I said, I bought a hat and a briefcase, all I kept in my briefcase was my lunch bags, because my auntie wanted me to bring the bags home because they were scarce. And a hat, and she couldn’t prise the hat off me. I thought I was just

18:00 Captain Cook. But I learnt a lot at MacDonald Hamilton, in a slow way. By the time I turned seventeen I wanted to join the navy. The day, as I said, the day Darwin was bombed I went down to join the navy.

Now before we move onto that, I just want us to move back to Kandos for a moment. As you were growing up, were there people in your family or among the family acquaintances who spoke about World War I?

18:30 Oh yes, well my father was in World War I. Yes, as a matter of fact, there was a pretty flourishing RSL, not an RSL, there was a club, they had a club, a flourishing RSL branch there. And there were a lot of people who had been wounded, gassed, my father was one of them. And they had a pretty good organisation there and a very, very strong RSL.

19:00 Yes, so they were very much aware of World War I.

And how aware were you of World War I, and the legacy that it had left?

Oh well, I was pretty much well aware too because we had it in school history. It was a subject that was taught about World War I and the armistice and the gnashing and the trench warfare and all that. And we were full of horror of that, I didn’t want to go to war for

19:30 that. I was very impressed the way the Germans swept across Europe in 1940 and I thought, “Well, if they can do it, so can we.” And of course, they seemed to lose no men, they seemed to sweep everything before them. And of course, mind you, I had a grudging admiration for the Germans, the Panzers particularly, because every night you’d see the arrows pointing to where they’d been and where they’ve come from and where they’re going to. To Dunkirk and… Dunkirk was a bitter sweet victory as far as we were concerned. But

20:00 I said, “Well at least they didn’t catch us, Dad.”

So you would discuss it with your father, would you?

Mm. And he said, “Son,” he said, “they’ll never beat us.” Good old Scottish man, “They’ll never beat us.”

So, to one extent, was your father talking about his World War I experiences?

Very, very, very little. He was in the navy and he was on the [HMS] Galatea in the Battle of Jutland. And he joined the navy when he was sixteen and he was in the Battle of Jutland, he was on the first ship to fire a shot and the first ship

20:30 to get hit. And his mother, once they got into port, his mother turned around and dobbed him in and they discharged him and he joined the Scottish Borderers under age. And they … his mother told them when they discharged him, his mother said, "I want you to join the navy again." His mother allowed him to stay in the navy. He was one of those … he was a person that was so persistent, and very, very patriotic man, my father. Without being …

21:00 he was … he had a fervency about him but he wasn't so dogmatic about it, he didn't like war but he liked to serve his country.

Now when you went to Sydney to get … first the iron foundry and then the clerical job, of course, you'd moved away from Kandos, were you staying in some kind of boarding house or with relatives in Sydney?

I was staying with my aunt in Sydney, yes. I was getting twelve and six a week and I used

21:30 to pay ten bob a week rent. My aunty went and got me an Australian cash order for, I think, ten pound. And we had to pay it off two bob a week. In those days, I think they were AGC [Australian Guarantee Corporation] in those days.

Can you explain the cash order and why you needed it?

She had to get it in her name because I was under age.

But what did the cash order mean?

I had to get a suit and to get to my job, I had to get a suit and a cap and a hat

22:00 and a brief case, to be up with it. And she used to make sure, she'd take the two bob a week for the cash order and she used to, sort of, pay it herself. She got it in her name. Australian cash orders were ten pounds in those days. They were always on the never-never because you had to pay two shillings a week for that ten pound and I think you had to pay ten per cent as well. So you had to pay eleven pounds back.

And you had to pay her back, ultimately?

Oh,

22:30 of course. Oh, I mean, that was understood. I mean, there was never any doubt about it, I was so grateful to her, because she was a wonderful person. And unlike my mother, she was a great cook and looked after me.

And your mother wasn't a great cook?

Not a particularly good cook. Mum was a very plain cook, but Nellie was a fancy cook. And oh boy, I tell you, I revelled in … I never wanted to leave their place.

What sort of food did she cook?

Well mutton chops, but they all tasted like pheasant in aspic. Everything

23:00 she touched, everything she made, cakes and puddings and she made them better than anybody else in this world.

So what was the staple diet provided by your mother?

Stew, we used to have stew and potatoes done in sort of pepper and salt, quite nice, I'm just trying to think of the name they used to call them. But they were very tasty but we were very… we were a stew family.

23:30 Because you couldn't buy good steak in those days, you couldn't get tender steak. Butchers used to kill their own and take them out to properties and skin them and put them back and the meat wasn't aged in any way at all.

So what went into the stew?

Oh, good chops, good quality but not aged beef or aged meat at all, because the secret in the meat was in the aging, apparently. Keep it cheap and keep it chilled. But there was no … very

24:00 little refrigeration except in the butcher shops up there.

You would have had meat safes, presumably?

We had to get to the butchers everyday or every time we had meat. We never had a meat safe, we had no refrigeration, we had no ice, ice safes. We did have an outside safe, an evaporated safe with a

hessian around it, water used to drip down there and the wind would blow through and keep … like a water bag, an evaporative water bag.

Now we're coming to your enlistment. You've give us a fairly

24:30 **complete account of the tonsil saga and how that had kept you out and the complications that it provided further along. What other details can you give us about your enlistment? I mean, what specifically did you want to be when you enlisted?**

Well, I wanted to be a supply assistant, and so did everybody else. Because it was the best service, supply and secretary was the best branch of the service. First, for most you

25:00 wore a square rig, you wore a peeked cap and a buttoned up double breasted jacket, trousers and shoes, and of course, that appeals to me, this peeked cap particularly. You looked like an officer but you were far from it. And I was probation supply assistant, class two, when I joined, because I was seventeen you see, and the lowest of the low. And then they used to call us "macaroons," still wet behind the ears, soft and sweet. And

25:30 yet we used to think we were just … when the girls used to say to you, "What's the S on your arm?" and the little star on your arm … but what's that S on your arm? I said, "Skipper." And they used to believe it.

So you were dating girls at this time?

No, I was almost engaged to my wife at the time. But I wasn't dating girls but I used to talk to girls. In those days I'd never been out with a girl

26:00 and I think my wife was the first girl I ever went out with. But it's not like today, things were different in those days. There was a great deal of respect for women and it was a different sort of world, a different world altogether. Today they'd call you a nerd. But I mean, in those days you were a dashing bloke if you smiled and got a smile back. And of course, I couldn't go to the hotel to drink, there was no drink in the first place because we were under twenty one.

26:30 You had to be twenty-one in those days before they'd let you get into a hotel whether you were in uniform or not. If you were under age, you were under age.

So could I be so bold to suggest that you wanted to be in that kind of uniform because it was a glamorous look for the girls?

You could be bold to suggest that and it's true too. You've hit the nail on the head, because as far as I was concerned, I used to think I was King's ransom. But after a while … the funny thing, the seamen didn't like it.

27:00 You see, they don't have it any more in the navy. Now, if you're a supply assistant, you wear the round rig and you have the star on your arm with an S in it until you're a petty officer.

So what, didn't the seamen like?

They didn't like us being taken for skippers. You know, here they were doing all the hard work and we were getting all the girls. I wasn't, in particular, but a lot of blokes were, a lot of people were a lot more successful with the girls than I was.

So how did you meet the woman

27:30 **that ultimately became your wife?**

Well, I went to a church meeting one night. Sounds like the boy scouts, doesn't it? Sounds like the boy scouts all over again. And Win was there and she was … a friend of mine from Kandos had been, was a choir master at this, only a young man too, he was the same age as me, and he was a choir master at this church at Waverley. And he was very keen on Winnie and

28:00 so were all these boys, you see, so I went along and I got very keen too, but I was only one of about a hundred. And she didn't seem to be particularly interested in me but I persisted and sort of just kept going and sort of just show up and try to be funny. And I don't know, I think she took pity on me and sort of … I think we went to the pictures one night and, yes, went to the Star Theatre, that was our first date,

28:30 at Bondi Junction. And oh, my goodness gracious me, I couldn't tell you what the picture was, I only knew it was the Star Theatre and I had stars in my eyes all the time. But we started, from the time I was seventeen, I went with Winy and eventually when I was eighteen, we got engaged. We were married at twenty one. She was the only woman in my life, actually.

And obviously, you were wearing the uniform at this time?

29:00 Oh, yes.

The storeman's uniform?

Yeah, oh yes. Mind you, as I say, you got used to that after a while. I mean, I'm exaggerating a little bit

about the uniform because I did like the idea of the square rig.

Now didn't the RAN [Royal Australian Navy] try and encourage you and encourage other people to be a cook or a stoker?

Yes, they did, because they couldn't get cooks, stokers or stewards, so they said, "Well you can be a cook or stoker and you can come in straight away." I had to wait until I was seventeen and a half before I could get into the

29:30 navy because they put all the opposition in my way. They told me I was unfit, too big a tonsils. Wouldn't tell me why I was unfit for a while and we had to sort of use Pinch Martin and Larry Machattie, the recruiting officer, to find out why, because I went into three medicals. Dr. Sussman was a …

30:00 a strange sort of doctor, a strange surgeon, but he was a very, very good surgeon apparently, in the navy. He walked into the room, the examination room, we were only stripped down to our trousers. And he just tapped three blokes on the back and said, "You go, you go, you go." And they just went. He didn't like the formation of their back, they weren't boisterous enough, weren't wide enough. And he just tapped them on the back, this was his examination,

30:30 "You go, you go, you go." And how he was taking the eyes….because everybody on our ship from Kandos was a school teacher. Jock Sneddon, and he joined the navy about the same time as me, but he'd already been a sergeant in the army, and he gave up his sergeant stripes to get into the navy. And they could pick and choose anybody they liked because … and they didn't want us seventeen year olds because they navy was the only one that would take anybody that was seventeen.

31:00 But they got sick and tired of mothering us, because we were just running around bumping into one another, you know, we were hopeless. We had no maturity but it was funny, I was seventeen and a half when I joined, when I was seventeen and seven months old I was almost the oldest man in the ward. Because, by gee, they pick you up and knock you down pretty quick smart. The navy was full of discipline.

When you mentioned mothering, was it also a question of physical development and robustness?

Yes. But when I say mothering,

31:30 I remember, when I was seventeen until I turned eighteen, you had to be on board at ten o'clock each night. And I turned eighteen on 15th December, 1942 and I put in my card, and the marshal at arms always used to admonish us, "Be back on board ten o'clock, my son." And I said, "Marshal, not tonight, I've got midnight leave tonight," I said, "I'm eighteen

32:00 today." He said, "Get back on board ten o'clock son." And just looked at me. "Master," I said, "It's my birthday." He said, "Back on board ten o'clock son," he said, "The navy will tell you when it's your birthday." And I was eighteen and three months before I could have night leave. And they used to look after the boys, I mean, even though they used to kick us to death, and they used to hate our intestines in many ways because we were useless and hopeless, they were determined, the senior officers, the senior ratings, the POs [Petty Officers], were

32:30 determined to knock us into shape as quick as they could, and they did too.

How did they do that?

Well, they used to sort of make it tough for you. As soon as you stepped out of the drill hall to go across to the parade ground you hear someone, "Come up there." You had to run across the parade ground. And they always picked on the boys, only the boys had to run, everybody else could walk sedately. And as soon as you stepped on the bottom step there was a pair of eyes and even two pair of eyes, "Run,

33:00 double up there." And of course you go in on the double. Coming back again, they'd be somebody else saying, "Double up there." And you'd be running everywhere. And of course, mind you, they used to be cruel to you in many ways, but George Gorman … I was training in navel stores, and Georgie Gorman, the petty officer, was a wonderful person, a wonderful person, exuberant, full of fun, full of regard, full of respect, but next door

33:30 the Sayonara shipyard was fitting up the Fairmiles to go up north to do the shooting. And one of the offices, a sub lieutenant by the name of Keith Inglett, who I later met in the army, the navy, the bank, and we didn't know our paths were going to cross, he was in the bank then, but he'd gone through officer training school and become a sub lieutenant and he was on the Fairmiles. And we were giving them their basic kit, like, soft soap, scrubbing brushes, squeegees, brooms, things like that.

34:00 But it was very restricted because things were pretty tough. And of course, quartermasters hate giving things out, you know. They loved saying, "We haven't got any." And he came in one day and we palled up, he and I, we had a rapport, he was about another six or seven years older than me, but he was being a bit greedy too, because even officers had to be nice to supply assistants if they wanted something. So he came in and he says, "Knuckles," he said, "Would you have any soft soap?" I

34:30 said, "Yes, yes sir, we've got plenty of soft soap." And I went down the back and I got a tin of soft soap, it had rust on it, you know, it had been down there for so long. And he said, "Oh, Knucks," he said,

“Thanks very much,” he said, “These are very, very …” he said, “Geeze, soft soap’s like gold, you know, it’s hard to get soft soap,” he said, “We do need it.” “Would you like another tin, sir?” He said, “Yeah.” It was almost like a flash, jumped across, put his foot out and tripped me, turned around and said, “Haven’t got any more love?” I said, “Yes, we have chief,” he said, “We’ve got …” He said, “Shut up Knuckles.” He had his foot on my

35:00 back.

Now where did the name Knuckles come from?

Oh, that was my nickname. Everybody had to have a nickname.

But why were you called Knuckles?

Oh well, I got involved in a little bit of a fracas at a Hasty Tasty one night trying to stop a fight. And when they ask me was I involved in it? I said, “No look, there’s no skin off my knuckles, I didn’t even land a punch. I got punched, I got punched to the ground three times and then I crawled away.” I said, “There’s no skin off my knuckles,” and of course they called me Knuckles from that day on.

35:30 I had twenty-eight fights with twenty-eight losses and that was only against the WRANS [Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service].

Could you explain that a little more?

Well, I used to say … they used to say, “Why do they call you Knuckles?” I said, “Oh, I had twenty-eight fights with twenty-eight losses and that was only against the WRANS.” Of course, Women’s Royal Australian Nursing Service had just started. And I said, “I had good reason, some of those girls were very big you know.” And when I used to fight, catch me… But I couldn’t fight,

36:00 couldn’t fight my way out of a paper bag, and that was the greatest, strangest paradox to call me Knuckles, because I wasn’t a fighter at all.

Now this fight at the Hasty Tasty, was this when you were in uniform?

Yes. As a matter of fact, I was coming down Darlinghurst Road, got off the tram, I’d seen Winnie, and got off the tram and I had midnight leave at this time, I was eighteen by this time, and I was walking down Darlinghurst Road which you could do in complete safety at midnight, before eleven o’clock, going,

36:30 walking down to Rushcutters. And we had to walk everywhere, there were no trams. And got abreast of the Hasty Tasty and three sailors, three American sailors and three Australian soldiers came out and they started to trade punches on the footpath. And of course, mind you, I sort of walk up and I said, “Hey fellows, cut it out, pack it up fellows.” And I walked into the middle of them and I got punched under the eye and I went down like a sack of potatoes, and I said, “Cut, cut.”

37:00 And I got a cut across the next one and got punched in the back and I had two black eyes or two bleeding eyes. And I thought, “Now I’ve lost my cap,” I thought, “Well discretion’s the better part of valour.” I just started to crawl away. But the 21st Division was there first and I got thrown into a paddy wagon and taken down to Regent Street, because Darlinghurst was full that night, apparently. And of course, I’m up there and here’s these three sailors and the three soldiers having a great time, by this time all palled up swapping cigarettes,

37:30 and I’m sitting there bleeding profusely from everywhere. And the sergeant said, “Where do you come into this son?” And I said, “Every one of those men laid a hand on me,” I said, “And I never punched one of them,” I said, “I ran in to try and stop the fight.” He took me over to them, he said, “Have you seen this bloke before?” They said, “No, no.” I said, “What’s the matter with you?” I said, “They never laid a hand on me.” And he said, “Oh go on, hop off,” he said, “Hop off, go.” I said, “Sergeant I can’t go back to the depot,” I said, “Looking like this.” I said, “I’ve got no cap,” I said,

38:00 “My shirt’s dirty with my blood on it.” I said, “I’ll get run in,” I said. “I’ll get run in,” I said, “And I’ll get stoppage for a year for this.” So he laughed and he said, “Well listen, I’ve got a couple of detectives going down to Rose Bay,” he said, “In a car,” he said, “I’ll tell them to drop you off.” And they did and very, very nicely explained to the officer of the watch the whole story as explained to them by the sergeant, and the officer of the watch looked me up and down and said, “Carry on.” And of course, in the morning I went back to the depot, into the

38:30 store room, and I’ve got two black eyes, closed. And that was when they said, “What have you been doing, who have you been fighting?” I said, “No, I haven’t been fighting no one, I’ve got no skin off my knuckles.” And of course, that stuck, I was called Knuckles. I met a bloke in Wagga in 1947 and he walked out of Romano’s Hotel. He said to me, “Hey, I know you.” He said, “Aren’t you Knuckles?” His name was Bill Roach, I remember him, his name was Bill Roach and he was a leading writer. He said, “Aren’t you Knuckles?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Look, pardon me,” he said,

39:00 “But I never knew your name, I only knew you as Knuckles.” And there were a lot of them. I had a mate from Forbes and he used to wear his overalls very long, and he cut them off and didn’t stitched them up, because we used to have to stitch our own overalls and do our own little housewife things. But he used to leave his … Nevil McDaid his name was, and he used to leave his overalls frayed a little, and we used to call him Ragsy, Ragsy McDaid. Ragsy got that all through the navy, as I got Knuckles

39:30 all through the navy. They used to love to nickname you. And they used it too and they knew… they didn't know me as McLaren, they knew me as Knuckles.

Tape 3

00:33 **Okay, so just a question about your enlistment. What did your parents think of your enlistment?**

Well, my mother was very, very unhappy in many ways. But my father said, "Go for it son." Being a Royal Naval man himself, he didn't want me to go in anything else but the navy, and of course, he thought I was following in his footsteps, and he was very happy about it. There was no real problem there. They signed the papers very, very happily,

01:00 or he did anyway. And I think my mother was, deep down, quite proud.

How did your mother express her, you know, upset, being upset?

She didn't express her upset at all, but I know she wasn't pleased about it but she wasn't unhappy either. She was unhappy but she wasn't against it. As far as I was concerned, if I wanted to go into the navy, it was all right with her. We all thought I'd be stuck at Rushcutter all during the war

01:30 and nobody thought I'd ever get transferred. You never thought any more than a day ahead, you know.

So, Rushcutters was where you, Rushcutters Bay was where you did your training? Yeah. So what can you tell me about your training?

Well, I was fantastic. We went to Rushcutter and they didn't have the huts built because, you see, there … they were so unprepared. I was an early, a reserved training centre and no huts built there. And so we went out and

02:00 got ten and sixpence a day, living out allowance, which helped … ten and six a week I think it was. We got a sum, I can't remember the amount, but we got a sum of living out allowance. And for three months, until the huts were completed, we lived out. It was like going to work. You used to got to work, you used to go home at night time, but every third weekend you had to stay on board on duty, just to teach you that you're in the navy now.

02:30 But they built the huts and then, not until I was transferred in September, they didn't have a gun there. And as Bofors became available they put Bofors there. But the remarkable thing about it was they were fitting out these Fairmiles at the Sayonara ship yard which was next door to our naval store, next door to the depot. And I said to the chief one day, "Chief, why don't they call it the 'Good-bye ship yard'?" I said, "Sayonara are Japanese." And

03:00 nobody could see the sense in that, and I thought, "What on earth are they calling it sayonara for? Why don't they call it goodbye, cheerio or something?" And of course, that was my … I had an aversion, I kept on …. And Georgie came to me and say, "Shut up Knuckles, shut up Knuckles, shut up Knuckles, oh shut up Knuckles, oh shut up Knuckles." And I could never get this sayonara out of my mind. And to this very day the Sayonara ship yard's still called the Sayonara ship yard all during the war and after the war until eventually, I think, they adopted it

03:30 for a marina, made a marina out of it down at Rushcutters. But they were fitting out these Fairmiles right next door … and I've lost the track, where were we?

We were talking about training.

Oh yes. And we were going ashore every night and it was just like, well, going to work. But when we lived in, I got a sense of purpose. You lived on the job and you got your leave and you did good

04:00 work. Well you did your work better because you felt as though you really belonged to the navy altogether. Because they're all a very, very good lot of people. One of my first jobs was kitting up the survivors of the [HMAS] Canberra, and they put me in charge of toothbrushes. And Charlie Woodley was the chief petty officer in charge of the slops, that was the clothing store, 'slops'

04:30 they used to call it. And his daughter was Pat Woodley, Miss Australia. She was only a young girl in those days. But I felt terribly sorry for these guys, and of course, they all came out looking for … and I was in charge of toothbrushes. They were in boxes with a hundred and forty four, a gross of toothbrushes. And there were seventy blokes to come out and I'm there, Woody was just behind me, the partition, and I said, the bloke said, "Thanks very much." And I said,

05:00 "Do you want a red one or a blue or a white one?" He said, "I'll have a red one, thanks." I said, "Do you want another one?" He said, "Yeah." And this little voice come out "Knuckles, there's a hundred and forty-four in that box," he said, "There are seventy to give out," he said, "If there aren't seventy four in there when you've finished giving them out, it's going to cost you tuppence halfpenny each." I said, "Give us the red one back." But it was remarkable how slops were worked out in those days. We used to

get eleven pence a day kit allowance.

05:30 We used to have to keep our own kit in order with that. And they'd have an inspection kit, and we use to dread these kit inspections because you used to have four pairs of socks and two pair of shoes. But quite often we used to, sort of, use the money in our pay rather than sort of buy it. But if you didn't have the proper kit you got suspended leave, you couldn't go ashore that night until you went to the slops the next day and bought

06:00 your kit. A rather remarkable repayment system they had of messing as well.

So you keep on mentioning going ashore, were you actually training on the boats at this point?

No. Well, when you were on a shore deputy, you'd go ashore. Like a ship

Right. So it's like a term that you used?

You had to be really sort of careful about it.

So you were just talking about your kit that you had, what else did you have in your kit?

Oh, you had uniform,

06:30 your whole uniform. Everything was supplied, everything was originally supplied but you had to maintain it, keep it up to day, keep the pieces of … a hat cost you four and sixpence and a pair of shoes cost you four and sixpence and you had to have all these … it didn't matter whether you had … you couldn't have too much on them but you had to have the basic kit when it came. And mind you, we used to skimp, wear the one pair of shoes and wear holes in them rather than pay the four and sixpence for … spent it on other things. A box of chocolates

07:00 for my wife or something, or my fiancé or something And we were all notorious like that, but they used to have regular kit inspections, and I'll tell you what, the penalty was stoppage of leave, immediate stoppage of leave until you replaced the kit. So if you got caught in the afternoon you couldn't go ashore that night until the slops opened the next morning because you couldn't just go into the slops and buy them, because everybody had gone, you know. So had all the supply assistants in slops, they'd gone home too.

So

07:30 **what else did your training consist of?**

Oh, well they gave us wooden guns, and I thought about it, I thought there was a shortage of guns, but apparently the armoury had plenty but they weren't going to trust us with them. And besides, I was only five foot seven when I joined and the guns were bigger … by the time I got all dressed up in gaiters and belts, webbing belts and bayonet scabbard, bayonet,

08:00 the gun was a bit too heavy for us, I mean. They gave us wooden rifles. And not only that, you could drop a wooden gun and not be ashamed of yourself, but you could never drop a rifle. You could be banished for life if you dropped your rifle. And not only that, I thought they were very heavy and so they trained us with wooden guns. And I went around telling everybody how unprepared we were because we only had wooden rifles. Just as well Hitler didn't find out because we didn't …

08:30 they were only doing it because … they didn't tell us so, but they were only doing it because we couldn't handle the big ones. As a matter of fact, that was the only time I ever handled a rifle in the navy. Of course, we had them on the ships in the armoury all the time but we never had occasion to sort of use a rifle.

So you only ever used a wooden rifle?

Only trained with a wooden rifle, never held a real rifle in my hand, in my arm.

Wow.

09:00 **So what would you use the wooden rifles for?**

Oh, mainly to present arms and shoulder arms and sort of marching with them. They were much better, I think, than the other one because the other ones … when I did hold a rifle, I found that they were quite heavy. I held a rifle and I had a rifle but I never used a rifle.

So, what else did your training consist of? What were you being taught?

Naval stores storage,

09:30 storage of all commodities, combustibles. You didn't put your rations with anything that was corrosive. And determining how much … what to get in and what to give out. And generally, just sort of maintaining the stores. In the depot, the supply assistants, the trainees, had very little to do

10:00 apart from sort of kept the trays tidy and all that, keep the place clean because they had assistants to look after all that in they depots. When you got on the ship, though, it was a little bit different. It would

have been all right if you'd gone to a big ship, it was virtually the same but when you went to a small ship you were responsible for everything yourself. And mind you, it was a bit of a shock to me to know that I had to have these things done, and particularly in view of the fact that at the time I was … had a very uncooperative store's officer

10:30 and I was quite … I'll admit it, I was a bit out of my depth because, as I pointed out, I could do the ordering all right but I had no authority to deliver. I mean, I was just a rating. I couldn't go to the depot yard and say, "Here's what we want," unless it was signed by the stores officer who was the lieutenant. And he would quite often deliberately not sign these things and then say, "We've run out of this, why?" And of course, mind you, I used to be quite

11:00 frustrated about this because I was very conscientious, I mightn't have been very clever but I was very conscientious.

But that was later on, wasn't it? That wasn't during the training. We might cover that in the …?

The trouble … the training was very pleasurable because we were well supervised and everybody was being taught something new every day. The big problem was, you were being taught by the store management, and of course, mind you, you learnt this and when

11:30 you did go to the ship eventually, you were supposed to use it. But when I went to the ship, the first lieutenant wanted to store some … well the first thing … I won't tell you the story, well I will tell you. The first thing I found was some gelignite in one of the cabins in a very, very unstable condition, it was all greasy, sweaty, and there was a box of detonators very close to it. And I took the detonators, as I explained later, put them in the

12:00 thing. The stuff could have gone off itself being unstable. And I said to the cook, I said, "Come and have a look at this." He said, "Yeah, that's the first lieutenant's fishing gear." And I said, "Well it's going over the side now." He said, "Why?" I said, "This will blow the stern off," I said, "if it goes up." He said, "It's not going to go up," he says, "You've got to have a detonator." And I said, "No, you haven't," I said, "When it gets unstable like this," I said, "I found out TNT, gelignite is quite explosive in itself." So he said, "Christ."

12:30 So we picked it up very gently with the rope handles, it was in a box, and we dropped it over the side. It was two weeks before he found out, and he was going to charge me with misuse of naval stores. And I said, "You can't do that sir, with the greatest respect, you can't do that sir." He said, "Why not?" I said, "Because," I said, "It wasn't taken on charge, that's not a naval store, there's no place for gelignite on this ship in that condition." And of course, that was the beginning

13:00 of our fall out. He thought I was a pretty smart little character, still wet behind the ears, telling him what to do and couldn't do.

So that was his fishing gear, is that what you said?

Yeah, he used to use it up in the … in the waters he used to use it. I wasn't on the ship at the time, but he used to use it in the creeks and the estuaries and he'd put a detonator in and throw some gelignite over and catch some fish. Stun fish and they'd float to the surface. It was …

13:30 I mean, he should have known … I understood that he couldn't because he was an overseer from Kavieng a plantation overseer from Kavieng called, they used to call him, Pineapple Jack, Pineapple Jack. And I suppose he didn't know what the damage that the unstable gelignite could do. But I was eighteen and I was told in my naval training how to … not how to handle it but not to handle it.

14:00 And of course, mind you, I panicked as soon as I saw it. Maybe I was a little bit fractious but I knew that it wasn't a naval store so that's why we got rid of it. I wouldn't be game to sort of drop any naval store overboard because you'd get charged with misuse of naval stores or things. But that was the story about the gelignite, anyway.

We've heard a few stories about creative fishing techniques in the forces …

Yes. He used to love that.

14:30 And I found that hand grenades were pretty good too. They were much safer than that, as long as you didn't explode them too close to hull, had to throw them well away from the ship.

And that's something you used to do?

No. I didn't do it because I wasn't in charge of the hand grenades either. But the first lieutenant's acolyte, sub lieutenant, he used to do that, he used to do a bit of fishing that way. Get rid of a shark at Kiriwina that way, when a rope tangled around our propeller, they sent the boys down to cut it free and this hammer

15:00 head shark appeared, and of course, they leaped out of the water and wouldn't go back again. So they got a hand grenade and dropped it over the side and it disappeared, didn't like the hand grenade.

Wow. Gosh. So we were talking about training and, you know, you were very happy during your training, like it seemed to be quite an enjoyable …

I was happy in the navy, I thought it was the most fantastic thing I'd ever been in. I was so proud and pleased and another guy I was with,

15:30 a couple of blokes like Ragsy McDaid and Hal Rider and a couple of other fellows who'd come in with me, we were all seventeen and we were all just as keen as beggars, and you see, we were very, very determined to sort of make a go at things. You know, I wanted to be a good supply assistant and so did they. Because you had to want to be good because the navy wouldn't have you if you weren't. Let's put it that way. You

16:00 had to be keeping on improving or otherwise they would … because they kept a little dossier on you, they'd put it on your work sheet, I've got the work sheet in my home here, I brought that home, it was in my discharge. And they'd comment on whether you were good, bad or indifferent. And I used to like to read that and of course, it was a good reference if you wanted to get a job or something like that, it was a very good reference, the final summary. I was always marked, average ability, keen and

16:30 alert. Average ability, keen, intelligent, alert, does a good job, and I used to be very proud about that.

That's a good summary. That's a good …

Yeah. And of course, mind you, it used to thrill me. Not that you saw it very often, I only saw my service sheet, I think, once. Because you never saw these comments that they made on you, about you, you didn't get a chance to comment on them. But I saw it once until I was discharged and I got it, and I was very, very pleased about it. I thought, I didn't know I was so good,

17:00 or as good.

Now tell me, you mentioned that you mucked around with some of the other blokes. You were obviously developing friendships and mates at this time, what kind of stuff did you guys get up to?

Not much, because I was governed by my wife. I used to spend much of my time with her. And we didn't

17:30 have much to do with them, with the blokes, we used to see each other all day long. And we never… when we went ashore, we went ashore separately. There was… there were no real … that was the thing about the navy, there were no real friendships. I think there was a… it wasn't frowned upon, there was an understanding that you didn't get too close to anybody because they mightn't be there tomorrow. And they never liked to put friends

18:00 or people from the same town on the same ship. And that was a result, I suppose, of the Sullivans in the United States, when there was five Sullivan boys went out on a ship. But they used to frown upon having relatives or friends on the same ship if they could avoid it. And of course, this permeated the navy, we were very private people. They used to smoke at the navy. It was a very, very, it was a very proud and a very

18:30 correct and a very disciplined organisation. And you either lived that way or you could get into trouble.

Who used to smoke at the navy? Was that like somebody felt…?

You know, the army blokes used to say … we used to call the poor old air force the "Blue Orchids" and they used to call us the "Boys that were more like Girls." I mean, I won't go into the inference, but they used to

19:00 think we were all homos. And of course, mind you, as I say, there were no more homosexuals then than there is today, or a lot less I think, because it was very, very, very, very taboo. Very closed shop.

But did it still happen, like was it still around?

Oh, of course it happened. Of course, I'd be stupid to say it didn't, of course it did. But I mean, most of us weren't that way inclined. Oh, no, it happened all right. No doubt about that. But it happened in the army and in

19:30 the air force to the same proportion, no doubt.

Was it a behind closed doors, not talked about or …?

Oh, it was … to those who were not that way inclined, it was disgusting. It was a vile sin, because we were very … I mean, today, I mean, that might hurt people today, when they hear me say that but I mean it, that's how it was in those days. You couldn't come out in the open, nobody could come out in the

20:00 open because if they were, they were shunned, vilified. But it happened just the same, I'm sure of that.

So you mentioned that, you know, Win was very much in your life, Winifred was in your life at this time and you were obviously spending a lot of time with her, what sort of things would you do for fun, for entertainment?

I didn't spend much time, because I used to, sort of, you know, you had to

20:30 sort of stay ashore, you didn't have leave every night. But we used to go to the pictures every Saturday. But when I was drafted, you see, I was two years … even though I was going to Sydney a couple of times, I was two years without leave, without official leave, because I was at Madang, Milne Bay, Brisbane. [HMAS] Matafele…and of course, the only time I came to Sydney was when Matafele made the two

21:00 voyages she made after a refit in Brisbane, to get supplies, and the second one she was lost, going back to Milne Bay. But I spent nearly two years away, two years and seven months away from Win. I did see her a couple of night times when we were in Sydney. But the first lieutenant made sure, because I was a Sydney native and he hated me, I was always kept on board when we were in Sydney. That was the thing that

21:30 frustrated me more than anything else. Other people were getting leave, Victorians, to go ashore, but because I was a Sydney native, he wouldn't let me go. He had me doing punishment every day we were in Sydney, just to make sure… he was a vindictive person. And that was very frustrating.

How did that affect your relationship with Win, if you couldn't get to see her?

She didn't know I was in Sydney, she didn't even know I was there half the time. I rang her up on a couple of occasions… I

22:00 wasn't even allowed on the wharf to ring up, he made sure of that too. I mean, no other person would have done it except that man. He was just that sort of person. I mean, I wasn't the only one that was victim of his vindictiveness, I was not the only one. If I had been I would have been… I would have done something really, about it. But, I mean, we all suffered from him. He was a very, very bad … he was a Captain Queeg. I don't know if you've ever read the Caine Mutiny, but he was Captain Queeg

22:30 and Mr. Robert's skipper all rolled into one, and Bennett, on this The Cruel Sea. They had them in the navy, they had these people, they were nuts, they were just crazy men. And when they got a set, their power, they were beyond … there was nothing you could do. I mean, if you were to strike one of them in the heat of the moment, you would have been shot. And I think that's what he used to hope I would do to him occasionally, hit him, so he could, sort of, get his way with me. And, I mean, I would never strike

23:00 an officer no matter how I was provoked. I mean, I might strike another rating, but I would never strike an officer because I knew the penalty, the more extreme penalty was death if you did that. It was absolute mutiny, something you didn't do at all. In other words, I was intelligent enough to know that I couldn't do that.

He sounds like an awful person?

He's indescribable, an indescribable man. We lost faith in the ship and

23:30 the rest of the ship's company, lost faith in the ship because of him.

Well let's continue with the chronology and we'll get to more about that later on because there's clearly, you know, there's a real sort of story there that I'm really interested to find out about. I mean, he just sounds like a very nasty, vindictive person …

You'll find out when you hear their story, he was. Or I'm the greatest fabricator of all time.

24:00 **Well we'll wait until we get to that. So, what about … just with your training, tell me a bit more about what you did? Were you doing drills at this time?**

Oh, yes. We were drilling, doing drills, and keeping watches and … like when I say keeping watches, you just had to stay aboard and sort of be on duty. You didn't go to the store, but you'd be on duty at night time. But it was just like a …

24:30 I used to love the drills and I used to love the marching of a morning, when you fell in your different divisions every morning and sort of got into your miscellaneous divisions and your parades. Came to attention and you'd start to march and they used to play Beyond the Quarter Deck, Upon the Quarter Deck. And they used to play this music and gee, I'll tell you what, you'd swagger.

25:00 It was a real … I don't know, it just fills you up with that … amazing, it was wonderful.

Was it a band playing or …?

No, it was recorded music.

Recorded, right.

It was recorded music but it was the sweetest sound in our ears. I mean, it used to brighten everybody up. But, I'll tell you what, it was a keen service, a very keen service, the navy.

So before we leave training, was there anything else that you,

25:30 **you know, … actually, perhaps if you could tell me what were your day to day … what was your day to day role as an assistant supply trainee?**

Well I used to, for instance, I used to have to go over the Garden Island in the boat to get … we were all sworn to secrecy because we were in the radar section and the anti submarine section.

26:00 Watson was the radar school and Rushcutters was the anti submarine school. Of course, I was all in it's infancy at the time and we were making great roads … and it was all like radio sets, and they used to have radio valves instead of little transistors like they do today, chips. They had big radio valves just like the ones you put in the back of your old radios. And they used to have funny names, Mark Five and Watson. And I remember

26:30 Lieutenant Commander Patrick Cole came down one day and he was a hero of the Canberra. He'd been the torpedo officer on the Canberra and he was badly injured himself. And he was put in Rushcutters and he was put in charge of the anti submarine. Lieutenant Commander Patrick Cole was a very fine man, very fine officer. He had a Lieutenant Nuttall who was in the bank, and he was his secretary,

27:00 and Nuttall was a pompous ass, if you pardon me saying so. But his secretary used to sit there, Commander Cole used to sit in a small office behind him, not a small office but a … in a small office behind him and he had to put everything through Nuttall, you'd have to say, "Permission to speak to Lieutenant Commander Cole, sir." And of course, mind you, he came in one day and he said to Chief Carmen, "Chief, have you got news on Mark Five?" And Georgie was never lost for an answer, he didn't know what

27:30 this is, Mark Five. He said, "No sir, we've got plenty of the Mark Sixteens, Watson, Mark Sixteens." And of course, Plunkett wasn't in a mood, he said, "Are they the same pattern, Chief?" He said, "Identical pattern, sir." He said, "We'll have five of them at Watson by three o'clock this afternoon." And then he walked out. And Georgie said, got up and he said, "My goodness, I've been funny too much," he said, "What's a Watson Mark Sixteen?" I said, "What's a Mark Five?" He said, "I don't know, we'll have a look in the manual."

28:00 We found these Mark Five and they were over at Garden Island. He said, "Knuckles, get the boat and go over there and get these Mark Five." So I did and I came back with them and he said, "Go up…," he said, Russell Prior was there and we used to send our…Geneva Convention not withstanding, we used to send our secret supplies up to Canterbury Naval Hospital in an ambulance, navy ambulance. Just as well there weren't any sentinels around because they'd be shooting us down. But yeah,

28:30 Russell Prior took them up there … we'd all been sworn to secrecy, you know, and mind you, we were all as proud as punch, we didn't know what we were doing, didn't know the slightest thing about it. He said, "Knuckles go and get Lieutenant Commander Plunkett in." Of course, Georgie, see, he just couldn't help himself, he just had to have a nickname for everyone and he used to call Cole, "Cole Plunkettin." So he said, "Go and see Lieutenant Commander Cole Plunkettin and give him my regards and say the Mark Five have been delivered to Watson." So of course, I walk up the steps,

29:00 knock on the door and Nuttall looks up and says "Yes?" I said, "Permission to speak to Lieutenant Commander Plunkettin sir." He said, "I beg your pardon?" I said, "Permission to speak to Lieutenant Commander Plunkettin sir." And he went as red as, and Plunkett Cole was behind him and he was a real gentleman, he said, "What is it son?" I said, "Chief Carmen's compliments sir, the Mark Five have been delivered to Watson." He said, "Thank you." I turned around and saluted, turned around, put my cap on, went down the stairs.

29:30 And I was stunned, I said, "They're funny people these people up there George, Chief, Chief," I said, "They're funny people." He said, "Why, what's wrong Knuckles, what's the matter Knuckles?" He was like a father to me, he was like a father to us all. And I said, "Look, I did everything right," I said, "I went up there," I said, "I took my cap off, I saluted and took my cap off and I put it under my arm," I said, "Permission to speak to Lieutenant Commander Plunkettin," and I said, "You've got no idea how Nuttall went," I said, "He went all apoplectic." He said, "What, what Knuckles?" I said, "Permission to speak to

30:00 Lieutenant Commander Plunkettin." He said, "His name's Plunkett Cole." I said, "Well you didn't tell me that." But Plunkett Cole was big enough to sort of take it. I thought we were all going to get court martialled over that. But that was the sort of thing they used to do, Georgie used to do it. He lived and dined off that for a week when he was telling the story. He said, "Knuckles called Cole Plunkettin."

That's a very funny story.

That's not a very funny story at all because I could have got … if Plunkett Cole hadn't been such a nice fellow, he could have been very, very offended and I couldn't

30:30 turn around and say, "Well Georgie Carmen told me to do that sir."

It's funny in retrospect.

In retrospect it's funny, yes. But you see, one person, his secretary was outraged and Plunkett Cole said, "What is it son?" A real hero he was, great man. They're the sort of people you respect. Another case was, another supply assistant, Kevin Ryan who was a swimming champion, he was a world swimming champion, he was in the early twenties and the Commander Hare wanted him

31:00 to go through officer training school and he didn't want to, he wanted to resist it, he wanted to be a

supply assistant. But he was an older man and he was a very nice fellow, this Ryan. And he said…he came down…he kept on worrying…Bunny kept…Bunny Hare we used to call him, Commander Hare, he kept on coming across and saying, "Now Ryan, there's big advantages if you go through this training school and you'll get through it, we want people like you. And he didn't want to be

31:30 an officer, he wanted to be just as he was. But eventually, he came over and he said, he gave him a half an hour speech and he walked around, he got to the drill hall, through the drill hall and he came back. And Kevin had gone upstairs to the sail loft and you could hear everything that was said up in the sail loft. And Bunny must have remembered something and he came back, Commander Hare came back and he said, "I would like to see Ryan for a little minute, Chief." And George

32:00 said, "Kevin?" And he said, "Yes." "Commander Hare would like to speak to you." He said, "What does the old B [bugger/bastard] want now?" And he used to be the B. "What does the old B want now?" He said, "He's down here." And even George was breathless, he said, "He's down here waiting for you." And Kevin came down, and of course, Kevin's face was like this. Bunny said, "And what … such and such and such and it'll be a very bit feather in your cap and I want you to do this."

32:30 And he said, "Incidentally Ryan, were your parents married?" And Ryan says, "Yes sir." He said, "So are mine," he said, "Remember that in future will you please?" And that's the sort of people… the commander could have shot us all to pieces and sort of… but that's what we loved about the navy, they could dish it out but they could take it as well.

Yeah, sounds like they had a real style.

The permanent officers,

33:00 they knew what… they were dealing with the riff raff and the rumble and they were going to turn them into sailors whether they liked it or not.

Now, did you remain a supply assistant?

I did until I was… after the ship was lost. I went to Ladava, I went back to Ladava, the ship was a tender of the Ladava, she belonged to Ladava. She didn't operate from Sydney, she operated from Ladava and she shouldn't have been used to come to the mainland

33:30 at all. We used to do all these runs with supplies from Ladava, Port Moresby first and then Ladava. And they had a lieutenant who used to look after the ship there. And when I went back, I went back as a supply assistant and … Commander Carey who was in charge there, he realised the problem and he sent me down straight away to the school to sit for my, to study for my leading supply

34:00 assistant examination. And in December, 1943 I was … December '44 I was gazetted a leading supply assistant, which of course, was the equivalent of a corporal in the army. But I thought that was fantastic and I thought it vindicated, it helped vindicate my otherwise position, I wouldn't be putting a man in detention one day and making him a leading supply assistant in a couple of months time. And I think they did that, Commander Carey did that deliberately because he realised what would prevail when you've gone through on a ship.

34:30 No, even just because of the loss, but we'd had trouble before and we'd complained because she was a, was tender of Madang, or of Ladava, Milne Bay, we had complained to our division officer, which was our right, about the treatment that was being meted out to us. One day I came back to the ship and I spoke to the first lieutenant and he was very, very cross with me. He said something… "McLaren I'm giving you forty days stoppage of leave." I said, "What for?"

35:00 He says, "That'll teach you to go ashore and whinge, won't it?" And I realised and I went back and told them in the mess tent, I said, "Don't ever go ashore boys and talk again because it gets back straight away to the ship, to the first lieutenant. If you make a complaint, the complaint is referred by to him again, so you're wasting your time." He reckoned we were conspiring and undermining and trying to get rid of him. Anyway, that's another story.

Yeah, we'll get to that because it would be good to deal with that whole story at the

35:30 **one time. But when did you first hear that you'd be going to sea?**

In September, 1943.

And how did that make you feel when you were, when you realised that you'd be setting off to sea?

Well, this Bill Roach came across to me … there were full of buzzes, buzzes going around everybody was getting buzzed, getting trips. And the WRANS were coming in and taking our jobs and we were all going to go to sea and everybody was getting drafts left, right

36:00 and centre. And of course, we weren't too happy about it in a way because we were so ensconced and we were happy at Rushcutter, but I didn't want to go to sea. But Bill Roach came over, "Knuckles," he said, "You're on the DDN [destroyer], you're on the draft list." He says, "You're going to the [HMS] Matabele." And I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well George has been up in the Aussie [HMAS Australia], he was on the Aussie in the North Sea," he said, "It's a Tribal. A kipper [naval slang: torpedo] Tribal," I said, "Oh my God, a kipper Tribal," everybody wanted to go to a Tribal.

36:30 A kipper Tribal means that I'm going overseas. And I'm going, "Oh, oh, how wonderful, how marvellous." And he got it wrong, it was the [HMAS] Matafele, there's only one … Matabele was indeed a Tribal ship but, of course, remarkably enough they, George didn't know she'd been sunk three months previously in the North Sea. But here am I all the time thinking, I'm going to a Tribal.

Can you explain to me what a Tribal is?

A Tribal is a Tribal class destroyer like the [HMAS] Warramunga and the [HMAS] Arunta, they were

37:00 Tribal class built in Australia. And they were the last things in … they were the sleekest and the most … you couldn't get any better ship than a Tribal. And I thought, "Here am I going to the Matabele." Never ever heard of the Matafele, she's never been to Australia. She'd never ever been to Australia, she'd been up doing the Island trade run ever since she was built in Hong Kong in 1938. And I'm going around telling everyone, "I'm going to a Tribal, I'm going to a Tribal." So they put me on a train,

37:30 a troop train to Brisbane, and I said, "I think I should be telling the RTO [Rail Transport Officer] I should be going the other way, I think I should be going via Melbourne and going round to Cape York." But I said, "Perhaps they're going to send me via America." Now this is how naïve you are, I already thought I was going overseas, because they told you nothing. And I told the RTO that I was going to the Matabele and he said, "Never heard of it." I said, "Well, I've got a troop ticket to Brisbane, a voucher,

38:00 to go to Brisbane." And I got to Moreton and I was put in at Moreton and they said, "What are you going …?" And I said, "I'm going to the Matabele." They said, "Oh, she's just down the river, she's down at the old naval wharf down near Windsor Street ferry." And I thought, "Oh gee, I never thought it would come up this far, up the river." And they took me down to the boat and when I saw this terrible looking, rusty bloody thing, three hundred and thirty five ton of rust and camouflage and

38:30 that. And they said, "All right out you get." Tipped me out and it was the Matafele. And there was nobody around, they were up in the naval depot, because the engines were having a refit at a second yard, the engines were out. And of course, I'm helloing and haranguing everybody. I slept that night, in one of the cabins on an iron bed with my hammock cover and because there was no ship, no boat to take me back and there was nowhere

39:00 I could go, I couldn't find anybody there. In the morning when I woke up, there were three natives looking at me through the door way, the cabin, giggling, saying, "What for master, what for you here master?" And of course, I went up and got a lift further up the river, up the road, and the mechanics were working on the auxiliary engines. At this stage I'd had nothing to eat for about thirty hours then and they didn't give me any breakfast because they had nothing

39:30 to eat, they used to go up to the depot, come down to the depot. And they just took me down there and shoved me on this bloody ship and I spent the first night aboard with not a soul around. I went back to the depot and I stayed there for a few days until they got the accommodation. Took us down to Mary Street wharf and built twelve bunks in the front and put three, made up, put three hammocks in. It was quite optimistic, it was where fifteen of us slept.

Tape 4

00:31 **So, Bill, can you continue the story of arriving at the Matafele?**

Yes. I spent the rest of the night in this cabin that I found that was vacant without any … just a let down spring on the side of the wall, on the bulk head, and I put my hammock on that. And I spend a very restless and boring night, tossing and turning along side the wharf at

01:00 the old naval wharf in Brisbane at the end of the Windsor Street ferry, wondering whether I was ever going to be joined by anybody in the ship? Still not believing it was the Matafele, I saw the name of the side, but I couldn't believe … I thought, "Somebody's made a mix up, I'm supposed to go to the Matabele." But Matafele is was, that I was going to because, I think I mentioned before, the Matabele had been sunk about three months prior to my

01:30 draft, in the North Sea, in the… on escort duties.

Were you feeling disappointed at this time?

Yes, and dispirited and dismayed and hungry because I'd had nothing to eat for thirty hours. And there were no facilities, the natives were all being housed in the old naval depot and they had been put in the HMAS Moreton, which is the Brisbane depot which is across the river, only across the river and away from Janella Street,

02:00 from where the ship was berthed. But they didn't have any accommodation for the natives. And incidentally, those natives were taken in as Royal Australian Naval Reservists, but they were only being paid one shilling a day. And they were … well that was September and Brisbane's not a very cold place in September, they had fires going all the time to keep themselves warm because they were very, very miserable, they weren't used to the sort of mild weather, and they had never been to Australia before

because the ship had just come down

02:30 from the north for a refit at Evans Deakin yard. And they were pretty unhappy with the situation. But I don't know, I'm not too sure about their messing facilities, I don't know who was looking after them at all, I never found out until… Of course, we only had them for a week because we all went back to the ship and stayed on her daily from the depot. The crew, generally assembled, they got some, quite a bit of new blood.

03:00 **So can you describe to me … you're talking about the natives, can you describe to me the make up of the crew, like who was on the crew?**

Yes. There were twenty... there were four officers, twenty-four white ratings and thirteen native crew.

And where were they from?

Well, a lot of them came from Buka, the Solomons, and some of them came from

03:30 the… some of them from the Marshall and Gilbert Islands. And they'd been taken in because being virtually indentured to Burns Philp, they belonged to the ship and they elected to stay on board when the ship was taken over by the navy. And it was taken over by the navy on 1st January, 1943 and commissioned at sea, which was another first, no other vessel had ever been commissioned at sea. One day she left Moresby as a MMV [Merchant Marine Vessel]

04:00 Matafele and the next day she was HMAS [His Majesty's Australian Ship]. But it didn't make any difference to the ship or the crew but it made a difference to the discipline, of course, because it was interchanged. As soon as it was HMAS it seemed … I wasn't on the ship when it was commissioned at sea, but it seemed apparently, from talking to people who were, that they went from a carefree sort of voyages to, supposed to be passable naval vessel. And of course, the officers,

04:30 they sort of stamped their feet and sort of said, "Right, attention, and you'd better start to wake up to the fact that you're in the navy now."

So those natives from Buka that were on this ship, they were volunteers, they volunteered?

They elected to stay on the ship. Virtually, they had nowhere else to go. We were based at Moresby at the time… well when I say we, I wasn't on the ship at the time, I didn't join the ship until six months after

05:00 this, she was commissioned at sea. But the ship was based at Port Moresby, a tender at Port Moresby belonged to HMAS Basilisk which was the shore depot at Port Moresby, and as such it was its home port virtually. But they had nowhere to be repatriated and they didn't want to go ashore and sort of be bush Kanakas, because they were all saltwater boys and they

05:30 elected to stay with the ship. And of course, mind you, just as well they did because, I think, that until they eventually founded her, they kept her afloat because they were very, very capable seamen, very likable people and very intelligent men, too.

Well, look, let's … I want to find out more about them and the relationship between, you know, the crew members and stuff. But perhaps I could just … before we do that, if you could give a description of what the Matafele was

06:00 **like as a ship, if you could describe her for us.**

Well, she was a twin engine motor vessel, built in Hong Kong by the Bums Philp dockyard in 1938. And she was commissioned as an inter island trader to run between Moresby, Fiji and Samoa. She was called Matafele after a province in Western Samoa called Matafele, which literally means the 'eye of the coconut'. And of course, she was

06:30 well named because she was engaged in the copra trade and she ran, very lackadaisical and erratic schedule because she picked up wherever there was a cargo. Most inter island traders used to just sort of pull into port and pick up what they could. So that is you got it in Western Samoa and you wanted to go to Moresby, it could take sixteen days or it could take maybe twenty-five or thirty days, depending… they judged it by the day, apparently, in

07:00 those days, on the passenger ships. Burns Philp were running a very good schedule, but you couldn't tell what day the ship was coming in, there was no… they were dictated by the cargoes available. And she was a very, rather trim looking ship, but a very strange vessel because she had a lot of top hamper, built rather remarkably.

What's top hamper?

07:30 I mean a lot of top structure, top deck structure, it seemed to sort of … it was only a hundred and fifteen feet long, three hundred and thirty five tons, dead weight, and only had one fire hold. And she was rather a sort of unstable ship, a ship that wasn't meant to be sort of sea voyaged. A ship that if the wind got a little bit strong, could go in

08:00 shelter at any bay, and we frequently did. Which also disrupted schedules, most schedules were a bit of

a laugh, they didn't worry about schedules, because if there were cyclonic weather around, then she'd stay four days in say Fiji, while I blew away from Bougainville or some place like that, you see. They didn't bother to… Australia was like… The navy expected us to sort of be able to take that. And when the cyclones came we used to steam into them,

08:30 the bays. And of course, most of the men on board went white after about three days, their hair went white after about three days, after a cyclone, being in a cyclone, which was the most terrifying experience I've ever had in my life. But the natives themselves were very, very amenable, very, very religiously strict as far as their demeanour was concerned

09:00 and they didn't deserve the attentions of the first lieutenant who hated fraternisation between the white and black crew. And of course, it was just so stupid because we were rubbing shoulders every day with them and being dependant on each other as a crew. They were the seamen on board and we were the sort of navy blokes, and they knew about four times as much about the sea as we did.

So did you ever … ?

09:30 **Were you able to make friendships with the …?**

We did, we did and not surreptitiously because we thought, "Blow it we don't give…" And this used to anger the first lieutenant no end. He hated to see us talking to the natives, which we couldn't understand. All the orders were given in Pidgin anyway, and we were speaking Pidgin, the white crew were speaking Pidgin as well as the natives because that was one of the first things … they gave us a book, Pidgin English and we all had… We became very fluent in Pidgin English which stood me in good

10:00 stead later on in the further jobs I had in the navy, in charge of natives. And the fact was we were sneaking… As a matter of fact, when we woke up in the morning there were thirty-seven black blokes on board or thirty-seven white blokes, whatever you liked. As far as we were concerned, there was no colour bar or… because we did… I admired every one of them and they admired every one of us except the first lieutenant. One of them

10:30 said to Jack Male who was running…. in the last days of the Matafele, he said, "Number one mate," he said, "If this ship finish along saltwater, number one mate, number one mate finish too." And he dragged his finger across his throat because they were going to… they disliked him so intensely. But of course, they weren't the only ones that disliked him intensely.

So, I mean, the first lieutenant sounds like he was …

11:00 **just didn't get on with anyone and didn't …**

Well, he had no background, he was an RANVR [Royal Australian Navy Volunteer Reserve] officer, lieutenant, and he'd been a plantation overseer at Kavieng and he was used to being brutal to natives, he was used to treating natives like slaves because they were virtually under his charge. And he had aspirations of becoming a naval officer in the real sense of the word but he just didn't have the ability. He wasn't a… he didn't have the background or the ability and of course, all he did

11:30 do was bluster and bluster and blunder. And of course he was never wrong, he was always right, and of course, he used to worry… we used to call it Harry Tate's navy because Harry Tate was an English comedian and everybody laughed at Harry Tate, it was one thing they used to say if things weren't right or the way the navy wanted it to be, you belonged to Harry Tate's navy. And of course, you were on a ship what just sort of meandered around and didn't…did what they wanted to do at the whim of the captain or the first lieutenant or the

12:00 officers. And we reckoned we were the flag ship of Harry Tate's navy because we just sort of were a pretend naval vessel. We tried very hard, I mean, we had a certain pride in the ship but it was very hard to love that ship, very hard to love it, particularly the way it used to behave in the sea and the way the officers used to behave. When I say officers, there were only three of them who were impossible to get on with, but three out of four is a pretty big score, isn't it?

What

12:30 **was the name of the first lieutenant?**

Gilbert, Lieutenant Gilbert. And they used to call him Pineapple Jack because … I put it together, I didn't realise why they called him Pineapple Jack, but it's possible that it's because he was always thorny, he had all these prickles all over him, and he was one of those blokes who couldn't talk to you without being harrassable. The skipper was lieutenant commander RN [Royal Navy],

13:00 and that was remarkable for a lieutenant commander RN to be in charge of a three hundred and thirty-five ton store carrier. But they used to call him Sampan Charlie because he used to run into every wharf that we went along side. And Sampan used to smile and say, "Nearly made it that time, didn't I?" And of course, we bumped our way along every wharf damaging, not only the ship but the wharf, not badly, but bumping our way along every wharf. Every time the Matafele came in, they said, "Look out, here comes the Matafele,

13:30 what wharf's going to go next?" Which is a little bit, sort of an exaggeration, I must I admit. But at the same time, that practically sums it up.

You mentioned that it was very hard to love the Matafele as a ship, but it sounds like you still did?

Well, we tried to because, you see, every sailor's in love with his ship to a degree, no matter whether it's a cockle shell, and I mean, we can knock it but nobody else can. And you've got to stick up for

14:00 your own of course, but it was hard to love it because she was such a vicious little thing, and I suppose she was vicious when the sea was worse. And you get to that stage when you say, when they mix, "The vixen and the fox are fighting." It's a bit hard to sort of ride on their backs. And that's a funny analogy, I mean, it was one I just made up but at the same time it just about sums it up because we didn't know what to hate worse, the ship

14:30 or the sea. And of course, the ship included certain people worse on board as well, a certain person.

You just mentioned that you hated the sea at times, like what …?

There was no enemy worse than the sea as far as we were concerned, on the vessel we were on anyway. Now, I later on went to a destroyer, I went to the [HMAS] Vendetta after Madang, I was drafted to the Vendetta for the

15:00 last couple of months before she was paid off in Sydney. Now the difference was chalk and cheese, I mean, at last I realised that I was in the navy and I was so proud of the Vendetta. She was twenty-eight years old and she'd been an old VW [class] destroyer, distinguished herself in the Mediterranean. Had a captain, Lieutenant Commander Keith Tapp who was a man and a gentleman. A man you could probably follow to hell. And I only went on it for two months and yet I felt

15:30 as though I'd sort of achieved my goal, I'd been on a real good … well by that time, the war had ended. But I was remembering just how impossible it was on the Matafele, because it was neither twixt nor tween, it was neither a port ship nor a sea ship, nor a fighting ship, but she was doing a job only because there was nobody else to do it, there was no other ships to do it.

So what was

16:00 **the role of the Matafele?**

We used to carry supplies to forward areas. And you see, before she was actually commissioned at sea she was used from the Islands to supply the outposts of the coast guards, coast watches, not the coast guards, the coast watches. And she got into some real hairy problems there because she was a completely unarmed vessel and she used to sort of

16:30 supply them, pick them up, replenish their batteries, their radio batteries and things like that, and they were dependant on her. But of course, when the Japs came to Kokoda and they had to bring most of the coast watchers back, she was confined to the south coast of Papua New Guinea and around as far as Milne Bay. She was the first

17:00 ship to run stores past Milne Bay after the invasion of, the Japanese invasion of Milne Bay. And she was pretty well known around the area because she was tireless, she never stopped. When I say we, I still wasn't on it at this time, but she never stopped sailing, she was always working. When I did join it, I realised how tough it must have been because it was a, frequently break down,

17:30 a ship, she used to break down, and we drifted from day in the Bismarck Sea, we just drifted for thirteen hours while they were hammering and trying to repair the engine. And that was another story, because there were no engineering spares on board, after the Evans refit, most of the tools had been stolen and the lathe had been taken off in Moresby,

18:00 the engineering lathe had been taken off in Moresby to be used in the store there, and never been put back on the ship, so they couldn't make their own machine tools. And I can tell you one case, for instance, one day when we were at sea, we decided to use the pork in the freezer, a fletch of pork, and we decided to cut the leg off. And I got … opened up the freezer with Lofty, the cook, and we dragged it out to a little chopping block that was on the

18:30 side of the gunwale. We laid it down there and Lofty hacked at it with his cleaver, all he was doing was chipping chunks of ice out, or chunks of meat and ice out of it. I said, "This is no good Lofty, we'll have to go and get and hacksaw, I'll go and see Bill," who was the chief ERA [Engine Room Artificer], "and we'll try and saw this leg off. Make it manageable, put the rest back." So Lofty said, "All right." I went to see Bill and I had an argument with Bill. Bill said, "No, I'm not going to lend you my hacksaw because I've only got one blade.

19:00 And here's a ship that's suppose to be at war," he said, "I've only got one blade and it's my blade," and he said, "I'm not lending you the hacksaw to saw up the meat." But the problem was solved because when I came back the flesh was gone, it had been washed over the side. Only a moderate sea, but the main deck used to become awash up to your knees, it had a big gunwale all the way around it, it would become awash up to your knees

19:30 just in a natural sea, the waves would break over into the gunwale and sort of just go through the big scupper doors. They had big scupper doors in the side that used to open by pressure, and it'd come out

pretty fast. But you were waiting around in knee deep water all the time on that main deck. The free board was very, very low.

So what was your role aboard the ship?

I was the supply assistant. I was in charge of the provisions and everything except engineering supplies. Not in charge, but responsible

20:00 for the issue of and the replenishment of.

So could you talk us through a typical day? Describe a typical day aboard the Matafele for you.

Well, the first lieutenant thought I was a lazy beggar, so he'd put me on watch, normally supply assistants didn't work watches. I used to be able to sort of… I had to do my books and issue all the business. So

20:30 daily, I'd speak to Lofty, the cook, and say, "What are we going to have today?" And it was mainly corned beef or biscuits and cheese, ships' biscuits and cheese. And we would decide, maybe if we had some sausages left over in the freezer, we'd have toad in the hole, tiddlioggy [Cornish pastie], whatever they called it. And toad in the hole was just sausages in batter, sausages with Yorkshire pudding poured over them and baked in an oven.

21:00 The food was very plain but it was fairly plentiful. But because the ship was so frequently rolling and rocking and even in a moderate sea, Lofty couldn't use his galley very well, because, I mean, the galley was midships, and even though he had guard rails around the stove, the fuel stove, it was rocking and rolling and everything was sliding off the heat plates.

21:30 And I felt sorry for Lofty, I thought he was a wonderful cook in many ways, because he made the most of whatever he had, but he had a very big battle to sort of feed thirty-seven of us. He used to have big pots of rice for the natives, and that was the main thing, rice was very hard to get, so I used to sort of have to ration the rice, make quite sure there was enough for the natives. The first lieutenant used to love his rice, he wasn't a gourmet, he was a gourmand.

22:00 He'd eat anything at any time, the first lieutenant. Big man, rather soft, blubberish, and he'd always say, "Well cook, what've we got today?" Cook would say, "Well, you got what you get." And of course he used to take it, and I used to give a little bit back to the first lieutenant that way. But he could take it from the cook because he was afraid of the cook, afraid of what the cook might do, but he wasn't afraid of me at all. And of course, he used to say, "Don't you be insolent to me you whipper snipper." And

22:30 I was always being told off for, well not answering back but sort of a smart reply. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, that was one of my biggest troubles. If I'd had a brain as big as my mouth I would have been a lot better off. But of a day, you'd get up at say six o'clock, or five-thirty, six o'clock, and I'd go and issue some stores, I'd get the dry stores out, the sugar,

23:00 the tea and the cocoa, they used to have kye in this big seven pound box and even in the tropics, I used to reckon it caused bad boils. In the tropics they used to be addicted to this kye which was big chocolate, big blocks of chocolate, melted into kettles and sort of poured out during the watches at night, the night watches. It was wonderful in the North Sea, no doubt, but it was pretty hard to sort of drink, as far

23:30 as I was concerned, in the tropics, but once you get addicted to this kye, you've got to have this kye. And not to be confused with … they used to call it kye but the natives used to call their food kye, too. But it was… Kye was a cocoa, melted chocolate. And I used to get all the rations and I'd enter them up in the book, virtually, because we were tenders of…

24:00 we were looked after from Port Moresby and Milne Bay later on, Ladava. I used to put the books in and they'd do all the reckoning because we were allowed one and nine pence a day per man, victualling allowance. You had fed everybody on the ship, each man for one and nine pence per day. It was very, very … a relic of the old Nelson days. I mean, they didn't go back to the cafeteria messing until, I think, after the war when they

24:30 decided, you know, dish it out in the lines like the Yanks used to. The cafeteria system, they'd do all the cooking, cook everything up and everybody would eat the same thing. But we had four messes on the Matafele, the officers' mess, the petty officers' mess, the seaman's mess and the native mess. And of course, as Lofty used to say "I cook them something different for upstairs, for the men, I'll make

25:00 it different for them." So they'd have sausages and mash, but they'd have a silver salver on top of theirs so that the steward could take it from the galley and just flourish it in front of them, take off the silver salver from the top and present it to them. But ostensibly we had to divide into four messes. A very antiquated and unruly system and I could never understand myself why they sort of had to … but that was the way you had to do it and you had to account for it, strictly.

25:30 And if you were over one and nine pence a day, allegedly, supposedly, they were suppose to collect that from the mess that supplied the mess that collected back from the ships company. So that could cost you, over a month, it cost you one and ten pence a day, you owed them thirty pence.

Did that ever happen?

No, never. Alternates, the other reason was, reckon that if you used one and eight pence a day, you were supposed to get the money back, but we never got that back either.

So you were talking … we've just

26:00 **started to talk about your daily routine, and you'd gotten to bringing out the dry good, the sugar and the kye, what would happen next in your day?**

Well, then I'd have to go… when you've done your book work now, and you've got nothing else to do, you can go up and be bridge look out. So I'd spend four hours… I'd do a four hours watch on the bridge as bridge look out. So this was a good thing in a way because I felt as though I was

26:30 a seaman. I didn't do… I mean, I took everything in my stride because, I must admit, I did get through all my jobs that I had to do. I didn't demure because I thought, "Well, I'm part of the crew." And quite often, supply assistants were not particularly liked in the navy. They never trusted … they were like the quartermasters in the army, they never trusted us.

27:00 They used to think we were… half a millionaires, we were getting… But the first lieutenant was very annoyed because I used to make sure that when the blokes went on leave they used to get a quarter of a pound or a half a pound of tea to take home to their parents or their wives and family. Because they weren't using the ration on the ship, they were being charged one and nine pence a day, this was my rationale only, so I used to give them a half pound of tea but it had to be done very surreptitiously. But I gave it to everybody except the petty officers and the

27:30 officers. And of course, somebody blabbed one day and the first lieutenant came down and said that I was misusing naval stores, naval supplies. So we had to cut it out, I had to cut out. So whenever they went on leave they didn't take any half a pound of tea home. I suppose when you consider it, I suppose, if I'd been sensible I would have given it to everybody. But I just couldn't find

28:00 any care in my body, for the officers, particularly. And the petty officers, they were mostly engineers anyway, and they were always very, very busy people, always trying to keep the ship afloat and keep her going. The remarkable thing about it was, all those people, thirty-seven people on board and there was very little communication of a friendly nature.

28:30 We all stuck together in the mess deck, the fifteen of us on the mess deck. But we had to be very careful, I told you, mentioned early, that if the first lieutenant saw three of us together in conversation he would allege that we were conspiring to mutiny. He had this fetish about mutiny. He alleged one night, he had us all out on the ship one night, out of our bunks one night, alleging that five ratings tried to

29:00 put him over the side when he was doing his eleven o'clock walk around the boat deck. And he took us out, and of course, this put a great deal of disquiet into our minds because we thought, "Who would do that? Who would try and get the first lieutenant overboard, who would try and throw him overboard on a quiet night?" And of course, we were all in the mess deck, and we were all tied together by rope because we all reckoned that when the ship went down we would all be able to get out

29:30 together. And the fifteen of us in the sea would be easier to find than one. So I mean, anybody on our mess deck who got out of bed to do this sort of deed would rouse the others, which they frequently did when they went to the toilet. And about three nights this suspicion went on the ship and the first lieutenant was furious… the officers were living in fear and the captain was furious. And

30:00 one night, Ron Upton was in his hammock… a regular sea man, spent fifteen years in the navy and he was a sparky on board, and he was our father, he was in his late thirties or early forties. And Ron said… he used to use a hammock, we used to have twelve bunks in the forehead deck and three hammocks, and of course, he used to love to sleep in the hammocks, so did we. We would all prefer to sleep in a hammock than

30:30 bunks because when the ship went down you'd hit your head against the top and slide down the back base again. When she went up on the crest of a wave and when she went sideways you've go over onto the bulkhead, and the next side you'd almost fall out of bed. Whereas a hammock used to just sort of sway gently. But Ron, the lights were out, and Ron said, "You know something," he said, "I reckon that B has sort of tried to put a ridge between us." He said, "I don't think it ever happened." He said, "I can't imagine anybody here trying to do that." He said,

31:00 "I think he's telling lies." He said, "I think he's got a fear of mutiny because of the way he goes on." And we all came to the conclusion that that was true. And we still believe to this day, that that man made up that story to put a wedge between us and the rest of the crew.

I mean, it sounds to me like there was, you know, the first lieutenant was … created a real

31:30 **culture of fear.**

Well, he was a mental case, I'm sure. He was an absolute… for instance, I would come out of the mess deck, out of my store, and he'd say, "When did you clean the bin, the tea bin?" I'd say, "Yesterday."

Because he had a fetish about the tea bin because he was aware of the tea going out to the crew. And I used to clean out the tea bin about four times a week. And that was his little way of getting back at me and letting me know that, "I know what you're doing, I know what's going on." And I couldn't see it, I

32:00 didn't realise that that was the reason why. I said, "I cleaned it out yesterday, sir." He said, "Well, clean it out again." So I was forever cleaning it. And he turned around and walked away and I mumbled something and he said, "You've got forty days stoppage of leave for being disrespectful." I hadn't let him walk far enough before I sort of mumbled. And that was… He'd dish out the punishment and it never went in the book, you were never formally charged

32:30 but he remembered. He said, "You're on punishment, you can't go ashore today," whenever we were tied up anywhere. And I only went ashore when he wanted me to go ashore, when I had to sort of deliver the things to the victualling yard, or go to the depot to get a bit of meat or things like that. And then I had to be back at a certain time, I wasn't allowed to sort of go around town or anything like that, because he used to watch every move I did. And he was terrified of me because I went ashore and complained to my

33:00 division officer at Milne Bay, and told him that I didn't want to go back to sitting on the ship, because it was just impossible to live there. And he said, "Well you're a Sydney native, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I know there's something wrong now," he said. "We're getting a few complaints about that ship." We had a right to go to our divisional officer when we were… because we were a tender of Madang, go over the skipper's head, we had that right to complain to a higher officer. And we

33:30 complained to the Commander Curry at Milne Bay. Not that he did anything about it apart from explain… ring up the ship and tell them that they were getting complaints and wake up to themselves. And I didn't find this out until a couple of days after we were at sea, and I said something and he said, "And you'll do as you're bloody well told," or something. He was very cross with me and he says, "And that'll teach you won't it, to go ashore and complain." And I went up to the mess deck immediately

34:00 and I said, "For God sake fellows, don't go ashore and complain any more because it's coming back to the ship, we've lost that right of complaint."

So, I mean, when you realised that he'd known that you'd made this complaint, that must have made you feel very depressed and …

Well, he did but when I consider, there was no alternative for them to do that. I mean, it wasn't as though they were being mates together,

34:30 the officers on shore and the officers on board, except that they are because the navy was an officers' club. I mean, there's no doubt about that. But at the same time they did try, the officers on shore, your divisional officer on shore did definitely try to sort of rectify the matter. And there was very little other way of doing it other than to say to the first lieutenant or the captain, "Look, these fellows are complaining, what's going on? Give us a reason." Of course, mind you,

35:00 they knew we were complaining because we were all complaining. Everybody was going to their engineering officer or their pay masters or their executive officers, complaining. A lot of the executive officers, of course, a lot of the engineers and some of the pay masters didn't give a continental. They didn't want any trouble. The ship was such a miserable little thing, if it had been a big, if it had been a corvette even, they would have been able to take it on board and understand it. But it

35:30 used to happen. They would also censor your letters when you were writing home. And we used to put in our letters deliberately, we'd put in some reference to the first lieutenant. But that of course, used to put him off for days. Everybody would say, "What can we write about the first lieutenant today that he's going to see?" Because he used to do the censoring. And I can…whenever… I wish Win were here to sort of confirm at the moment, but she got a letter once and it had every second word cut out of it. They used to

36:00 excise the letters, the words and the phrases that… with a razor blade. They wouldn't sort of black them out, they used to cut them out with a razor blade. And she got a letter that looked like a paper doll.

What sort of things would you write about the first lieutenant?

Oh, we'd say something about, "Old blubber guts," which we knew was going to get us into trouble but it was what you call almost self adulation, almost. You used to say, "I know I'm going to get

36:30 into trouble about this, but at least I can say…" But I put that in a letter, I didn't call him that. And of course, we used to refer to him as … only obliquely, we didn't refer to him by name or anything like that but he knew who we were talking about, and we would make sure that he did. And of course, every one of us would do it, you see, so that he couldn't sort of … we'd say, "Who's writing home tonight?" And we'd say, "What are we going to say about the person tonight?" And we'd all put the same thing, and it'd be all cut out. And of course, mind you,

37:00 you could tell he was so… we'd wake up in the morning and he used to be all puffy eyed and sort of red faced and grimacing and screaming. Everything was wrong that morning. And we used to say, "We've got him today." Terribly childish, terribly childish, terribly stupid but only… our frustration was so intense and it was so amazing that we just couldn't help our childishness. When you get to the stage where you've got … get to say anything

37:30 to make him unhappy, we used to do. And he used to absolutely react.

Well it sounds like there was a bit of mutual provocation.

Well, there was no doubt about that, there was no doubt about that, there was mutual provocation. I mean, we had no respect for him whatsoever. And you do provoke people you have no respect for, whether it's the first lieutenant or not. It happens on ships. First lieutenants are always

38:00 a very, very difficult job. But I've served on vessels where there's been a very… I was on the [HMAS] Bendigo for a fortnight going back to Milne Bay to rejoin the Matafele, and there was a first lieutenant on there and a captain on the Bendigo. They were officers that were complete and utter gentleman. I mean, I thought to myself, "Why can't I stay on the Bendigo?" There was a fellow named Dalgleish, I think he was the first lieutenant and a Captain Dowson, Jimmy Dowson, and those people

38:30 were absolutely faultless as far as officers were concerned. I mean, there was no friendliness about it, no mateness, there was a deep respect for these people, and that's how it should be, that's how we want it. That was real discipline, you had respect for the officer and he had respect for you. And there was no respect on the Matafele, none at all, it was just a laugh. You got

39:00 punished for sort of sneezing, you got punished for sort of standing together having a cigarette, talking together. We got punished, Lofty and I got punished one day, we got punished for the loss of the fletch of bacon and he wasn't going to touch Lofty, but I think I had to pay seven and sixpence for the side of bacon, the side of pork, took it out of my wages, out of my pay. And it used to happen quite frequently. You'd get milked if anything happened to the

39:30 ship's supplies. They'd say, "Take seven and six out of his pay for it."

Tape 5

00:33 **Okay, so you had a quite interesting crew in terms of make up, you know, you had the officers, the petty officers, the regular crew and then also the natives on board. I'm interested, we've touched on that briefly but I'd like to know more about the inter relationship between the white crew and the native crew that were onboard the Matafele?**

Well, apart from speaking Pidgin

01:00 to make ourselves understood, on both sides, we just … the inter relationship was fantastic on the vessel because we used to work side by side. Joe and Lambousie, Joe was the head boy and Lambousie was the coxswain, and he had to con all the time because he'd been with the ship ever since she was built. And mind you, he knew how to keep our head into the sea, which was a difficult job and he

01:30 actually used to lash himself, in storms, lash himself to the wheel to get some stability. Lash one leg to the wheel so that he could hang onto the wheel once it keeled onto the side. But…

What, he'd actually tie his foot to the wheel?

He had to tie himself, otherwise, you see, if he lost the con and the wheel span, as it apparently did in the eventual end, in the supposed end, was what happened. She just bent over in a big sea and went over and lay on her side and couldn't possibly get up again.

02:00 And that happened almost every time we went into a bad sea. She'd go over to starboard and she would struggle to get up because they'd put in two water tanks, water ships, and there was about twenty-one ton of water, fresh water in the things. And of course, they used to take the water from each tank willy nilly, and one tank would be empty, and there was no baffle, so one tank would be empty and of course, the water would go down. And as the water, there was twenty-one ton of water, when she was full

02:30 it helped the stability, when the tanks were full. But when they were half full, ten and a half ton would sort of slide down to port or starboard and make it very difficult, that ten and a half ton of water, to sort of right again. She used to fight to get up again occasionally. Now, this was well known when they put the… at Evans, did the refit, and they were supposed to have kilometre

03:00 tests to test the stability, but they didn't. They were told to do these, a man was commissioned to do the, a technician was commissioned to do them, but it never ever happened, tests were never done. And as a result, with the top hamper that they'd put on, the iron clad around the bridge windows, because we were going back to, as I say, we were going further north into the Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, and they'd put this gun on,

03:30 a twelve pound gun as well. All that weight displacement was going onto the top, and they'd taken, as I said, they'd taken the load from below, it was five and a half hundred weight, taken the load from below as well, and that had been some sort of stable weight in the engine room, and everything was going on top. And of course, as I say, the naval constructors were not paying attention to the fact that she had too

much

04:00 top hamper, as we say, and not enough keel.

So because of this instability, was it Joe, the head boy, would tie himself to the wheel?

He had to do that even before the stability, because, see, she wasn't supposed to do any long voyages, as I've said. If the seas blew up on a voyage between Samoa and Port Moresby via Fiji, she could run into a little

04:30 bay or inlet anywhere and shelter, anchor and she'd shelter from the storm. And she'd stay in the bay as long as they had to. But when she was embarking on a two thousand, five hundred mile journey to Sydney from Milne Bay, and there was a cyclone in the Coral Sea, there was nowhere to run. We only had to come … we had to come south to get to a Whitsunday island or some sort of land, because there was no

05:00 shelter in the Coral Sea and there was no shelter on the Solomon Sea or the Bismarck Sea, apart from the mainlands. We used to just have to … we used to go through the cyclones. And I think on one occasion, on more than one occasion, on two occasions I can recall, we broke into the centre of the cyclone, and that was an experience which I've never forgotten. It was like being in an atrium. When you broke through the centre

05:30 of a storm, the winds were fiercest, so then all of a sudden you break through into the eye and there's an eerie howling on the wind, you can hear the noise of the wind. But there's a flatness of the sea. And a green, greeny-bluish sort of a canopy.

06:00 It was the most unusual thing, a great relief for us. But of course, once you break through the storm, it either moves onto you again from one side, from forehead or beam, because it's moving and so are you and you've got to break through it to go through it again. So we knew we could have a respite of about two or three hours at the most in the eye, depending on how big the eye was. And we used to try and keep within the eye and clean up a bit, and get

06:30 some of the water out of the mess decks. And then all of a sudden you'd go through this again for maybe two days. Two days of decreasing winds and seas. But the most eerie thing in the world was to be in the eye of the cyclone.

So were the natives on board helpful in terms of, you know, navigation and weather patterns …?

They were

07:00 invaluable, they weren't helpful, they were invaluable. They were without peer, that's why I say we should have deferred to them. And the first lieutenant had no faith in them at all. They weren't his boys, but even so, if they had been, they were black and he didn't like black boys. He was a man that should have known better, but he had an aversion to knackers. And these weren't knackers, these were salt water boys, and of course, as

07:30 I said, they were completely invaluable. They used that ship and they conned that ship. On one occasion, when she broke down, they raised the jerry sail to keep us well away from the islands. They rigged a jerry sail from an old piece of canvas to sort of… Now, the first lieutenant or the captain didn't think of this but Joe, he said, "Oh, we've done this before sir." Joe, our coxswain.

08:00 And they rigged a jerry sail which kept us away from coral reefs and little islands while we were drifting uncontrollably when the engines had broken down. And if it hadn't been for them, we would have been aground on a reef or on an island about four or five times. So little things like that. People don't understand that these people understand the sea better than we did. We've had engines all our lives to keep us going but when the engines broke down we don't realise we can

08:30 rely on sail. But they did this, and they did it cheerfully, happily and they were always, even though they were under duress to a degree, they were always happy people. They lived in the mess deck forehead of ours in the inner chain locker. Every time… I mean, I think they got the rust from the… I never ever went into the native mess deck. That's one thing we were forbidden to do, nobody ever went … I never saw their living quarters. It's funny,

09:00 living on a little three hundred and thirty-five, hundred and fifteen foot, three hundred and thirty-five toner, hundred and fifteen foot long vessel, that you could say that you'd never been to the chain locker, never been to the foc'sle mess deck or the native mess deck. But there were areas that were completely taboo, as if it wasn't restricted enough. And you could imagine, she was about one third the size of the Manly ferry or half the size of a corvette and she carried a crew of thirty seven and we were all sort of …

09:30 you'd think we'd all get in the way, we were all sort of quite happy as far as the company was concerned, as far as we were confined to quarters.

So tell me more about, I mean, you mentioned that, you know, even though it wasn't encouraged by the first lieutenant, he sounds like he was, he actually sounds like he was a racist, really, I mean, he doesn't sound like he …?

Well in these days, racism's all the rage.

10:00 I mean, blacks were inferior. Even, you'd find, even the Americans used to have problems treating their black soldiers. And of course, we, living in the era, we accepted all this as the way the world was. I mean, let's put it this way, I neither cared nor was concerned about racism because I was probably

10:30 as racist as the next person in those days. And of course, mind you, the black man was a very, very inferior people in most people's eyes, which was the way the world was in those days. I'm so glad it has changed because, I mean, I knew their worth on that ship, I knew they were equal to us as far as intelligence and ability were concerned. But of course, when you went ashore… later on I had

11:00 control of twenty-four natives in a transit. When I was at Madang I was running native ships and three of us were given three ton trucks, eight cargo nets, and twenty-four boys to unload the ships. Well, I applied all the principles that I had, and my prejudices were eased in the nine months I was on the Matafele, as far as that was concerned.

11:30 And I had the most wonderful success with the twenty-four natives that we controlled at Madang, loading and unloading the ships because they were treated just like … they were treated humanely and, well they were treated properly, given all the privileges that we could give them and treated nicely and I never had any trouble, never had any outrage, never any disrespect. And it was remarkable, as a matter of fact, people used to comment on it, these boys …

12:00 One of them stopped, an engineer, a bloke from the army, he said to him, Lido my head boy, he said, "You saltwater boy or you bush Kanaka, you saltwater boy or are you bush Kanaka?" And Lido drew himself to his full five foot in height and said, "No, me nippy." So they were being instilled with these navy traditions themselves. "No," he said, "Me nippy." And of course, this is the

12:30 accepting… you accept them and they'll accept you. So I found that the prejudice was very rife because everybody thought they were second rate citizens but that was the way things were. I not saying… I'm glad they've changed, but it was an evolution, it's taken sixty years almost to get to that stage where we have complete acceptance. Well, we've still got racism rife,

13:00 and of course, mind you, I'm as bad as the next man as far as that's concerned.

But back then, you seem to have had, I mean compared to the first lieutenant, you seemed to have had, and your crew, seemed to have a respect for them and friendships with them.

Yes, because we'd had no previous association with natives, whereas, he had. He'd lived with sort of poor old labourers in Kavieng

13:30 on the plantation, the copper plantation that he was responsible for. And of course, I suppose he got paid on results, he didn't give a continental whether the people … he probably didn't know half his men. He was being paid… I think he must have been an employee of Burns Philp, I'm not sure of that.

Who were the natives actually employed by?

The natives were employed by the navy in the end, but they were Burns Philp employees, and of course, they belonged to the naval …

14:00 to the ship. And they used to use an indentured sort of reason … indentured. They used to pick the eyes out of their sea men because… it was like the P&O, used to use Lascar seamen and they would… the first born of the Lascar seamen would be entitled to sort of join the company when they were old enough. So they kept it within the company and they built up a tradition. Burns Philp were doing the same with their

14:30 crew. If you had a son and you were at sea, you were a native and you had a son, well that son was eligible, the first born son was eligible to sort of be taken on board when he got old enough, on one of their vessels to be trained as a seaman. And it was a tradition, a native tradition and they had the greatest of ability, and ability to do

15:00 what was expected of them. And they grew up actually being racist themselves because they got to the stage where they considered themselves quite superior. And they were to the general run of native, they weren't primitive people, they were educated people, most of them had been mission trained, and they weren't primitive. There is a difference between the primitive native and the… we saw, just recently, when a man was beheaded.

15:30 It seems there are still people who haven't had white acquaintances yet in New Guinea, in the islands.

Now, before you mentioned Joe as the head boy of the natives, what were some of the other notable personalities amongst the natives?

Well, there was Lambousie.

What was he like?

Well, he was… he used to have his hair peroxided red.

16:00 And he was a very handsome young man and very well built and always laughing, always cracking jokes. And of course, the first lieutenant used to think that was disrespectful because he thought he was laughing at him because being a sensitive man as he was he used to think… But Lambousie was the life of the party. And we used to have some fun with Lambousie, and of course he used to get into trouble,

16:30 Lambousie used to get into trouble because we used to speak to him after … down on the poop deck where the gun was and we'd sort of come round there. And as soon as four of us or five of us got together the first lieutenant would send his acolyte down and he'd say, "Right, break it up you people, haven't you got jobs to do?" And he'd hunt us and scoot us like school boys. And on this small vessel we actually might have been off duty, some of us, most of us were

17:00 off duty, but they'd hunt us. They couldn't stand to see five people down there laughing or joking. They couldn't stand any fun on that ship at all. They tried to sort of kill all the spontaneous cheerfulness that we were mustering and we were demanding to have because we were so unhappy on the vessel, and we were just living in each other's pockets, actually.

Well, what about some of the other natives, what were some of the other stand out

17:30 **personalities?**

Solomon, he used to work in the engine room and he used to be as powerful, he was a powerful man. He'd climb up a ladder with a propeller shaft on his shoulder and sort of carry two hundred yards across … where four men couldn't lift it. There was Tama, he was a steward, assistant steward, used to help the steward upstairs. And he was our main source of communication because he

18:00 used to tell us what was happening up on the mess deck, up in the wardroom, before the steward could. Because the steward couldn't tell us anything because he wouldn't tell them anything and he wouldn't bring stories back to us. But he knew, the steward knew, through over hearing conversations in the ward room what was happening and things that were going on. But Tama used to tell us all what was going on. "Number one man, number one mate," used to do this and used

18:30 to do that, and "today a bit cross," and, "he burnt his tongue with tea," or something. It was all this sort of chit chat. But the rest of the crew were… like I remember the funniest, the assistant to the cook. And Lofty Bideau came from South Australia, Lofty thought so much of him that he took him home to his place when they went down on leave once. Got permission

19:00 from the ANGAU people, [Australia New Guinea Administration Unit], who were not really in charge, the navy were in charge, but he got permission to take him home on leave. And that was the sort of people, you could take them actually home on leave, if you were allowed to, because they were… their airs and graces were not unlike ours. They had intelligence and they had ability and they were very humble people. They were used

19:30 to speaking when they were spoken to, but they used to be a bit weary of being over friendly. We weren't, we used to be overt about it but they were a little bit covert about being over friendly, and that was because of the first lieutenant, just didn't like fraternisation. But, as I say, they were the kernel in the nut, they were the key of the ship. They had been on the ship and they knew the ship and they knew it. But they were

20:00 as terrified as we were of as far as sailing the ship into stormy seas. Because they knew that she wasn't stable enough to sort of do it. She was becoming more unstable by the day, every time they did something to it like put the gun, the twelve pounder, aft, that reduced the free board.

So was the fact that you had these natives on board, was that quite a unique thing?

It was the only ship in the navy that had native,

20:30 New Guinea natives as taken as naval reservists, the only one, it was unique. And they were being paid one shilling a day, thirty bob a month.

And who paid them?

ANGAU, they used to be paid by the ANGAU people, but we used to, the navy boys, we used to get the money and pay them, but ANGAU used to take the responsibility because all natives in work, be that labourers or seamen, came under the jurisdiction of the Australian

21:00 and New Guinea administration unit. And they all got paid the same amount of money, one shilling a day, which meant they couldn't go ashore, they couldn't do anything when they came to Sydney, they had no money. They used to stick on the ship. They didn't want to go ashore because they were a bit afraid and they weren't encouraged to go ashore.

Did you keep in touch with any of them after the war?

No, they were all lost.

Of course, of course, sorry. Now, you mentioned

21:30 **before … thank you for all that information about it because it's quite a unique, as you just**

said, it's such a unique experience, the crew on board the Matafele. It's very interesting to hear about the dynamics between the crew and the first lieutenant. But I just wanting to go back, you mentioned in passing, tying a cod line around yourselves, can you talk a bit more about that and why you did it?

Well, paradoxically,

22:00 when we used to go … we were so sure that the ship was going to go down one day, we were actually certain it was going to founder because… We all decided we'd tie a cod line around our half inflated Mae West [life jacket], because we used to sleep every night with a … whether the weather was calm or stormy, because it could blow up very, very quickly sometimes in the tropics. We used to all get into our bunks at night time, on either side of the vessel,

22:30 port and starboard, and we would tie this, loop this cod line around our Mae Wests, we used to sleep with out Mae Wests half inflated. Paradoxically, we used to say to ourselves, "Put your lead boots on when it gets stormy because we'll go down quick." But paradoxically, again, we used to think we'd all be able to get out of the ship and be together in the sea. We used to think if there was fifteen of us together it would be very, very good for us, easy to find, and

23:00 not only that, we'd have companionship. We were in terror of being left alone in the sea. I used to think, "What would happen if I fell over board?" Now, I could imagine, I used to dream of it of a night time, seeing the ship disappear in the distance and being going out saying, "Stop, stop, I'm in the water." And of course, this was a fear of eventually … we knew we were going to get in the water one day. And Lofty used to say to us, he was a pragmatist, he used to say, "Put your wellie [Wellington] boots on, and you'll go

23:30 down real quick." And as I say, on the other hand, we used to put the cod line around because we all used to think we were going to go down. Not that we had a hope under the circumstances, because if the ship turned over and heeled, you couldn't open the mess deck door anyway, we would be in a heap. And she used to incline sometimes, to do more than fifty degrees, port or starboard, and I'll tell you what, it used to terrify you because she'd stay there. She'd lurch, she'd stay there and then you'd feel her shudder. You'd think, "She's only got to go another two degrees and we're gone."

24:00 And then a wave would get us and send us… right ourselves, and then over we'd go to the other side again. And this would go on, and it got to the stage where you'd spend the first hour in a very bad storm, terrified, saying, "Oops." Grabbing at things and then the rest of the time you'd be saying, "Well let it be the next one, we don't care." Because you get to the stage where fear overtakes… pragmatism over takes fear, because you get to the stage, "I can't live with this fear all the time." So you sort of,

24:30 you're almost wishing that the next one will take you. Because we used to have a lot of people on board who got sea sick and I was unfortunate enough not to get sea sick.

Why unfortunate?

Well, I used to have to do all the work. There were five or seven of us, seven of us I think, amongst a crew of thirty seven, who didn't get sea sick. All the officers got sea sick. And of course, this is no sort of wonderful thing, this is just because you've got good equilibrium between the ears,

25:00 your balance, sea sickness is just a matter of balance. And of course, it's a matter of adjusting yourself to that horizon. And if you sort of look ahead, you're going to get sea sick whereas if you sort of go with the ship and you let your brain sort of work like that, you don't get sick. Now, that's an instinct, that's something you're born with, I don't know why. A lot of people never get sea sick and some people can't help but get sea sick. But you'd be running around saying, "Do you want a drink of water?" Trying to sort of get them some tea or some coffee

25:30 or something. And of course, Lofty couldn't cook, and we couldn't even heat up the coffee. We couldn't run the gas fired ovens, we couldn't do that. We used to have a coke brazier, we'd fit that in the thing and we'd virtually tie a kettle to that, and you'd use to have a bit of coffee or a bit of tea, and you'd have a corned beef sandwich maybe if you … or biscuits and, ships biscuits and

26:00 a bit of corned beef or ships biscuits and some cheese. And that was what you lived on for maybe three days because there was no cooking, you couldn't possibly cook in a storm. And only five of us or seven of us would eat anyway, because the messing was very simple because nobody could eat, they couldn't keep anything down, and so there was no worry about the food. They used to just lose weight and starve. But they couldn't possibly keep more than water down. I remember, Arnold Core said to me one day, "Knuckles," he said, "Would

26:30 you do me a favour?" I said, "What do you want Arnold, do you want a drink of water?" We were doing all the watches, administering, getting about one hour's sleep in every fifteen or twenty and keeping awake. And he said to me… I said, "What do you want Arnold, I'll do anything you like, what do you want?" And he said, and he was about seven stone now, he'd been quite sea sick in this case, he said, "Would you just

27:00 open the door, the mess deck door, and put me on the gunwale," he said, "and turn away?" And he said, "You can have the twelve hundred dollars under my bunk." I said, "Oh, don't be silly Allan, you…" "No," he said, "Bill, I'm pleading with you," he said, "Let me do that," he said, "Take me out," he said, "And sit me on the gunwale, so I can slip into the water." Now, that's how bad it was, so these blokes who were

sea sick didn't care whether we did go down… they were hoping we would. Because sea sickness is, apparently, such a…

27:30 It's a dreadful thing, that you don't care whether you live or die.

Did you take him out to the gunwale?

Of course not, of course not. Not even for twelve hundred dollars. I had twelve hundred dollars of my own ….

I was just wondering, because you mentioned that you'd lost twelve hundred dollars last night, and I was going, well maybe … yeah?

We all lost it because it was tied to our bunks when

28:00 the ship went down. I went off to spend the night… left the twelve hundred dollars on my bunk, I knew nobody was going to take that.

We'll get onto that because that's another kind of chapter in the story, so to speak. So you mentioned…you were talking, you know, about the fear on board the ship. You know, I mean, obviously there was low morale with the leadership that you were under and also, you know, the fear of the ship, you know, not having the

28:30 **confidence in the Matafele, and also the sea, the fear of the weather and so forth. Could you talk personally what it was like for you on a day to day basis, living with this low morale and this chronic fear there whole time?**

Well, the funny thing, strangely enough, I can remember being afraid but only at the beginning. I used to think … I'd have that sinking feeling in the beginning when we were going into a bad storm again. But the funny thing was, you did get … you adapted … fear,

29:00 it doesn't dissolve, it dissipates but it doesn't stay with you because, you see, you can't live that way, you can't … an hour of that, an hour of terror and you've had enough. And you get to the stage where you either overcome it and accept the fact that, "This is going to be it," sooner or later, which most of us did, well all of us had to do. Or you got so sea sick, as some of them did, they didn't care

29:30 whether they died or not. They wanted to die. And it's an amazing thing, this sea sickness clears up almost immediately you get into calm water. The funny thing, apparently, you wouldn't think that people with severe terminal illness, don't want to die, but then people with sea sickness, which is a slight thing, do want to die. They get to the stage where they prefer … As Allan said, "Let me go, just … I can't get out there myself, I can't

30:00 get out of my bunk, would you lift me out of my bunk and put me on the gunwale and turn away?" And I thought he was joking but he wasn't joking. He told me since, "You can have the twelve hundred dollars out of my bunk, if you do that." And of course, mind you, it gets to the stage where you get used to it. No, you never get used to it, I don't mean that, but you get to the stage where you become so fatalistic that you said, "Well everything's in order now," I mean, "I don't want to die but if we've got to go,

30:30 I hope it's quick."

I mean, for you personally, did you ever get to a point where, you know, you were so down on what you were going through that you just didn't want to continue?

No. I think this is the remarkable thing of youth, you get to the stage, there's always the will to live. The will to live is there all the time. And you say… I used to think to myself, "Well, if ever I got into the water, I'll be the one that gets picked up." And that was the thought that would prevail in our

31:00 mind, "We'll get picked up." How we were going to get picked up, we didn't know. Why? We didn't think about it. We knew that we would get picked up. And it's this … this is the only faith that keeps you going.

So, you've talked a lot about the native crew and also, you know, the first lieutenant, the

31:30 **white officers. Can you perhaps talk about the other crew members, for instance, the skipper, what was he like?**

Well he was, as I say, a lieutenant commander RN.

And what was his name?

Simmons. "Sampan Charlie," they used to call him. And he was an acute alcoholic and he was never ever compos mentis. He was rather a nice man in many ways, but very quiet. And I do think

32:00 he was dominated … although he was a senior officer, he was dominated by the first lieutenant. And I'm sure that the first lieutenant had an objective ahead, to sort of replace him as the skipper. But, I mean, we used to be terrified of the thought because the first lieutenant had no naval experience, he was a Royal Australian naval volunteer reservist who had been taken in because he was in charge of natives. And he couldn't even handle natives let alone handle the ship. And

32:30 there was an allegation on one occasion, I wasn't on the bridge, but he did push Joe out of the way and he almost capsized the ship because he took the wheel. And the first thing that happened, Joe was lashed, and when Joe sort of went to relieve himself and undo it, he took the wheel and didn't want to give it back because he thought he'd be the champion. And of course, the ship heeled and she used to heel very, very badly, the temperature in the engine room used to get up to fifty degrees,

33:00 and that's enough to throw you right off your feet. And of course, he pulled the wheel, let go of it and slid off the top and of course, the wheel was just sort of spinning, trying to correct itself to even itself up. And Joe had to come back, race back up there and wrestle the wheel and hold the wheel. Two men holding the wheel and as the ship heeled to port, the one on the starboard side held

33:30 onto it until they got it shaped up again. He interfered that much.

So Joe was lashed?

Only with one leg. He used to lash himself with one leg, he put his other leg around …

Oh okay. I thought that, as punishment, he was lashed, but …?

Oh no, no. When I say lashed to the wheel I mean tied to the wheel, he'd tie himself to the wheel.

I just had a flash back to slavery and … yeah.

There wasn't any …

34:00 there was never any … it wasn't that bad, nobody was ever struck.

Oh that's good, yeah. So the skipper too, was kind of under the influence of the first lieutenant?

Yes. The captain had been Mentioned in Dispatches in Darwin when he was captain of the [HMAS] Southern Cross. And he was quite a capable man in many ways except that he was a victim of alcoholism.

34:30 **So how would he get access to alcohol on the ship?**

Oh, officers were allowed to drink. Even at one stage, although I was only eighteen and you weren't allowed to drink until you were twenty one in those days, and I never took my ration. Because I think, of the hard line on the ship, like the difficulty of sort of any amenities. We used to get a bottle of beer per day per man shipped to us

35:00 but that would only apply to ratings over twenty-one and petty officers and officers. But the officers used to sort of have access to … he used to love pink gin, because alcohol was allowed for officers. You weren't allowed, on naval vessels, you weren't allowed to drink. Like even in the Royal Navy they used to have rum, but in the Royal Australian Navy they never had rum. There was no drinking in the mess deck.

Did you have a best mate on board the

35:30 **Matafele?**

I had a role model. A fellow by the name of Bill Hickey, who was a stoker. And I'll never forget, we went to … in November 1943 we went to Breakfast Creek, to the Melbourne Cup meet in Brisbane. And Bill was an inveterate horse follower and he was twenty two. He took the steward and myself, Lofty Bideau, the cook, and

36:00 Keith Morrison, one of the able seamen, and the other stoker. Four of us went to Breakfast Creek in the train, or the tram, the tram I think, and we … it was my first race meeting, I was eighteen years of age and Bill came to me and said, "Well, we'll put in ten bob on Dark Felton in the Cup." And I said, "That means two bob each." He said, "No, ten bob each." I said,

36:30 "Oh no, not that much Bill." He said, "Knuckles, if you don't give me ten bob, I'll lift you up by the legs and shake it out of you." So I gave him ten bob reluctantly and Dark Felton won seven to one. Now, I've always waited for a quiz master to say, "Bill McLaren, for a million dollars, what won the Melbourne Cup in 1943 and what price did it start at?" And I'd say "Dark Felton, seven to one, because I was on it." And I couldn't tell you who won the last Melbourne Cup because …

37:00 I said to Bill, "Bill, what are we going to bet the next time?" Now, here's the remarkable thing, I loved that man, I just followed him around like a pussy cat because he was always full of wisdom, he was twenty-two years of age and full of wisdom. He was the happiest fellow on board. And I always thought, "He never gets terrified." When I put the part in the news and asked about the Matafele, I got fifty-seven replies back in a short time. Put it in the DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] news and wanted to find out a little bit more because

37:30 I was aware of the existence of the last days of the Matafele. A lady rang me up and she said, "I've just seen a little part in the DVA news," she said, "My name's Goodwin, Elwin Goodwin, I live in Sans Souci." I said, "Sans Souci, that's not very far away from me. "No," she said, "I'm the widow of Bill Hickey." And

I took the deepest breath of all my life. I said, “Good heavens above, so close.” So Elwin and I and Winnie have been very, very, and her son, have been great friends

38:00 ever since. And we’ve been speaking at length on the Matafele and Bill was… remarkably enough, I didn’t even know that she… she was a Victorian girl, I didn’t know that she lived at Sans Souci and we would never have met if I hadn’t put the little part in the thing. We’ve been about to find out a tremendous, between the two of us and her son, Jim, Jim Goodwin, we’ve been able to research a lot and we’ve found a lot of things that happened. And we found Jack Male’s book in the archives and a lot of

38:30 details that we’d never known about because, at one stage she said she had a letter from the minister for the navy saying that ‘the ship and crew had been captured by the Japanese and were all taken to Japan and they were all alive’. The stories that circulated … the news of the ship sinking wasn’t given until six months after she went, wasn’t made official. And they’d been very poorly treated because they were only getting second hand information.

39:00 But Bill Hickey was my role model I’d say. He was a stoker and he… Elwin said to me one day, she said, “You know the night before the ship sailed,” she said, “Bill saw me and he said ‘I’m not going back to that ship Elwin, I’ve lost all my faith in that ship’s company and the crew and the captain and the officers’, he said, ‘I’m not going back’.”

39:30 She said, “What do you mean?” He said, “I’m going to desert.” Now Elwin told me this story herself, personally, she told it to Winnie and I the other day. And she said, “I’ve often felt wrong because,” she said, “I prevailed upon him.” I said, “Bill, you know what’s going to happen if you desert,” she said, “You’ll get into trouble, very bad trouble.” And she said, “He was quite for a few minutes, and he said, ‘Yes, I might finish my tour’.”

40:00 Sorry about that.

No, that’s fine. He obviously meant a great deal to you.

I didn’t think I’d ever get that way.

But he didn’t desert, I take it?

No, he went back to the ship and got lost. But Elwin said… I was only speaking to her when I told her about this

40:30 happening. She said, “I often feel as though it was my fault that he went.” And I said, “He would have thanked you now Elwin.”

You felt like it was your fault or she did?

She did. I said, “He would have thanked you for it now Elwin.” I said, “Bill would never desert,” I said, “Because we all wanted to do that, we all wanted to leave the ship but we couldn’t do it because … we were not dogs.”

Yeah.

41:00 **I mean, it sounds like you were all in such an impossible position in a lot of ways.**

Gee, I’m sorry about that.

Oh, look, that’s fine, yeah, that’s fine.

Tape 6

00:32 **Okay, so, we were just talking about your friend, it was Bill the stoker, wasn’t it, yeah, and I got a sense then when you were just talking about him that you didn’t actually realise that other members of your crew were actually feeling the same way as you, about feeling so frustrated and depressed**

01:00 **about being on the Matafele?**

We were all being actually punished one way or another. And just by the attitude of the first lieutenant, he was a Captain Queeg and a Mr. Robert’s skipper and a Bennett in The Cruel Sea, rolled into one. Whereas, it could have been a happy ship

01:30 and apparently she was until she became commissioned at sea. And I was talking to an ex member of the crew who got into contact with me about… from the par on the DVA news, he said to me, “How did you get on with the first lieutenant?” And I thought, “Oh, oh.” He said, “Well he got rid of me,” he said, “But you know,” he said, “That was a happy ship,” he said, “before she was commissioned.” He said, “Even

02:00 when he was on it and the skipper,” he said, “And when she became commissioned at sea … we all used

to sit down in the mess deck with the natives, there weren't as many crew on it then." But he said, "We all used to sit down in the forward hold and have our meals, we were always together, the natives and the lot of us, and it was all sit together." And he said, "One day," he said, "The day after she was commissioned we were doing this and Gilbert turned to the captain and he said, 'This isn't right, sir.' He said, 'We shouldn't be here, sitting here with the men'." And he

02:30 said, "The next day they weren't." He said, "They had their meals up in the ward room." And he said, "That changed the tone of the ship immediately," he said. And he said, "I had a bit of a run in with Gilbert," he said, "talking back to him." And he said, "And he used to get rid of all the people that he didn't like." And I said, "Well he didn't want to get rid of me and he didn't like me," I said, "He just wanted to punish me, keep me on the ship." But he said, "Oh no, he's a bad man, a very bad man," he said, "And he was the cause of the trouble. All of a sudden he said, 'This is not right, sir, we shouldn't

03:00 be sitting here with the men'." But anyway, that gives you some idea of what his attitude was. And he was only a plantation overseer himself, he wasn't a naval man.

So what sort of operations did you do in the seas around New Guinea? Like, where did you go to …?

Everywhere and anywhere. Used to just sort of run where we were directed. Take supplies, we used to even pick up old copper

03:30 supplies, so they wouldn't fall into Japanese hands or… sort of take it back to Moresby and dump it on the wharf. We'd only take it away so that people couldn't sort of steal it or pinch it or… And of course, being a Burns Philp made vessel, anything that had Burns Philp on it was theirs, you know. You used to sort of always grab their own stuff. But she was leaving, were leaving Milne Bay,

04:00 Port Moresby on the 29th June, 29th August, sorry, 1942. And they were en route to Cairns to pick up some supplies to bring back to Port Moresby. And the Potrero was a little, HMAS Potrero, a little auxiliary ship, not as big as the Matafele. But they were both unarmed and they were working in company, just going from Port Moresby to Cairns and they were overtaken by the [MV] Malaita

04:30 which was about a five thousand ton Burns Philp vessel who was taking evacuees back to Australia. And she went past them, she was torpedoed and the Matafele and the Potrero put a line on board and the HMAS Arunta came out from Port Moresby, the Arunta, and sunk the first Japanese submarine. It was the first Australian ship to sink a Japanese submarine in the middle of war. The submarine was the RO33

05:00 and paradoxically, the RO33, three weeks before had sunk the Matafele's sister ship, the [MV] Mamutu and machine gunned a hundred and sixty three people in the water and killed them all. And that was when the Japanese declared total war. And the Arunta was the first Australian destroyer to sink a Japanese submarine. And of course, that RO33 deserved to die, everybody was very, very happy about that. But the Matafele and the Potrero

05:30 towed it back to safe harbour and she was saved, she didn't sink, she lived to sail another day, the Malaita. And little things … Like she was doing things, they were doing things like that, they were doing things beyond her capacity really, but everybody was called upon to do things because in those days they had no bottoms to fill. A match box would have been used and utilised because we were so short of

06:00 shipping and scarce of ships to run supplies anywhere. People don't realise, I don't think, how very, very narrow the piece of cotton was. And she was doing things that were not beyond her capacity but things that should never have been asked of her, but no because they were asking unreasonably, but because

06:30 there was nothing else to do, they had to be done and they had to be done in some way. So you can forget the people in the navy and the navy board all that, a lot of people say, "Oh they shouldn't have sent that ship to sea." But if they hadn't sent the ship to sea they wouldn't have been supplied, we might have lost the war. That ship and other ships, if they hadn't away … I mean, it was a case of inevitability, it had to be done, it just had to be done. They couldn't

07:00 arm her, they didn't have time to arm her, they didn't have any arms to put on her. They had to send some of the supplies from Cairns to Darwin and Cairns to Milne Bay and Cairns to Moresby, just had to have the ships to do it.

Did you ever come under enemy fire or see a Japanese sub or …?

Not … we never came under fire wittingly or knowingly, but apparently we used to be shadowed when we were coming down through the Grafton passage, submarines used to follow us to the shallows to try and get in the

07:30 passage, the Whitsunday passage, through the Grafton passage to get into the shipping lane and we were aware of that fact and we never used to do it except in daylight. And then we'd radio Cooktown and Cooktown would send out some Beauforts to … and they could see the Japanese and they used to sort of scare them away or try and sink them.

So you were aware of being shadowed by Japanese subs?

Yeah, we had

08:00 some echo sounding equipment on board that we used. It wasn't anti submarine gear at all, it was just for soundings and taking soundings when we were doing survey work, when we were in the survey fleet. And we could tell that they were there and as soon as radio there was silence, we used to move away and move into deeper water because they were also listening to our transmissions, and they knew that

08:30 we were radioing Cooktown, so the Beauforts could find them. Of course, the water was quite shallow at the beginning there and they used to have to move out into deeper water to sort of avoid detection.

So what was that like, when you knew you were being followed by a Japanese sub?

We knew we were … we reckoned we couldn't be torpedoed because they couldn't set their torpedoes shallow enough, because we were only drawing about ten foot. We were more worried that they would actually shell us, they would sink us by gun fire.

09:00 But we thought, "Oh well, if it happens, it happens." At that time we didn't have the twelve pounder up, we couldn't even reply. But we had a twelve pounded mounted aft in April, 1944, in Sydney and she only made one trip back to Milne Bay and back to Sydney in May to…

09:30 we never utilised the gun at all, it was more of a hindrance than a help.

So, can you describe some of the ports that you visited?

Well, not very well because everyone was the same in those days. Whenever you visited a port, all you could see was cut down palm trees where the shrapnel had sort of cut them down. And the terrain was very, very similar

10:00 at all the places. Except when we were at Milne Bay, in particular, that was always remarkable because the run from Samarai, where you turned the corner and went past Samarai, and went up the bay which is about forty miles long. And you used to have rain squall after rain squall because they … you used to get about four hundred inches a year in Milne Bay. Milne Bay was the wettest,

10:30 dampest, dirtiest place I've ever been in. And we used to have little bouts of rain squall going up the bay, and on the left hand side near Gili Gili, you used to see some very, very nice country, and Samarai was a beautiful little island. It was … Samarai was what the called "The Pearl of the Pacific." It was a delightful place, apparently, we never went ashore at Samarai, but we used to pass it every time we went up to the mouth of Milne Bay.

11:00 And when we got up to Madang or to Ladava, we'd tie up at the wharf. And of course, all they had there was muddy native huts for housing and thatched roof villages, village huts that were the administration buildings. And everything was sort of mouldy, wet, damp. They didn't have a hospital at Milne Bay, and I remember I got dengue fever

11:30 at Milne Bay. And after I was based up there, after I went up to rejoin the vessel, and she said, she wasn't there, I got dengue fever, and they put me in a hut. I remember, that was … I had my first out of life experience there because I remember seeing the sick bay tiffy….in the hut for seventeen days. And they had no hospital there, they used to send an orderly to sort of give me a wash and a bathe and sort of give me a drink of water. And the boys

12:00 used to look after the food, which I didn't eat very much, I wasn't well enough to eat. But I remember, I saw the sick bay tiffy [sick berth attendant] come in and I was up in the rafters, I was hallucinating, and I was up in the rafters and I watched this sick bay tiffy come over and tend to me. I was in bed and up in the rafters at the same time. It has a funny effect, the fever, it does make you hallucinate. But I believe in out of life experiences, they're not dangerous at all, it's just

12:30 hallucination, complete and utter. But you imagine that you're up looking down, and I was looking down to the sick bay tiffy sort of sponging my forehead. It was very primitive, very, very primitive conditions, and thank God I didn't have malaria, I only had dengue fever.

Did you come close to dying with the dengue?

No, no, no. No, you … they cared for you enough. You didn't die of malaria or dengue fever unless you got it very, very badly. And there was no

13:00 first aid there, you might have died then. No malaria and dengue were a way of life up there. I used to take my Atebrin assiduously, I wasn't going to get malaria if I could help it. But dengue fever is carried by different mosquito and of course there was no prophylactic against, the guard against dengue fever, but it was against

13:30 malaria.

Now, I believe that when you were back in Sydney at one point, you were accused of being a ring leader in a mutiny?

Well, that was how I got twenty-eight days detention.

Can you tell us what happened?

Yes. The first lieutenant said to me, “I want you to go over the victualling yard and get these supplies.” So I had to walk across Watsons Bay, we were loading supplies for New Guinea,

14:00 we were at Watsons Bay. And I walked across to the victualling yard and I put the requisition in and they got the stores ready and they gave me a three ton truck, or it was about a five ton truck. And the driver drove us back down to Watsons Bay and we pulled up alongside the wharf and I said, “Come and have a cup of tea.” It was about eleven o’clock. I said, “Come and have a cup of cha,” I said to the driver, and “I’ll get a working party to get these stores on board.” So

14:30 we went into the mess deck, we went up, there was nobody on the gang way, normally there’s some sentry on the gang way but there was nobody on the gang way. We went up the gang way and went up to the mess deck. And kettles were there with the cake and they were all steaming hot and the cups, or the mugs were all out on the table but there wasn’t a sole on the mess deck. And I said, “Oh, I don’t know where they are, I wonder where they are?” It wasn’t a big ship and of course everybody had disappeared.

15:00 And I said, “Never mind,” I said, “I’ll pour you a cup of cha for the driver in the truck from the victualling yard,” and I poured one for myself. And the first lieutenant … didn’t even request permission of anything, always … navy tradition, permission to enter the mess deck. They never refused it but you always had to ask. On official rounds the navy asked permission, officers asked permission to enter the mess deck because you had to ask permission to enter the ward room.

15:30 And he walked in and said, “Right, you’re the only one that hasn’t turned to, you’re the ring leader.” I said, “I beg your pardon, I beg your bloody pardon,” I said … I was so cranky because I wanted to get these stores, I said, “I beg your bloody pardon?” And I was most insolent because I’d just had … I had him up to the neck. This was the day I knew I was going to blow up that day. I said, “I beg your bloody pardon?” And of course he looked at the other driver and he was a bit embarrassed because I’d spoken to him like that. And he

16:00 had a right to be and he said, “What are you doing here?” And the fellow said, “I’m the driver of the truck.” He said, “Get off this ship,” he said, “How dare you enter this, without permission.” The bloke walked off got into his truck and drove the stuff back to the victualling yard. And he said, “You’re the ring leader of this mutiny.” I said, “What bloody mutiny?” He said, “You’re the only one that hasn’t turned to,” he said, “All the boys have refused to turned to,

16:30 they’re all down aft, get down aft,” he said, “And join them.” So I went down aft and he said, “Coxswain, run in this man, this man is …” and Bill said, “Look … the petty officer, coxswain,” he said, “Oh, look,” he said, “Can’t we just …?” He said, “Run this man in,” he said, “He’s the only man that hasn’t turned to.” I didn’t even know there’d been a mutiny on board. Well it wasn’t a mutiny, it was a few of them that didn’t want to do their duty, they just said, “No, bugger it we’re not going to load this

17:00 ship any more, we’ve had enough of this.” Because he’d been interfering and going crook all morning. And so I go and Bill, the coxswain said to me, he said, “Well look, come on,” he said, “It’s going to be all right, it’s going to be all right.” So of course, I didn’t sort of demure, I went up the gang way and as I went up there he turned around and Cookie, Lofty said, “You’re not taking him, he wasn’t even here.”

17:30 And he swung around on the gang way, bent down under the cabling of it. “And you’ll be next Cookie.” As he did, he cannoned into me, see, he said, “Coxswain, did you see that?” Coxswain said, “No.” He said, “He hit me, that man struck me.” He said, “This man struck me,” he said. And Coleman gave me a push and he gave him a push and he said, “Oh come on.” He’d had enough of him too you see. He said, “Come on.” So up he goes and he said, “I want to charge … this man has not only refused to do … but he’s struck me on the way up.”

18:00 And the old man was as full as a goog and as soon as he said that … he didn’t say to me “What have you got to say for yourself?” And he didn’t ask Bill Coleman to read the charge. He said, “I’ve had enough of you in this bloody ship,” he says, “I’m giving you detention, twenty eight days detention, detention, detention, detention. Dismissed.” And I … Bill Coleman said, “Right turn, quick march, quick march, quick march.”

18:30 I said, “Bill, you said it was going to be all right.” And he said, “Thought it was.” And that was the end of it, there was no question or anything. Twenty-eight days detention! So they got two fellows ready to escort over to Penguin to spend the first night in the Brig. And I was to go to Holsworthy, because they’d closed the naval detention quarters on Garden Island, known as the Corner, because of the brutality of it. There had been suicides

19:00 there recently, and they closed that down in 1942, fortunately. But it was a terrible place and it was right in the heart of the city, but it was an allegedly a very, very bad place for discipline and brutality. And they took me across the Penguin and I was interviewed by an officer and he said, “What are you here for son?” And I said, “I don’t know sir.” He said, “Well, you must know something.” And I said, “Well the charge was I refused to do duty.”

19:30 He said, “What was the sentence?” I said, “Twenty-eight days.” He said, “You must have done more than that.” I said, “That was the charge sir.” And he said, “Well, did you?” And I said, “No, I was framed.” He said, “They all say that.” And every time I was asked the question “Did I do it?” I used to say, “No, I was framed.” And the same answer, “They all say that son.” So I thought, “Well I’m getting off the ship

anyway for a little while." And they took me up to Holsworthy and put into the compound at Holsworthy.

20:00 And I was interviewed at length by an army officer, and he couldn't make head nor tail of it. And he said, "Well," he said … I kept on denying that I'd ever been … refused duty because I had not refused duty, I was in the mess deck and I didn't even know there was a refusal on, I wasn't on the ship when they did this. So I wasn't demurring because it looked all right to me, Holsworthy, I seemed pretty good. So apart from going to boring… getting up

20:30 early in the morning and doing to parades in the middle of June, in the cold weather … May 22nd I went there, or 23rd, I went there, it was pretty cold. But I was pretty tough and I was like a whippet anyway and I thought, "This isn't too bad, this." So they put me … a couple of days after that, they put me in the kitchen. Get up and a quarter to five I used to have to get up and I used to do the kindling. And thereby hangs a tale because my mother's training had all come back to me. They gave me an axe and kindling

21:00 and boy, didn't I chop that wood. I got to the stage where I was three days ahead of the cooks and the sergeant cook was very, very upset, he said, "You know, you're the only bloke that's ever kept it up," he said, "We almost have to whip blokes," he said, "To sort of get the kindling," he said, "You're three days ahead already." He said, "I'll have to boil water for nothing just to keep the wood, just to try and get you to slow down a bit." And I said, "Well you can blame my mother for that because she used to make me chop the wood after I got home from school."

21:30 And, I said, "I became obsessed with chopping wood." So he said … and I become, not exactly a favourite, but I mean, I was known as the Wood Chopper. And I was very, very happy there for a few days, but the only time I ever … I think I mentioned to you before, the only time I sort of regretted being in Holsworthy, because it was much better than the ship, much better than the ship, they were full

22:00 of discipline up there but they weren't brutal, they weren't stupid, they weren't unreasonable, everything had a purpose and I was under punishment, but the punishment I was under was nothing compared to what was on the ship when I was doing the right thing. And the only time I got very upset was on 6th June they came through the compound to the hut crying out, "The troops have landed in Normandy, the troops have …" It was then that I felt absolutely ashamed of myself. I thought, "Here I am languishing in prison

22:30 and there are men on the beaches in Normandy being killed." And that upset me, it was the only time I was unhappy about it but I got over it the next day. And on about 8th June, on the Friday before the King's birthday weekend, the sergeant cook came to me and said, "Well Knuckles, you're going to the dream hut tonight." I said, "I beg your pardon sergeant?" He said, "You're going into the dream hut." I said, "What's that?" He said, "That's where you're going," he said, "You're going out tomorrow." I said, "Hey, hey, no,

23:00 I've only done eighteen days," I said, "I've been counting them," but I said, "I've got a lot of days to go." He said, "I can't help that son, all good things have got to come to an end." And he was quite right, I was actually having a ball. It's a terrible thing to say that you're having fun in Holsworthy. I'm about the only person that ever said that they were enjoying Holsworthy because I learnt how to throw a Mills bomb and I learnt how to sort of be part of a Bren gun team and I learnt how to sort of march properly.

23:30 **So while you were under detention you were doing training and learning things?**

Oh yes, oh yes. You didn't just sort of languish in jail, they made you work, and you were working all the time from before sun up to after sun down. But I thrived on it because, as I say, everything had a purpose. I wasn't being taken from one job to another and being criticised for not doing this and then criticised for not doing than and being interrupted. I thrived

24:00 at Holsworthy. When I came out of there, I was like a racing greyhound when I went in but I was like a whippet when I came out. And I went back to Penguin and the master at arms was there, an old… I can't remember his name, he was a Sydney bloke, and he said to me, he said …when I got out of the truck from Holsworthy, he said, "You, you McLaren." He had eyes in the back of his head, this fellow, he said, "Where did you come from?" I said, "Holsworthy Master."

24:30 He said, "Holsworthy, what were you doing up there?" I said, "It's a long story." He said, "I remember you," he said, "I remember you quite well," he said, "You don't look like WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK material to me." Chook material was prisoner material. I said, "I'm not WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK material master." He said, "Well, what were you doing in Holsworthy?" I said, "Well it's a long story." He said, "I remember you very well," he said, "You used to come across the gang way saluting like a bush cutter at Rushcutters, I was at Rushcutters too." I said, "I remember you too master," I said, "Because you soon cured

25:00 that, you made me salute for three and a half hours, everybody who came across the gang way you made me salute them using the proper hand, fingers out sign." He said, "Yes, that's right we can't have boy scouts in the navy you know." And he said, "Come here and tell me all about it." So I went in and I told him the story, which, thought it through, the main echelon, people knew what the ship was all about, they knew she was a hell ship anyway.

25:30 And I mean, we weren't aware of the fact of the extent of it because divisional officers everywhere had been approached by individual sailors on the ship unbeknown … we never spoke about it to each other, you see, we never said, "I went ashore and complained," we went ashore and complained and we

thought “We had immunity.” But anyway, he said … so I spoke to him, I explained to him, talked to him for two hours, he said, “You got somewhere to go tonight son?”

26:00 I said, “Yes I have,” I could go to my … to Winnie’s place. I said, “Yes I have. I was looking forward to this, I thought they might be taking me back to the ship.” He said, “Well, your ships sailed, but apparently … there’s nothing I can do about that,” he said, “Your ship sailed on Sunday.” He said, “In the meantime you can report to me tomorrow morning, go ashore tonight.” He said, “Hold on a minute, the King’s birthday weekend’s on Monday,” he said, “Report to me at 08 …,” this was on Friday … “Report to me

26:30 at 0800 on Tuesday morning,” he said, “Go ashore and have a weekend ashore,” he said. So I said, “Oh, thank you Master, but there are no more liberty boats.” He said, “I’m the liberty …” he said, “You go and have your shower, get your gear together,” he said, “And get it all set up” and he said, “And you go and then come and see me and say ‘I’m going’.” The buses run until seven o’clock anyway. So about six o’clock I come back and say “I’m going now master.” He said, “Righto, righto.”

27:00 So off I went, and I came back on Tuesday morning. And the man was looking for me, he was peering out and he was livid. He said, “You got me in a lot of trouble you know,” he said, “You didn’t have a shore leave, you were meant to go up on a certain vessel …” I can’t remember what ship it was … he said, “You were supposed to rejoin that ship in Townsville. You were supposed to go on that other ship, it was ready for you.” Well I said, “I didn’t know that master.” He said, “You didn’t leave a shore address.” I said, “But you didn’t ask me for one.” He said, “Don’t you tell the

27:30 first lieutenant that, don’t you tell the first lieutenant that,” he said. He said, “He wants to see you straight away.” He said, “You’re in trouble.” I said, “What, again?” So I went down to see the first lieutenant and I was not in trouble. The first lieutenant was very, very kind. And he said … I’m just trying to think of his name but I can’t remember… but he said to me, “Now you were suppose to rejoin that vessel in Townsville but you’ve missed the ship,” but, he said, “I understand the situation,” he said, “And we’ll put you on the

28:00 Bendigo, she’ll be going up there in a few days.” He said, “We’ll put you on the Bendigo and you can rejoin the ship either in Townsville or in Milne Bay.” So that was okay with me, so I went onto the Bendigo and we were …

What was that weekend off like, spending that time with Winy?

Oh, best weekend of my life, because I had a very, very good potential father and mother in law. And he had seen the ship, my father in law had seen

28:30 the ship, he went out to Manly particularly to see the ship, the number nine buoy, when we swing around the buoy. And he said, when I saw him next time, he said, “Bill, I’ll never sleep again all night, ever at night time, while you’re on that ship, I’ve never seen that.” And anyway, he said, “It was dreadful.” But it was a wonderful weekend that I had. And I

29:00 joined the Bendigo very happily, and there again, when you get on a naval vessel you don’t sort of go as a passenger, I was taken on as ship’s company and working in the stores and doing bits, look out and action stations, shown action station. And I spent twelve days getting to Milne Bay on the Bendigo and I got to Bendigo, got to Milne Bay on about

29:30 5th or 6th July, and I had my hammock and my gear and I dumped it down by the ship’s office and Tommy Deamer who was the pay master officer, he said, “Bill, Bill,” he said, “The Matafeles in,” he said, “Where are you tied up?” I didn’t know, I didn’t know she was coming in. I said, “Mr. Deamer, master, I told you I was going to get into trouble before I left Milne Bay,” and I said, “I didn’t come up on the Matafele,

30:00 I came up on the Bendigo.” He said, “What, don’t you know what happened to the Matafele?” I said, “What happened to the Matafele? “Oh,” he said, “You’d better come in and see Commander Curry.” So I went in to see Commander Curry, and Commander Curry got up and he said, “Son, sit down, I’ve got some bad news for you.” I thought, “Oh, please don’t tell me my mother’s died or my father’s died or something.” And he said, “Have a cigarette.” And I thought, “It’s too bad a news.”

30:30 So I sat down and he said, “Son, I’ve got a terrible thing to tell you, but your ship hasn’t been seen since … it didn’t arrive at Milne Bay on 24th June as she should have,” he said, “We think she foundered on the Coral Sea on 20th June.” And I stood up, I said, “Sir …,” first thing I said was, “I had a lot of gear on that ship.” And his eyes hardened immediately, I could see, all the sympathy he had disappeared almost immediately.

31:00 My first reaction was that I had a lot of gear. So he said, “Well you give me a list of everything you had on that ship and I’ll personally see that you get it all replaced.” And I said, “And not only that, I had twelve hundred dollars underneath the bunk, twelve hundred US dollars under the bunk.” And he stood up then and he said, “I’m not even going to ask you where you got that from, but you’re not getting that back.” He said, “My God man, you’ll be asking for survivors leave next, dismissed.” And I went out,

31:30 a bit stunned, still not comprehending. And I went down to the mess deck to have dinner that night and I was talking to Joe Jenkins, just generally speaking, and all of a sudden I burst into tears, I realised what had happened. And I realised, also, what had gone on between Curry and I, and the next morning I

said to Tommy Deamer, “Mr Deamer, may I see Commander Curry?” He said, “Oh, he’s not very happy with you Bill.”

32:00 Because, I mean we were all pretty good friends because they were tenders. The ship, as I said, belonged to Milne Bay at the time and we were all…I was on the Matafele, but I really was … I belonged to Milne Bay depot and the ship was a tender of the depot, so that I had actually been known to the people up there in the ships office before this time, ever since I joined the Matafele, because we were

32:30 part of Milne Bay even though we were a ship with a free command, we were based at Milne Bay and that was out home base. And he said, “He’s very cross with you.” I said, “Why’s that?” He said, “Well, he reckons you’re a hard hearted little B.” And I said, “Yes, that’s what I want to see him about.” So I went in and saw him. Curry was very brusque, a nice man, Commander Curry, very brusque, he said, “What is it son?” I said, “I’ve come to apologise

33:00 for yesterdays….. yesterday, sir. I didn’t realise until last night what had happened, what you were telling me.” His face softened and he said, “Oh, sit down, sit down, want a cigarette?” I said, “No thank you, I just wanted to apologise.” “Well,” he said, “Son, I suppose I should have known better myself because I realise what you’re suffering from now.” He said, “I realise you were suffering from survivor’s guilt.” He said, “I should have realised myself,” but, he said, “Look, you just settle down here and we’ll look after you,

33:30 everything’s going to be all right,” and it was after that.

So when you did realise that night after you’d spoken, you know, you were speaking with your friend and you did realise the loss of the Matafele, what went through your mind and your heart?

Well, I was devastated. The first thing I said was, “Why was I supposed to be here?” The first thing I said was, “Why me, why am I the only survivor?”

34:00 Which in retrospect, I was not, because this bloke, Jack Male got off it in Townsville before she sailed from Townsville on the 18th June, because he was the chief ERA in charge of the Indians. He was taking a hatch cover of the timing case and it fell on his legs and he strained his groin, and he went to the sick bay and they kept him in sick bay for ten days

34:30 until the ship’s engineer was going to come back to Townsville for another supply run to Sydney. I didn’t even know that Jack Male had been a survivor. I wasn’t even aware of it until I took the part in this DVA and his wife range me up. She said, “Did you know that Jeff wrote a book?” I said, “No, I didn’t know.” She said, “It’s down at the archives in the war memorial.” And of course, we got the book, The Last Days of the Matafele by John Male. And he set the record straight, and I learnt so much

35:00 in that book, and he hadn’t been on it as long as I had, he hadn’t been on the ship as long as I had. But I learnt so much from a different perspective from the chief ERA. I didn’t know that you could be on the same ship and be so ignorant of what was going on. I didn’t know the intrigues that were going on in the engine room and the troubles that were going on in the ward room. And I thought it was confined to a couple of ratings, but she was an absolute hot bed of horror and misery, the whole ship

35:30 was miserable. Even Jack Male said, “The time has come …,” he said in the book … “The time had come when I was thinking very seriously of deliberately missing that ship.” It was the same thing as Bill Hickey wanted to do. Now, when a man gets to that stage … I never ever got to that stage, because I was too frightened to get to that stage. I never thought of deserting because it wasn’t in my make up, I couldn’t desert. You know, you’d go into debt but you couldn’t desert, you couldn’t run away. And

36:00 yet everybody felt the same way, everybody wanted to get off that ship, everybody knew the inevitability that if we didn’t get off we’re going to be dead one way or another. And so I found that out from that little par, and since then Elwin Goodwin, the lady whose first husband was my hero, Bill Hickey,

36:30 we’ve been piecing little things together and understanding, trying to come to grips with the whole thing and understanding it. Things that were never revealed by the navy. For instance, they had two courts of enquiry about the loss of the vessel, one was convened in August 1944 in Sydney. The only one officer that was called who had been on the ship once before, hadn’t been on the ship for months, he’d only had four days at sea

37:00 on the ship. And they did try very hard to find Jack Male or myself who were survivors to give the enquiry, to give evidence at the enquiry. But they found that the ship was sixty-eight per cent over loaded when it left Sydney, and that contributed to its foundering.

So what happened to the Matafele?

She foundered, apparently, foundered in the Coral Sea in a cyclone or heavy weather, not necessarily a cyclone

37:30 but very heavy weather on 20th June, apparently. The last she was sighted was leaving the Grafton Passage on 18th June in PM hours, and then she foundered in the Coral Sea in heavy weather apparently, but no message was received from her. There’d been no message or … she was asked to break liberty silence on 24th June and give her estimated time of arrival in Milne Bay, because she was

a day

38:00 overdue and they just couldn't contact her. But the court of enquiry found that she was sixty-eight per cent over loaded, and the naval constructor at Garden Island had refused to accept this finding because it would reflect upon the loading people and the cargo co coordinators and all that. And they had to reconvene the enquiry, which they did three weeks later, and they found this time, that

38:30 the ship had foundered but the cause of its foundering was unknown. And that's what you call covering your face or (UNCLEAR). But that was the reason. There was a denial all the time. The ship was not meant to be used as she was, but, as I said, that can be forgiven in the long term now, because there was nothing … no alternative, they had to use something to get some things somewhere.

39:00 But it does seem a bit needless to have a cover up because, there apparently was a cover up for a long time, after the foundering. And the non acceptance of a sixty-eight per cent over loading was quite wrong because she was always over loaded, she was always having trouble with her free board. The main deck was always awash and, as I said, if it hadn't been for the big scupper doors,

39:30 you'd be walking up to your waist in water all the time. Before you get to the sail of pigs, as Jack Male said, "Before you get to the sour picks, you'd be in two foot of water on the main deck, over the main deck."

Tape 7

00:37 **Could we talk about the other crew members? We've mentioned the skipper, we've certainly mentioned the stoker and the first lieutenant and the black crew members, but there were a couple of other naval ratings aboard the Matafele, weren't there?**

They were officers.

They were naval officers?

Yes, two sub lieutenants. One was Lieutenant McNally, Jack McNally, and he was an

01:00 acolyte of the first lieutenant, he was trying to model himself in the same vein as the first lieutenant. And he also, was a drop the hat person, he used to sort of come down and give you stoppage of leave. And I said to him one day … he told me one day, I had forty days stoppage of leave for being cheeky or something and I said, "With the greatest of respect, sir," I said, "You can't do that, you can only give seven days, that's your maximum as a sub lieutenant." He said, "Don't you

01:30 tell me my job." I said, "Well I'm telling you, you can only give me seven days." He said, "All right, I'll give you seven days this week and seven days next week, fourteen days." So I mean, they were unreasonably stupid. And on one occasion the steward referred to the ship, "Oh," he said, "The sharp end of the ship," and McNally picked him up and said, "That's no way to talk about a vessel, you mean the stern,

02:00 don't you know your naval nautical terms?" And Cleaver said, "I know and I don't care," the steward said. "Well," he said, "Here is my seamanship manual," he said, "You learn these terms," and he says, "I will give you a test on these by this afternoon." And he said, "Bring up your friend McLaren also, because I'm sure he doesn't know anything about naval terms." Mind you, I knew more than he knew.

02:30 Anyway, Cleaver came onto the mess deck and he threw the book onto my bunk and he said, "Here, we've got to learn this by this afternoon." I said, "What's this?" He said, "I said the sharp end," I referred to the ship as the sharp end, the forehead part. So I said, "What have we got to learn?" He said, "All navel terms." I said, "Okay, righto." So he went back up to the ward room. Half an hour later McNally walked in and I hit him again,

03:00 I said, "Did you ask permission to enter the mess deck?" Now this was being provocative, I know, but you see, we just had to sort of … they wanted it, they insisted on being stubborn when they wanted to be. He said, "I don't have to." He walked up to my bunk and he picked up the manual and he took it, walked out.

So that was McNally, who was the other sub lieutenant?

Watkins, who was a very, very good guy. His name was Guy Watkins,

03:30 he was a very, very nice person. But mind you, what chance did he have, he had to live with the other officers, he couldn't … he was an officer after all is said and done, and there was a gulf. As I say, it was an officers' club, the navy, there was a gulf between the rating and the officer, and of course, they let you know it too. The good naval officer was a person who let you know it, but you respected them. The bad ones were the ones that couldn't care less. But he picked up this book, he took it up with him, quite

04:00 overtly, then in the afternoon he yelled out from the bridge after we had lunch, he said, "Cleaver," that was the steward's name. He said, "Sir." He said, "Bring up my manual now and bring McLaren, your friend McLaren with you and I'll give you the test." And Junior said, "Where's the book, where's the

book?" I said, "He came in two hours ago and took it off my desk, took it away with him." And

04:30 Cleaver said, "McLaren says you've got that book, you got the book." He says, "Well bring your caps with you because I'm going to charge you with losing my property." And he did and we had to be knocked half of seventeen and sixpence each, taken out of our pay, because he had claimed we had lost his book in the meantime. That was the sort of provocative things that they used to do to you to make you … He was an acolyte

05:00 of the first lieutenant, and he used to admire the first lieutenant. Those two were the only people that loved each other. I don't know whether the first lieutenant admired him as much as he admired the first lieutenant, but he was modelling himself on that.

Now you mentioned that the captain had problems with alcohol, how often did this incapacitate him?

More often than not.

So how often during a journey would he be out of action?

Well, he'd disappear for days at times because he used to get sea sick

05:30 as well. Fortunately, so did the first lieutenant. They used to both be out of action for days and it would be up to the subbies [sub lieutenant]. And of course, Watkins would prevail because McNally was also … because three out of the four of them used to suffer from sea sickness. In a way we'd be happy when it was rough sea because they'd be very quiet.

And Watkins would run a good ship on those occasions?

Well, he was also only a young man who came from the

06:00 lower deck, but he was a man who understood the lower deck too. And he was neither good nor bad, he was just steady. I always thought that God wasn't … I called him one day and he said, "Mac, don't talk to me, don't talk to me about it, I can't do anything about it." It was wrong to even appeal to him because it was putting him in a spot. He says, "Can't you understand, I've got to live with it, I'm living upstairs, I'm living upstairs."

06:30 "Don't ask me whether it's right or wrong," he said, "I'm living upstairs." Which was the only thing he could say but I didn't like his answer because I was looking for sympathy and looking for some authority. But, I mean, he was in a terrible position.

Yeah, quite an invidious position by the sounds of it. Now, I believe the Matafele had a motto, what was that motto?

"Wok wok tasol masol" which is Pidgin English, freely translated

07:00 for "All work and no play." "Wok wok tasol masol." And that was the only motto she had and of course, she deserved it, she earned it, I can tell you that much.

And that was in Pidgin English?

Yeah.

And who wrote that motto?

Sub Lieutenant Tankard, he was a pay master sub lieutenant who had been on the ship prior to her commissioning at sea and had been, spent a lot of time … and apparently was the back bone of the vessel.

07:30 He was a man … he was only on the ship three days after I got there. He disappeared because they'd amalgamated my job and the first lieutenant's job to take away stores' officer, but when he was stores' officer, the ship was running very, very well and I think they were … everybody loved Tankard. They don't normally love pay masters sub lieutenants, but this fellow was a very likable person because he also had come from the low deck

08:00 and very capable, apparently a very capable officer. I've search the phone books in Sydney and I've tried to find that man, he also wrote a beautiful poem which I can't read to you without choking up, about the Matafele.

Did you ever meet him in the first place?

Yes, I met him in the first place. But, of course, mind you, it was a very confused sort of meeting, we were in the midst of a refit and we weren't living up at the depot, so we were only

08:30 together during the three days we were there, but we never had an opportunity to speak. Mainly, because I think the first lieutenant was trying to get rid of him quickly so that he could be stores' officer. He didn't want to be stores officer, I'm sure, after he was, but he thought, "Oh well, I'll get control and do this." But the ship went to pieces because, you see, being in control after having a refit there were no engineering stores replaced, and that wasn't my responsibility. And he just didn't know the

09:00 right thing … how to go about the requisitioning of stores. He thought you just went up to the quartermasters or the victualling yard and said, “I want this and I want that.” But it was a matter of getting to know people, if you wanted to get good stores and good provisions you had to sort of, not bribe anybody, but you had to know them.

So this was a little bit of scrounging, was it?

Oh, a tremendous amount of scrounging. I mean …

So what would you do?

Well, I had some stick tobacco and I used to send the boys ashore and they’d get

09:30 bananas. And you couldn’t get … bananas were very, very … a lot of raw bananas in New Guinea. But in the native gardens, the native gardens were all hidden because they didn’t want all the troops coming in and taking their bananas. And we used to look for bananas, but the natives used to go ashore with some stick tobacco and they would bargain, and they’d come back with big, huge bunches and we’d have bananas ripening from the bottom up, hanging up down near the heads, down the stern. And you’d take a banana whenever you wanted one.

10:00 Now, the fact was, they got so used to having bananas, because when we ran out of them they’d say, “Where’s the bananas Mac, Knuckles, where’s the bananas?”

Why were you in a position where you had to do so much scrounging?

Well we were away from the depot so often and we used to have the cod line going over the back and we used to all beat our rations by fish, which was a very sensible thing to do and very decent too. Because he used to catch king fish by trawling astern.

10:30 And we used to have a cod line astern, run a cod line with a bit of red rag and a big hook, a half size shark hook. And we’d catch king fish after king fish, we’d catch two or three, and we’d chop them up into steaks. We have king fish steaks, king fish kedgeree and we’d all meet our supplies that way, with the fresh food. Because it was very, very hard to get unless you were at base. And we were away from the base a lot of times and sometimes we were indeterminate. We’d

11:00 take a load from one place to another place and we’d pick up a load and we didn’t know that we were going there. Well, you have to be pretty innovative to sort of keep on feeding these people.

So, I think initially when you were aboard the Matafele, it was going around the Solomons, wasn’t it? Wasn’t there a period of time when it was going around the channels dropping marker buoys and things like that?

Yes, yes.

At what point was that?

That was prior to our going to Brisbane. I wasn’t on the ship.

Oh, you

11:30 **weren’t on the ship at that stage. Right, okay. So you’ve explained what it was doing when you were aboard, so that’s fine. Now just sticking with Tankard for a moment, didn’t he design a coat of arms for the Matafele?**

Yes, he did. He designed a coat of arms, it wasn’t official of course, unofficial. But we had it and it was a …crown and the sailing ships on the top, done in the proper style with the insert,

12:00 boomerang and native spear, Papua New Guinea native spear, and with the insignia around the thing, and we were very proud of that, very proud of that.

Well it indicates that at that time there was a very good spirit aboard the ship.

At that time there was a good spirit. There was a good spirit right up to the time we … or a fair spirit right up to the time we completed the refit. As soon as we went to sea we had problems.

12:30 The first voyage, we went from Brisbane to Sydney, took a load of Kraft cheese from Brisbane to Sydney to pick up a load of supplies to go to Milne Bay, and that was the first problem because … as Jack Male … I was not aware of this until I read Jack’s book, but Jack Male said, “We were half way to Sydney and they got a cranking sound in the port engine, port

13:00 propeller housing and they lifted the lid and they found that they hadn’t tightened the bolts and they were running hot.” And he had visions, he had visions, being the senior rating on board, engineer rating on board, had visions of the couplings shearing off, the propeller shaft spearing out of the housing and disappearing and the ship going down by the stern. And he said this was straight after the refit.

13:30 There was some very, very shoddy work done, apparently, at the refit, and they’d stolen all our tools and nobody replaced the tools because I think you must blame the engineer officer for that in a way. But, as I say, they asked the stores’ officer to do it, he was responsible for all stores, and he took no notice, he

didn't even know where to get them, I think.

Now you've mentioned before the twelve hundred dollars under your bunk, how did you obtain that twelve hundred dollars?

Well,

14:00 we were the first ship into Madang and when we got there, we took up twenty-five pounder ammunition and M and V, meat and vegetable, and biscuits for the troops, because they were the first ones there and they were expecting a bit of a siege and they were running short of supplies and on the twenty-five pounder equipment. So we loaded at Porlock [Harbour] and went into Madang, and we were the first ship into Madang, allegedly. It's been disputed

14:30 because The Bundaberg said they were the first. But this captain thought we were the first ones there, and when we got there the dumps were available, the Japanese had melted away three days before and they'd left everything there but they'd slashed their rice supplies and they were fermenting and rotting in the sun. And there was this pervading smell of rotting rice there, but when we went on further we saw these

15:00 medical supplies, and there were hundreds and hundreds of Japanese field dressings with Japanese writing on them. And we thought, "Oh gee, these will be pretty good." So we took those back to the ship and we took a few gas masks, a couple of helmets with stars on them, there was equipment galore and cigarettes, they had the crossed flags with the cigarettes and they had the little individual filters, and they were dreadful cigarettes to smoke. But, Ron Upton used to drive us made, Ron, the old senior

15:30 telegraphist, he used to love to smoke them in the mess deck and of course, we'd say, "They're only good for killing mosquitoes and cockroaches," and he used to help get rid of the cockroaches and the mosquitoes in the mess deck when he smoked. But he wouldn't smoke after dinner. We were smoking Pall Malls and Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields, which we could get in plenty and he insisted on smoking these Japanese cigarettes, but they were dreadful. But we took all that back to Saidor where the 32nd US

16:00 Division was and the Americans went mad about the … when they saw us come in. We had actually sort of made a bit of a reputation in Saidor because they could never understand how we … we used to go to Saidor quite often, and it was an American base built up there. And they came on board, and they were giving us two dollars a piece for field dressings alone. Of course, we just put a price on them, we said, "Ten bob," which

16:30 we reckoned was … but they were giving us two dollars because they had American currency. And we decided that we'd have a few games of poker because they used to like to play for stakes, and we were getting their money so we thought, "We'll give them a chance to get it back." And we were winning at poker too. And eventually after two days in Saidor, we'd got rid of all the Japanese gear and we had piles and piles of dollar notes, dollar bills, two dollar, one dollar,

17:00 ten dollars, five dollars. And we decided we'd count it all up. It came to twelve … there were fifteen of us in the mess deck and because we'd done the exploring and getting these things, we decided to split it amongst us. And each one of us got twelve hundred dollars. And that was enough to buy two houses in Sydney after the war. And so we had nowhere to put it except under our bunks. And everybody slept on their bunks with twelve hundred dollars without any problems about anybody taking it away from you.

17:30 We knew very well … but it was surprising because when the ship went down there was about twenty thousand dollars that went down with it, in cash.

How frustrating.

Yes. As a matter of fact, that's what I said to Commander Curry, one of my remarks was "But I had twelve hundred dollars on the boat." And he said, "I'm not going to even ask you where you got that from." But it wasn't nefarious but it was a little bit dicey, dodgy. We'd

18:00 done gambling and sort of trucking in artefacts.

It must have been very frustrating nevertheless?

Well, I didn't really miss it to tell you the truth. I must admit, it wasn't one of those things that played on my mind, twelve hundred dollars, because I always thought it was a bit of a giggle. Easy come, easy go.

Like monopoly money. Yeah. Now you mentioned the man that had recognised you as

18:30 **having given the incorrect salute, and we didn't actually cover what that original story was, with the incorrect salute. Could you just give us brief account of that?**

Yes, well when I was doing my training as a boy, every time we came across the quarter deck, we used to have to salute, naturally, as you do on all naval vessels. And I used to come aboard with my three fingers because I was so used to saluting like a boy scout, and I'd salute like with a boy scout sign with the three fingers. And, I should remember his name because he was a rather pleasant man, a

19:00 nasty man to look at and talk to but a pleasant man in his heart. And he said, "Son, come here," he said, "You, come here," he said, "Salute for me." And so I saluted for him and I saluted with my fingers. He

said, “Come here, you were a boy scout were you?” I said, “Yes.” “Well, you’re not a bloody boy scout now,” he said, “You stand there and salute everybody who comes on board, behind that barrier, so that they can’t see you.” He said, “I want to watch your fingers all the time.” And for three and a half hours he had me saluting there, he since cured the

19:30 boy scout sign. But I mean, old habits die hard, and of course, mind you, the transition from boy scout to patient supply assistant was pretty hard as far as I was concerned.

That’s great, that’s put that later story into context for us. So, okay, now just bare with me.

20:00 **So after the period of detention, what happened then?**

Well, I went back to Milne Bay, and I told you the story about finding out about the Matafele having disappeared. So of course, I had to stay at base staff at Milne Bay, they weren’t going to send me back to Sydney. Also I

20:30 belonged to Milne Bay anyway as a tender, so I stayed there. And I was a bit unsettled for some time, but I must admit that Curry and Tom Deamer and the rest of the boys were very, very cognizant to the fact that I’d had a bit of a shock. And Tom Deamer said to me, “Would you like to go down and sit for the examination for a leading supply assistant?” And there was a warrant supply officer by the name

21:00 of Armstrong there, he was a school teacher, school master, so I went down there and I studied for about three weeks. Everyday I used to go down for a couple of hours at the school and I sat for the examination for a leading supply assistant. And I was gazetted in December 1944 as a leading supply assistant, which thrilled me no end. And of course, mind you, it was a bit of a giggle because, as I’ve pointed out, a leading supply assistant was the equivalent of a corporal in the army.

21:30 But I was on my way, if I’d stayed long enough I would have got somewhere I suppose. After twenty five years in the navy I might have been a chief petty officer.

So what were the duties of a leading supply assistant?

Well, no different to a supply assistant except that you used to give the directions. You used to direct the people to do it. You had a corporal’s authority, like, in other words, if somebody wanted something to eat, they’d say, “Can I have something to eat?” You were virtually sort of a,

22:00 well just like a corporal was in the … a man with responsibility and just a little bit more authority than the run of the mill bloke.

Just before we progress the story, when you thought of the Matafele at this time, because, obviously other people like Curry realised that it had had a bit of an impact on you, did you miss a number of the men aboard the ship and did you regret the loss of the ship?

Well I did but I hid it because I didn’t talk about it. I didn’t

22:30 go around telling everybody “I was on the Matafele,” I mean, I tried to put it out of my memory. And I did too, because in October ‘44 we moved up from Milne Bay to Madang which was a base … we’d been there in April when the place was taken six months previously. And I didn’t recognise Madang from the day we went in there on the Matafele but

23:00 I was put in charge of the transit store because we were loading and unloading ships and they knew I could speak fluent pidgin. Norm Ridgeway was a lieutenant commander RAN, Royal Australian Naval Reserves Seagoing, and he was another one of those fine fellows that used to leave us to our own devices. He had confidence in me and I had confidence in him, he was the man in charge of the trans-shipment store and three of us used to run it on the mainland. The navy was on the island which

23:30 was about a mile away, a mile offshore. And we used to travel everyday to the mainland and open up the big stores hut with all the provisions and stores and supplies in it. We would unload ships, put the cargo in one corner and load it to another ship for Kiriwina, Goodenough Island, Woodlark and all those places in the Bismarck Sea. And they gave me eight cargo nets, three three-ton trucks

24:00 and twenty-four boys. And the remarkable thing was, that we treated them so well that when they first came the ANGAU people used to take them back every night to the compound, when they first came, the ANGAU men said to me, said, “Look …,” we used to give them tins of pilchers to take back to the ship, to the compound, and of course, they used to open them with stone axes because they couldn’t … or axes, they didn’t have any openers. And the ANGAU blokes said to me

24:30 the next morning, he came down with the truck, he said, “Listen, don’t give them pilchers, don’t give them anything to bring back to the compound.” He said, “I had to take eighty blokes off your truck this morning.” He said, “They all wanted to come and work for the navy.” I said, “All right.” So I said, “Tell them they can eat them here.” And I told the lead boy, who was my best friend and I said, “Lido, look don’t even open them with an axe,” I said, “Here …,” I went and found a gross of

25:00 those hand tin openers up the back which had been in some sort of cargo and we had there and we weren’t using them at all. And I issued every one of my twenty-four boys with a tin opener. They used that as a badge, that was their entrée into the navy. And they used to use … they put it around their

neck, on a thong around their neck, because they used to scratch themselves when they bent down with the sharp little point.

25:30 So we went and got some gum, some chewing gum and they used to chew the gum and they'd put the gum around the sharp point. And that was their entrée, they wore that badge as transit store boys. And they used to amuse everybody and they used to open the tins of kye and stuff that the blokes had themselves, for a certain sum of money or a bit of stick tobacco, they would do the opening with these things, and they thought they were marvellous.

26:00 But they became very, very tremendously loyal. As I said, the story was, when this engineer … we were an enclave with the Royal Australian Engineers, mechanical engineers, came to us and they said … the sergeant said to them one day, he said, "Hey, you bush Kanaka or you saltwater boy?" And Lido very proudly said, "No, me nabee [navy]." And of course, that's what they thought, they thought they were navy boys

26:30 and they were very proud to sort of work with us.

So what were their duties?

Well, they used to unload the ships and they used to do it well. Not many vessels would allow them to even operate the winches, but a couple used to because they would do it quite safely. And that was one thing I was always terrified about, having an injury. But they were so … they had been loading and unloading ships before, they'd had experience, and they were so careful. I remember, a naval officer in charge in New Guinea

27:00 and I can't remember his name, it might have been Freddy Cook, he came up one day. He said, "I've just had …," he walked into the store and Lido called the boys to attention and Snub and Colin and I were, the two supply assistants and myself, we were taken by surprise by this fellow walking in. And he said, "Who's in charge here?" And I said, "I am sir." He said, "What's your name?" I said, "McLaren." He said, "What are you?" I said, "I'm leading supply assistant." He said, "Well, I've just been down to the [SS] Bungarees, just had lunch with the captain of the Bungarees,"

27:30 and he said to me, he said, "You know," he said, "Those natives and three supply assistants up there," he said, "Unloaded my ship two days quicker than it was loaded in Townsville." He said, "I couldn't believe it, they worked day and night and I don't think those three supply assistants went home or went across to the island." And he said, "Did you go across to the island?" I said, "No sir, we stay until we finish." He said, "What about sleeping?" I said, "Oh well, we take

28:00 it in turns, we work watches." He said, "We work watches." He said, "What about food?" I said, "Well we've got our own here." Because we had K rations and sea rations and everything from the PX [Post Exchange – American canteen unit] stores because we were supplying Kiriwina and all the outlining, the American out posts as well with PX goods. These little fast ships that the Americans had built were coming into Madang, unloading for trans shipping and going back to Morotai, and Madang was the focal point. And it was

28:30 the ships like the Matafele or smaller vessels to take to Kiriwina, which was only a day or two, a day's run.

Now you mentioned that the head boy was your best friend, what was his name?

Lido.

Can you tell us a bit about him?

Oh well, he was a mission trained boy and very, very … he was only about eighteen or nineteen, round about eighteen or nineteen and of course, he was about the same age as we were. But he was a mission trained boy and he was very, very conscientious.

29:00 He used to be very … he could get very moody at times because he used to think he was letting things down. And in this case, he used to do things that were terrible because the Tankard had some chickens and he used to go and get the chickens, and because we were scrounging sometimes, he'd go and pinch the chickens from up at Tankard's house where the naval officer in charge was, pinch his chickens, bring them back, pluck them, bury the feathers and they would

29:30 grill them on a barbeque for us to eat. And of course, we'd enjoy these chickens. I said, "Where are you getting these chickens from Lido?" He said, "Oh, bush, bush chicken." They didn't taste like bush chickens to me, they tasted like very well fed ones. But we didn't argue, we wouldn't argue. He was bringing in octopus, we used to grill the octopus and have grilled chicken. That was our fresh food, we were living on that just about when we were unloading the ships. And we didn't want to go back to the depot because the food wasn't too good there. It was only a mile across the river and there was a boat coming across every fifteen minutes,

30:00 but we were left to our own devices, nobody sort of worried about us. And Ridgeway, the skipper, the officer in charge was such a good man and he could trust us and we trusted him. And so NLC [Naval Lieutenant in Command] came up and ostensibly he came up to see … and Lido pulled up the boys and stood them up to attention and of course, we sort of straggled along. And you know, I saw this captain's epaulettes there and he said, "Oh you're in charge McLaren?"

30:30 And I said, “Yes.” He said, “McLaren, have you seen any chickens around here?” And I didn’t know whether to tell the truth or not, I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to tell a lie, I said, “No sir.” I told a blatant lie, I said, “No sir.” He said, “Well, my chickens have been disappearing, McLaren,” he said, “It took me a long time to become a captain,” he said, “A little longer to become a NLC in New Guinea,” he said, “Would you think it was incorrect for me to like a fresh egg every morning for my breakfast?”

31:00 He said, “Do you think I was being ostentatious?” I said, “Not a bit sir.” He said, “Well somebody’s stealing my chickens and I’m running short and I’m getting a bit worried about it.” And Lido came up and he said, and it was almost Christmas time and turned around and he said, “And a Merry Christmas to you.” And Lido said, “Me no got Mary.” And I looked up and he said, “No, but you’ve got my bloody chickens haven’t you?” And Lido said, “No savvy.” And I looked,

31:30 and here is a tail feather of a white leghorn in Lido’s … he’d buried all the feathers but he kept the main one to put in his … And of course, I soon put two and two together. And he said, I didn’t know what to do, I said, “Sir, would you like a case of Gold pineapple and a case of Gold fruit salad to have with your breakfast?” He said, “Indeed I would if it’s legal.” I said, “Well quick Lido, get the boys to put some in the jeep.” So they put them in the jeep

32:00 and the NLC went away and Colin went with him, one of the supply assistants and he said, “Harman,” he said, “I want you to take this back to McLaren and one to (UNCLEAR).” So he gave us a bottle of ice cold beer. He said, “Tell McLaren that I said, fair exchange is no robbery.” In other words, he wasn’t going to take it for nothing, fair exchange. He said, “Tell McLaren …” and his chief steward came

32:30 down later on and he said, “Don’t let the boys go up there because, I’m not joking, no one else is going to notice us going in and out, tell the boys to shoot on sight if he catches anybody around his chicken pen.” And I’ll tell you what, once again, there you are, it shows you the humour and the tolerance of some of these permanent naval officers. This fellow was NOC [Naval Officer Commanding] in New Guinea. He said, “Oh, incidentally, you’re doing a good job.” And that was the last part, we never saw him again, he never came anywhere near us again. Except, his steward used to

33:00 come down fairly regularly, every fortnight, to get a case of Gold pineapple or Gold fruit salad, and we used to give it freely too, I can tell you. We were lucky to get off the hook.

That’s great, that’s a great story. You mentioned before, censorship of letters, how much when you were aboard the Matafele and how much now that you were ashore, were you able to send letters and receive letters from home?

Oh, unrestricted as long as you … you were unrestricted, you could write as many as you liked. Whether they got there or not, I don’t know.

33:30 **Were you receiving many letters from Win?**

Yes, I was getting plenty of mail. And I do believe that the Matafele was the only one that really had the censorship. I think they were tolerated because I understood it was given … But of course, mind you, Gilbert was on cutting those letters up because he was just being vindictive. We weren’t giving away any information.

This didn’t happen once you were in Madang?

No,

34:00 no, no, not at all. It only happened on the ship.

So were you getting a sense of the war at home through the letters you were receiving from Win?

Oh yes. I thought they were all having a good time, they all seemed to be having a good time. Life was going on pretty well down here and we didn’t begrudge them that either. But I don’t think they realised how … not that we had some traumas but the traumas that some people were going through. I always thought very, very … I did feel for these people,

34:30 these soldiers in the jungle. I mean, I really think that the army did a fantastic job in New Guinea.

And obviously the navy and the air force?

Well, yes, the navy and the air force. But of course, that’s self praise, isn’t it? The air force too, they were very, very good.

But you had particular respect for the army and the hard slog they were doing?

Well yes. We had a … the navy had a rapport with the army. And every time we’d get an opportunity, we take them on board. If we went to a place and tied up and there were a couple of sentries

35:00 there or people, even the provos, we used to say, “Come and have a meal with us.” And of course, we’d always pick a time when we had roast pork and roast potatoes and apple sauce and something like that. Lofty could cook it when we were alongside and we’d put on a big act. We’d put up in front of them, put

this one on … and I'd say "Oh, Lofty, not roast pork again." And of course, they used to say "Do you have this often?" One bloke burst into tears and said, "I haven't seen fresh meat in two years."

35:30 And of course, we used to love doing things like that, sort of helping them. Because we had a big rapport with the army.

Now, just another flash back question, 16th April, 1944, I believe was a significant date for you?

Well, it was a significant date without us knowing it. But on 16th April we were in Saidor, which was an American venger base. And we anchored in the usual spot

36:00 and we were asked very quickly to move out of the way of the runway, because we were opposite the runway. So we moved up, we couldn't understand why they asked us to move, we thought "They were being a bit pedantic and that they'd had enough of us" because we were always sort of bludging things from the Yanks and they were very generous with their giving, they were fantastic, they looked upon us as visitors not … guests, not visitors. And Saidor was a focal point for us, we used to run from Saidor to Wareo Bay and to Porlock and to,

36:30 eventually, Madang. And on 16th April … I found this out after the war, put two and two together. On 16th April, was Black Sunday, they called it, it was the day the US Air Force lost the most planes in one day of the war on a raid on Hollandia and Wewak. What happened was, they'd taken off from Nadzab and different places, different airstrips around the place and they

37:00 had gone to Hollandia, successfully bombed it and when they were coming back the clouds closed in and they got lost, most of them got lost. Of course, they were navigating by sight and they got lost and it was very bad, a lot of them … they lost thirty eight planes that day, which was the biggest loss of the war, in one day, loss of the war. And we got, the reason they

37:30 told us to move, because they started to straggle in, short of fuel and they were coming in very fast to … and they had a fast landing speed anyway. And they were all trying to get in at once because they were running very low on fuel. Some of them were crashing on the runway, there were only about three crashes on the runway actually, but everybody was trying to get in at once. And it had a sequel, because when we went on 25th April, we went to Madang,

38:00 as we were coming out of Madang, bringing some prisoners of war, some Japanese prisoners of war back to Saidor for interrogation, we notice these two people on the beach gesticulating greatly. And so we stopped and they had raggedy uniforms on and they'd followed the Kokun River down … they'd crashed at a town, a little place called Anitam a fortnight before from Saidor in their Liberator.

38:30 And they, oh no, the Liberator had come … came from Nadzab I think, and they crashed and they'd made their way, in that fortnight, all the way down the river to Madang. And they were on the beach, and we picked them up and … it was a First Lieutenant Donaldson and a sergeant … I can't remember his other name, but they were recently out here, they retrieved that Liberator bomber. We put two and two together and we realised why we were asked to move that day.

39:00 And they told us a few things about the thing too, but they had been helped by the natives and it took them a fortnight to walk to the beach, and we happened to be passing and we picked them up and took them back to Saidor. But they … the Liberator was retrieved by the RAAF later on, and recently, 1988, it was restored, and Donaldson, I think, the first lieutenant who flew it, came out to the ceremony. So it was remarkable, here we were, quite

39:30 unaware of why we were asked to move and yet later on you find … you put two and two together. But the remarkable story was, we were affected because two of these fellows set out that day and they were part of the Black Sunday crashes. Quite a remarkable story, I thought myself. We took it in our stride, we didn't, we did not put two and two together because we didn't have the time or the inclination to worry about … every day was another day.

Tape 8

00:32 **Bill, I believe you have a story of Japanese prisoners at Madang?**

Yes, we went ashore at Madang to pick up all our rubbish. I was very interested in the rice supply because rice was hard to get and the natives loved, our natives, our native seamen, liked rice. And I always had problems getting rice because it was a shortage everywhere. And I said to one of the sergeants there, "I think I'll take a couple of bags of that rice." He said, "I wouldn't if I were you,

01:00 because they probably did what we used to do with it, we put ratsack in it if we have to abandon it." He said, "And it's probably all poisoned, you're running a risk." And I said, "Oh, thanks for that." And when we noticed the fellow, a Japanese prisoner of war, sitting there eating bully beef out of a tin, and Jack Male was there and he said, "What's with this bloke?" He said, "Oh, he jumped out on the track, he was …

01:30 we were with the 2/15th Field Ambulance," and he said, "We just came into Madang and this bloke jumped out from one of the tracks and he tried to stab an officer with a bayonet and the officer hit him hard in the head and he broke his wrist, broke his hand." He said, "We've got three others around there." And it was remarkable because we took the four of them back to Saidor for interrogation. But the prisoner was quite happy and

02:00 later on I found out … this is another coincidence. The man whose daughter lives next door was also there on the same day and he happened to tell the story … I was telling him we were in Madang and he said, "I was there on the same day." And I told him about the prisoner of war and he said, "Yes, I knew the fellow that hit him on the head."

And so the fellow that hit him on the head literally broke wrist?

Wrist. And

02:30 apparently … I got a little bit more information, apparently the fellow could speak good English. Of course, he could too, he spoke to us on the ship, but the other three were very non communicative, we didn't speak to them, they were very raggedy and looked very, very bad. But this fellow had been educated in Sydney apparently and he said that they … he was in a possession of occupation money, Australia. And also he said that they'd been told that the Japanese were on the outskirts of Sydney ready to capture Sydney.

03:00 **The Japanese soldier's been told that?**

The Japanese soldier, yes, in New Guinea. They'd been told it wouldn't be very long before they were all in Australia or were all going home because … And he said he'd been educated, he alleged he'd been educated in Sydney. I don't know where, but he spoke very good English.

Talk about morale boosting for the Japanese.

I think he was pretty much aware that that was a bit of a furphy, because he had been educated in … But he was a remarkable thing, and the man …

03:30 They took them back to Saidor for interrogation, and we never ever saw … we didn't even care about them. The natives were very uneasy, our native seamen were very uneasy about having them on board because they hated the Japanese, they really loathed them. They did … I mean we didn't like them very much but they were just absolutely terrified of them.

They'd obviously had bad experiences or they'd heard about bad experiences?

Yeah, well I remember one day Lido was very troubled when I was in Madang in the

04:00 transit store. And he came to me and he said, "Mast Mac." I said, "What's wrong with you today?" He said, "Mast Mac," he said, "Boys him took him, Japan he come, true?" I said, "No, Japanie finish," I said, "He no come again." Oh, and he was very relieved about it because they were terrified. Somebody had started it in the compound apparently, a rumour that the Japanese were coming back. Mind you, there were plenty of Japanese around there because

04:30 we built a little … The vicar of Gerringong, who was also a supply assistant, who is since deceased, Doug Abbott who was a bit of a naval historian and researcher himself, he was with me at Madang. And we built a little … after the war in Europe had ended we built a bit of a regatta fleet there, home made fleet. We built a sort of sailing boat and we went … it wasn't very good because it had a canvas

05:00 sail and it was very heavy, but we went up the river, up to Kokun River with the tide, not with the wind but with the tide we were being taken. But we had some bully beef in tins and we were going to do a bit of trading because I thought "I might be able to get some bananas this way." So we go along the track, we saw this track, and we tied the canoe or the sailing boat to the wharf and we decided we'd go along the track.

05:30 And we came to this clearing and I stopped in horror, we both sort of took one step back, because there were two bicycles propped up against one another, four huts in the little clearing. And the only people that had bicycles up there were the Japanese. So we back tracked and we ran back to the boat and paddled, paddled our way back. We made good speed even against the tide, we paddled our way back to the depot. We went and saw our intelligence officer and we reported these bicycles there,

06:00 and he went crook on us. He said, "You're not supposed to go outside the fortress area." We said, "We know that but we were taken by the tide." Anyway they rounded up four or five Japanese who had been living with the natives. And they were very close, they used to come down and raid the dump themselves. It was a case of live and let live.

Just looking at Madang, you said when you came back to Madang to work there, there were quite a few changes? Could you describe Madang itself when you did come back to work there?

Yes, because the trees had grown again

06:30 and they'd got rid of most of the palms that had been cut off by the shrapnel and they'd sort of built

good accommodation on the island for the navy. And they'd eradicated the mosquitoes on the island, they'd gone through it with the DDT [pesticide] and the oil. And there were no mosquitoes on the island, it was a delightful place to sort of really live. It was a paradise. But I mean, you couldn't convince people that, but it was a paradise. And the whole place was an orderly …

07:00 laid out because the thing that I found when I first went was the amount of filth that the Japanese had … they'd been there for two years, it was their biggest base in New Guinea, they'd been there for two years and they'd done practically nothing to build the base up. The installations were very, very good but the living quarters were dreadful. The latrines were almost non existent and their hygiene was dreadful. I always thought that they were a clean race

07:30 but they were riddled with disease, mainly because of their own neglect of the basic hygienic things.

Apart from that, what was your opinion of the Japanese?

Well, I didn't have much to do … naturally I didn't … I thought … you talk about racism, I was very, very much biased against them and I thought they were just second rate citizens. But I went to Japan in 1980 and I think it was the most wonderful foreign place

08:00 I've ever been to. And the only problem on that was, we were outside Akasita, Asakusa station one day and I wanted to ask where the Asakusa station was because I couldn't read this drawing, and I could see that there was a man walking up the road on the footpath. And our eyes met from about, maybe say fifty feet, sixty feet, and he put his hand up and he said, "Do not ask me any questions,

08:30 I do not speak English." And there was animosity there, I mean, I realise. I said, "Okay." But of course, I found that I had learnt a smattering of Japanese, a few words, and of course, every time we used them the girls used to love it, the boys … the young men I found were very nervous, the young

09:00 students, but the girls were entirely different. They were so friendly and so anxious to practice their English on anybody. And of course, they used to use one phrase, "How old are you?" And we used to try and baffle them, we were on a tour, we used to say, "We're as old as our tongue and a little older than our teeth." Oh, they couldn't understand that, that used to baffle the poor things. But they were so lovely.

Now

09:30 **just returning to Madang in 1944, what was the purpose of the stores depot there?**

Trans shipment stores and forward base. It was an advanced forward permanent base.

So could you describe the place where you actually worked? The building …

Yes, it was a Quonset hut in an enclave, it was …WA Carpenter's wharf was there and that was our wharf that we operated,

10:00 it was navy. And we had the enclave, the big Quonset hut with the trans shipment stores and supplies which we used to lock up at night time, every night. And it was in an enclave of Royal Australian Engineering, electrical and mechanical engineers, who were a pretty fine mob. And of course, they used to wander over every now and again and ask us if we had any pears, peaches, and we used to give them a case of peaches and a case of pears to keep in sweet with them.

10:30 And they used to do everything that they could to help us there. And I mean, we were very loose with their supplies. We found out that there'd … I found out that there'd been a duplication of peck supply, about forty or fifty ton of peck supplies including all the cigarettes and things, by an SF [sea ferry] in Morotai. She had broken down at Madang, she unloaded at Madang and we were to wait at trans shipment for another ship, but it never came.

11:00 And in the meantime I knew that the Yanks were very much supplied … was to go to Kiriwina, I knew that they very much would have supplied that, so we just hid it with tarpaulins for about two months, and then we realised that they were never going to come back for it. And oh boy, didn't we have a bonanza. We had about a million cigarettes, Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields and Pall Malls. And we used to use those as our trade, we used to get everything we wanted around the base. And they did everything but call us "Sir." They used to think that "We were wonderful."

Now what was your

11:30 **own frame of mind at this time, I mean, it must have been a great relief after the Matafele?**

Oh, it was carefree. Completely carefree, but not only that either, but I was a leading supply assistant and I was in charge of the things. I had a purpose in life and I wasn't a … I knew my authority, I mean, I had the authority of a corporal only. So I didn't sort of go overboard about the whole thing. But we used to be very judicious and we sort of … we'd give to everybody that asked

12:00 but was always very careful that the stuff that we gave was the stuff that we knew was never going to be asked about. Because, as I say,

Can you explain that? I mean, these people wanting favours of some kind?

Oh, no, they used to wander over and say, “Have you got this? Have you got that?” Because the navy used to have things that the army didn’t have. And as I told you, our rapport was so great. We used to get so much from the army in friendliness and friendship and attitude, we just liked to give things back. And so we’d give them a case of pears, the

12:30 engineers, a case of pears. No one wanted pears, everybody in the navy hated pears. We used to keep our peaches and our fruit salad, but we’d give them the pears. And they wanted the pears because they never ever got pears. So we’d give them, sometimes, ship’s biscuits, which was like big Sao’s, was different to the army biscuit. And they used to love the ship’s biscuit. And we’d give them some cheese. And the cheese used to come in those big containers, big round containers, and every time you opened one, you had

13:00 to sort of wear a gas mask, because they were so ripe. The navy cheese was fantastic but smell, you’ve never smelt anything like it in all your life when you opened a can. The gas would escape and of course, it would permeate the whole Quonset hut. You’d think it was a cockroach bomb or something going off. But we used to give them that. But of course, mind you, we were looking for favours but we never ever needed them.

So what was an average day for you? What sort of activities were you

13:30 **preoccupied with?**

We’d get up in the morning and have breakfast at the depot if we were there, if we didn’t have any ships to unload. And we’d catch a boat across to the … the first liberty boat across, or the first duty boat across to the island. Unlock the door and be ready for the natives who came from the compounded. And they used to leave them there at night time, if we were unloading a ship, if it was going to take two days or three days, they used to leave them there. And we’d take care of their food but they used to go and get

14:00 octopus from around the wharf, and they’d get oysters, clams and we used to cook it on our barbeques, so that we were always well fed. We used to feed ourselves, nobody ever asked us where we were feeding, nobody ever cared about us either, nobody said, “Where are you getting your food from?”

So to continue to walk us through your working day, what would happen next?

Oh, then we would sort of move any stuff that had to go out, we’d move stuff in, unload it from the ship and move it into the

14:30 store. And the natives would load it, pack it, and they would label it and make sure they knew where it was going and what it was for, what it consisted of. Everything was there, and we’d put a tarpaulin over it and we’d put it in the register, ex Bungeree for such and such ship, for Kiriwina, for Woodlark or wherever it had to go, for Saidor. Although they were going direct to Saidor, mainly, looking after themselves. And in other words, we were sort of wharf labourers,

15:00 we were just sort of wharf workers. And it was a really remarkably free life. Nobody was … no discipline, apart from the fact that you had to get up in the morning and go home at night time. You were supposed to sort of go back at night time and lock everything up, and we did, except when we had a ship to unload and we’d stay for three days. And nobody would come looking for us because they could see the lights on in the … it was only a mile away across the water, they could see the light on, on the wharf and they’d say, “They’re unloading, we know where they are.”

15:30 **So presumedly, anyone that took anything away from there, unless you were doing them favours, had to sign for it in the first place?**

Oh yes, I mean, it was all regulated.

The register, was that register signed?

No, it wasn’t signed, there was an honesty system there as far as we were concerned. They invested a great deal of faith in us.

So how did they keep track of what was coming in and out?

Well, they didn’t worry too much but they did know. They used to know when

16:00 it left and they used to know when it arrived at the destination, and if it didn’t they’d say “Where is it?” And you had to have it...if it was at Madang and it had been delayed, you’d have to have it there or they’d come looking for it.

Who was doing an inventory of stores, to know what you needed in terms of replacements?

We were doing inventory, we were doing it ourselves. It was coming from the ship, we were signing for it from the ship into the store and they were signing for it from the store into the ship. We were doing all the loading and unloading

16:30 ourselves.

And presumedly you’d have a stock take every now and then?

No, we didn't have time to stock take because I think we were too efficient, we knew exactly what we had. We knew by sight. This … not contraband but the one that was the bonanza was covered by a tarpaulin and we made quite sure that there were no demands on it. And, as I say, after two months we knew that there was not going to be any demands because the ship had broken down in Madang and I knew that

17:00 automatically, the Americans with their efficiency, would say, "That gear's been unloaded in Madang, get the stuff to Woodlark or get the stuff to wherever it had to go," and they'd send another off the Morotai direct. I mean, we knew that they … And not only that, but we would always say, "Well we only got fourteen cases of cigarettes in, or forty cases of cigarettes in." And we would always be able to say, "Well that's all that came, we don't know where the other is."

So during this period how often would you think of the Matafele?

17:30 Not very often.

And when you did think about it, in what terms were those thoughts?

Well, I didn't think very much of it at all, because, once again, I was in the navy, I was a leading supply assistant, I didn't tell everybody around that I had been to a detention. I was very conscious of the fact that I'd been in detention. Even though, as I say, no matter how innocent I was, I'd done the time. I didn't like that, it was on my record, on

18:00 my paper.

Did that weigh on you more prominently than the loss of the ship itself?

Not really, no. But then at the same time, I'm trying to put the loss of the ship behind me. I mean, I'm trying to sort of blank that out. I did it pretty successfully too, I mean, because, as I say, even though we had a boring life, we kept pretty busy on the trans shipment side and I was very lucky to sort of have a knowledge of pidgin or I wouldn't have got

18:30 the job, if I hadn't been a Pidgin speaker. If I hadn't been on the Matafele. And also, if they hadn't, if the ANGAU people hadn't … once we had a big fight on a native ship and one of the boys was chewing beetle, not one of my boys but another boy. We were unloading the [HMAS] Vendetta, she was a victualling storage ship, and I was looking down on the fore deck and somebody said, "Get those black bastards moving."

19:00 And of course, I didn't take any notice because, I mean, I never used those words, never called anybody "A black bastard" in my life. And this boy was listening, chewing betel and he was a bit crazy with the betel, he was chewing the betel and the lime. He came and he said, "You no can call me black bastard, you no can call me black bastard." I said, "Wait a moment, I didn't call you that." He said, "You call me black bastard." Well, I was a bit nonplussed, but I thought, "There's only one way to do that." So I walked off the ship and he

19:30 was following me, shouting and gesticulating. I walked up to the ANGAU sergeant. Well, I was sorry I did in a way but that was they only way. ANGAU sergeant got his cane and he hit this bloke and beat him unmercifully. Because he realised he was crazy with the betel. But I thought, "Gee wiz, they are tough people, these ANGAU blokes." But it was the only way he could sort of control him, there's no doubt about it. Because once they become crazed and got ideas, they would go berserk because there were rebels amongst

20:00 those people too. But I'll never forget that as long as I live because I thought, "Don't tell me that anybody thought that I would call anybody like that." I tried to explain, I said to the ANGAU man who knew me, he was a sergeant, I said, "You know I was on the Matafele, it was the only time I ever used the Matafele," I said, "I was on the Matafele for nine months, and I worked with these people and we didn't call them black …" I'd never called anybody a black bastard in my life.

So throughout all of this period, were you homesick?

Oh, yes, very much so.

20:30 Of course, I'd been over two years away and of course, as I say, I had been home in Sydney in the port but I'd been kept on board by the first lieutenant, and I wasn't even allowed to make phone calls because I was supposed to be under punishment, that he'd made up himself, it wasn't official, noted in the book but he said, "You've got forty days stoppage of leave, you stay on board until we sail." And of course, I think he was getting back at me because he was afraid that I would go and report to a divisional

21:00 officer again. He thought I'd sort of tell them of the conditions aboard.

Oh, once you went ashore?

Mmm, once I went ashore.

So he was kind of minimising what he thought might be some damage?

Yeah. And I was lonely but, of course, all of a sudden the war ended. And it was one month, the 15th, I

remember the day the war ended. The [MV] Suva was in port, one of the transport ships and here is a remarkable thing. I went

21:30 back across to the island for lunch, we were very quiet, very, very quiet day. I got the duty boat back to the island for lunch, which was no thrill but I went, I decided. And it was on 15th August and it was round about noon. And there were no shelter around, I was walking up the hill from the wharf up towards the mess deck and she had a twelve pounder, the Suva had a twelve pounder aft, and she fired her gun in the harbour.

22:00 And I went to ground immediately, I immediately fell to the ground. I thought, "My God, something's happened." She fired again. And I looked over, I could see her beside the wharf because it was only a mile away, or less than a mile away, and I thought, "What are they doing, what on earth's happening?" So I stood up, somebody came running out of one of the huts and said, "The war's over, the war's over." And I realised, but I wasn't taking any chances, I went to ground, not that there was any shelter.

22:30 But the funny thing, I went to have lunch and we were all abuzz, you know, talking about … we didn't eat much, it was just a bit of corned beef and some sandwiches and I got the duty boat back to tell Snubb and … of course, they knew, the Suva had got the news before me and they'd stayed over at the transit store. And I got back there and the blokes from the Suva, WA Carpenter's ship, WA Carpenter's wharf had locked the gate. They said, "The war's over,

23:00 this is our bloody property now, you can't come up." And so, I went back, they wouldn't let me on board. I said, "But this is our transit store." They said, "No, it's our transit store now." So that the civilian crew, the merchant crew on the Suva had usurped their instructions and decided they'd take over. This is our wharf and our transit store. So I went up to NOC's office and I said to the officer of the watch up there, I said, "We can't get back on the wharf."

23:30 He said, "Why?" I said, "Because the Suva's locked the gates." He said, "What?" I said, "No, they tell us it's their store now, it's their wharf." He said, "We'll soon bloody see whose wharf it is." And he came down and he said, "If you don't unlock this gate, I'll shoot the lock open." So they reluctantly opened it. And of course the Suva sailed the next day and that was the end of it. But they wanted to reclaim it the moment the war ended.

Sorry, the Suva being a civilian vessel?

The Suva was a WR Carpenter

24:00 vessel, yeah.

Oh, right. And WR Carpenter had previously controlled the wharf?

Yes, they owned the wharf, it was their wharf. But we'd repaired it, it had been damaged by the Japanese and we'd repaired it and looked after it and built the hut. They wanted to take over the property immediately with every thing in it as well. About a million pounds worth of stuff.

So could you describe for us … just lead us through a few mile stones of the remainder of your naval service?

Yes. A month after the war

24:30 ended, I was transferred to the Vendetta which was in the harbour at Madang. And she was on route to Sydney to pay off. The Vendetta, of course, was an old VW destroyer of great fame. A hero of Tobruk, did thirty nine spud runs and sunk destroyers in the Midden, she did a fantastic job. And she was part of the Lord Haw Haw's scrap iron flotilla. And I was very proud to sort of go to a ship like the Vendetta, even though we were

25:00 going to Sydney to pay off. And I was transferred there to pay her off and I stayed on her as care and maintenance party when … we paid off on 3rd October alongside of Garden Island and then moved across to Watson's Bay. And I was care and maintenance party for the next six weeks, seven weeks until she was stripped of all her moveables. And she lay in the wharf there and she was taken out to the heads and sunk.

25:30 But she was the happiest ship I'd ever been on. Marvellous vessel.

What made her the happiest?

Oh, good skipper, good first lieutenant, good crew and pride. They were very proud of her, the old Vendetta. And I mean, I never ever saw action on her at all. Except it was a different thing when went in heavy sea on the Vendetta, she used to sort of … might slack and spit a bit but she'd slice through these waves. It was known as tossing and

26:00 going over in a beam and back to another beam again.

So the sea was no longer an enemy?

No. I felt like I was on the back of a greyhound or a thoroughbred.

So what was your attitude to the sea at this time? It had obviously changed.

Oh it had, because I was on something that could cope with it. Yes. My fear of the sea was great. As soon as it started to blow up, we all used to go pale, it wasn't only sea sickness, we used to go pale because we'd all say, "Here we go, here we go again." And the

26:30 funny thing was, we'd turn like that, at the drop of a hat, the tropics. You would just have a nice day, a good … and all of a sudden a black cloud would appear. And then the next minute the winds would come.

This was while you were aboard the Matafele?

Mm. And I mean, even a moderate sea was bad, our gunnels would … we would be shipping water on a moderate sea. And in a storm we used to … I had seen them, when I was on board I had seem them

27:00 twenty metres high at the stern, I'd seen waves coming down. And that is where the skill of the con man is being … old Joe, he's got to keep ahead of the sea. And when it's coming from all directions, there's a beam sea coming in from here and a head sea coming from the wind and bearing down, a crest on you, and you look up and say "My God, where am I going to go?" And what you used to do, you get out of the … you'd jump into the galley or

27:30 into the engine hutch way because you couldn't stay on the open deck because the water used to pour in and it would even go in through the hatch ways, through your covers. You'd become drenched. And of course, mind you, if you stayed out, if you were on the main deck, you'd just get sucked out with the opening of the scuppers or even the over flow from the side because it used to be two foot over the gunwale on occasions. And of course, that didn't help the stability, I mean, to have a main deck full of

28:00 water that couldn't get away quickly enough to sort of regain stability. And I used to think to myself, "How the hell … we're not like a cork in the sea because a cork would float." And Jack Male in his book gives a graphic description of how he thought the ship ended and it's really terrifying.

Just sounds like a floating dinner plate?

Oh, it was worse than that, it was like a floating cannon

28:30 ball, you'd sink. Jack said that, Jack Male said that "She drove herself down to the sea. She lost control and she went over and the screws drove her down as the water came in and engulfed her on the back, it covered the screws and therefore would be driving her into the ocean …" and he would know all about it because he was the engineer. And he said, "She sank in four thousand two hundred and sixty feet of water,

29:00 in the trench between Milne Bay and the Coral Sea." He said at that depth, he said, "She'll never be found." And yet historians have even said that they found the Matafele and I've proved from the war commission that they haven't found the Matafele. And they never will find the Matafele at that depth. There's no reason for them to look for her either. It's a war grave, it's a dedicated war grave but they don't know where it is.

Now, just moving back to

29:30 **end of war, what was your true home coming? I mean, when did you actually come home?**

When I came home on 3rd October. And I came home to Winnie's place and I thought, "This is the end, I'm going to be discharged shortly, I must be discharged shortly." I'd been in the navy, by that time, about three and a half years. And my term of enlistment was three years and six months thereafter, and I thought

30:00 this was good. But they had other ideas, the navy board, because I went … had a wonderful time on the care and maintenance party because we used to go ashore every night from Vaucluse, from Watson's Bay. And come back in the morning and sort of do a little bit more work on the ship, and it was so very, very casual. There was a lieutenant in charge and he was just checking all the inventories and getting all the naval stores off. And that was my job, to make sure they were all inventoried and

30:30 checked.

This was care and maintenance of what exactly?

The Vendetta. And we used to sort of do only one night in ten, on duty. And it was lovely. But when they took her out and sank her, they sent me across to Penguin and I stayed there for a few weeks. And then, low and behold, I get a draft to Magnetic, HMAS Magnetic, to Townsville. And that was the last place I wanted to go and I had to last six months

31:00 in Magnetic. And when we got up there they started to work on us. They said, "Now, if you joined up the BCOF, British Commonwealth Occupational Forces," see, they couldn't get any volunteers for the BCOF. So they started to work on us, they said, "Now you're already a supply assistant now, now if you join up the BCOF we can guarantee that … you sign up for another three years, we can guarantee that at the end of that three years you'll be warrant supply officer."

They wanted you to go to the British Commonwealth Occupational Forces in Japan?

31:30 Yeah. I said, “Look, I don’t want to be a warrant supply officer.” I said, “I want to be a free man.” They said, “Look, you’re missing a great opportunity.” And of course, mind you, the more I ignored it the more they said…. Anyway, it took me six months before I eventually got to … and I came out on 4th July, 1946, which happened to be Winnie’s birthday. And I came home,

32:00 I was discharged from the navy on 4th July and I … we got married on 6th July the same year, only two days later. And I went back to MacDonald Hamilton to the shipping company.

So it must have been quite a relief to suddenly see a lot more of Win and to get married and to spend so much more time together?

Oh, well, it was like a new world, a new life

32:30 I mean, mind you, I had a great time in the navy, when I look back on it, I had a good time in the navy, in my respect, because, I mean, it was an experience. I used to gaze at … they used to have a log line on the stern to judge our day’s run, I used to watch that go round, spinning around to see our day’s run, how far we’d travelled. And I used to say to myself, look at the wake and I’d say, “You know in civilian life I’d have to pay for this.” And that was one way … being Scottish I suppose, of Scottish extraction, that was one way of

33:00 sort of making it all worthwhile. I’d say, “Well I’m getting this for nothing.” But going through the Whitsundays was a beautiful experience and I used to be very annoyed if we went through at night time because I used to think “We were robbed because the Whitsunday passage was …” particularly in view of the fact that we were on our way home, on our way to Sydney if we were coming down that way. And it’s the most beautiful thing. In those days it was unspoilt and unsullied, there were no resorts. Dunk Island was just Dunk Island. And Daydream was Daydream. But it was the most

33:30 beautiful place. And I always used to feel sad when I saw Lady Elliot disappear from the old sandy cape, because you’d say, “Well this is your last light house, this is the end, we’re going into the ocean now.” When we went through the Grafton Passage you said, “Well we’re into the ocean sea now.” And you’d sort of bank off, you say, “Well there’s going to be four or five days or four or five night of monotony,” just sailing along, hoping a cyclone doesn’t come along.

34:00 **That’s a beautiful area, the Whitsunday’s are stunning. So look, since the war have you belonged to an RSL or any unit associations?**

Oh yes, I’m president and secretary of the National Australia Bank sub branch of the RSL, still at this time. And I’ve always been a strong supporter of the RSL. But I went back to MacDonald Hamilton, I stayed there until 1951 when I had an opportunity to join the bank as a late entrant. And I

34:30 joined the bank and I travelled from southern Queensland to northern Victoria and a lot of New South Wales towns in between. Which kept me away from Jack Male and those people, I was in the country a lot of the time. I had ten or twelve years in the country doing the service.

So did you ever miss any of your navy mates?

No. And I never met them and I never had the chance to reach them because I was away in the country and of course, it was a different life as far as I was concerned. I left all that navy stuff behind me.

35:00 And when I was at Barham, I had the honour, it was the navy’s turn to lead the march, and I lead the march. And of course, they always used to trick you, you know, they always used to do the funny things to you. But nobody told me at Barham… from Koondrook, we used to march from Koondrook to Barham, Koondrook was the twin town on the Victorian side of the bridge across the Murray. And nobody told me … I hadn’t been there long enough to sort of realise that they used to have you on anyway. And I’m proudly leading the contingent across

35:30 the bridge and I ran into the band. Because the band always had a breather on the bridge every Anzac, the traditional … but nobody told me about it and I was very confused about the whole thing. And they said, “Typical bloody sailor, bump into everything you do.”

And so you said you put the navy behind you, since when has the navy come back into your life?

No, I never put the navy behind me, I’ve always been very proud of the navy and I’ve always been … if anybody said, “I was in the army,” I would say, “Well I was in the navy. I can’t help it if you were in the army

36:00 or the air force, that’s just too bad, I was in the navy, I was in the best service.” I never put it behind me but I put, sort of tried to put … I think as I said before, the stigma of being in prison was still … the innocence didn’t matter, the fact was I served the time and it was on my record and I just kept quiet about that, I never wanted to tell everybody that I was in prison.

Your innocence was obviously very clear, I think?

Well, yes,

36:30 but at the same time I think I could have handled it better. I was too inexperienced, too young and too

cheeky. I don't think … in a way I think this infuriated him more and this saved me from being ground into the ground. And sort of … maybe I would have done some damage to myself if I hadn't had that spirited attitude.

37:00 Of course, I mean, I thought it was a big joke, we all thought he was a big joke, but he was a very dangerous joke.

Yeah, very domineering personality

A very powerful man. A naval officer has the power of life and death over you, there's no doubt about that, you must never forget that, any of us.

No. His personality and those experiences have obviously remained fairly strongly with you.

Well, I didn't realise what it was all about but, I'll tell you what, when I read The Cruel Sea after the war by Montserrat. The man, Bennett,

37:30 who was the first lieutenant on the [HMS] Compass Rose was exactly the same type of man as Bennett. Puffed up with his own importance, cowardly, bullish. And then I saw The Caine Mutiny, I read The Caine Mutiny and then I saw the picture, and Humphrey Bogart took the captain there. And these blokes were psychopathic, they were. And then comes Mr. Roberts, if you've ever seen the story, Henry Fonda. And you

38:00 see, the way that these captains act, and they were all powerful, they were all absolutely … the were beyond reproach themselves. Give them enough rope and they'll hang themselves because the mills of justice grind slowly but they do grind. They grind completely. Eventually they get caught up with, but at the same time they do so much damage. They do harm not only to the people they treat but to the service. That's what annoys me so much. The fact is, they should really weed these people out very quickly,

38:30 more quickly than they can because they do the damage to the service.

Well, hopefully they do in the long term.

Well, they always do, yes.

Bill, we're almost at the end of the interview and I'm just wondering if there's anything further that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention at this stage.

Not really, I think I've said just about all … I know I could go on with little anecdotes for years, but that wouldn't be of great interest. But I think I've just about covered the whole thing.

39:00 The nuts and bolts of it anyway.

Well, look on behalf of Rebecca [interviewer] and myself and indeed the entire project, I'd like to thank you very much, for what's been quite an electrifying interview, actually.

Well, you're very welcome and I never realised it would sort of touch people as it has. But quite frankly I'm very, very pleased that you did the interview and I'm very pleased that I got it off my chest. And I think … I want to congratulate you both on your skill and efficiency and proficiency. I think you're very

39:30 good interviewers indeed. I mean, you've pulled me out. I haven't given you the story, you got the story out of me, but it's come out in a lucid way because of your questions and kindness and attitudes. So thank you very much.

Thank you too.

You're welcome.

INTERVIEW ENDS