Australians at War Film Archive

Keith Hansen (Avro) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:34 **Could you take us through a summary of your life?**

My name is Keith

01:00 Russell Hansen. I was born on the 6th of July 1919 at 92 French's Street in Bundaberg in Queensland. My mother was Elizabeth Hansen and my father was Andres Hansen. My mother was an Australian born from French and German descent.

01:30 And my father was of Danish descent. He migrated to Australia with his parents in 1884. I went to school at East Bundaberg State School and I left at 14 years of age. Then I went to work at the Millet and Sugar Company

02:00 for a number of years. Then I was up in what they called the pants stage where the sugar is granulated into grains. From there I stayed until I was aged about 20 then I joined the air force. First of all

02:30 I was called up after I had signed the papers and I was put on the reserve in December 1940 and called up as aircrew. Previous to that I was going to be

03:00 a pilot and I was going to do some training at Bundaberg, and it was going to cost me ten shillings an hour for flying tuition. That of course fell through after the war was declared. I was called up for full-time aircrew training on the 25th

03:30 of April 1940 and I was transferred to Ballarat to commence training there as a wireless operator air gunner. After I finished the training there the whole course proceeded to Evans Head for gunnery practice and from there

04:00 we went to an embarkation depot at Bradfield Park in Sydney. On the 25th of April 1941 we were transferred to the Queen Elizabeth troopship to the Middle East. At that time we didn't know anything about where we were going. They just said that we were going overseas.

04:39 We arrived at Port Taufiq in Egypt some time in May and we were transferred to an embarkation depot at Kasfareet in Egypt. Our first morning there we had breakfast

05:00 and it consisted one hard boiled egg, a raw onion and a hard biscuit. That was our breakfast, and we didn't know what hit us after having such beautiful meals on the Queen Elizabeth. From there we had a little bit of leave and we went to Cairo and played around until they organised

05:30 a transfer, and then we were transferred to Kenya. We caught an Empire Flying Boat, I think it was called the 'Carolinas', to Kenya. We took off from Cairo on the Nile River and we landed in different parts of the Nile River

06:01 as far as Khartoum. We stayed at Khartoum and then the next day we caught the Empire boat again for Kasuma in Kenya. From Kenya we caught a train up to Nakuru and we were going out on operational training there

06:34 and we had a few flights. One flight was Lake Victoria over to the Congo and back again and landed at port in Lake Victoria. Another flight we did was from Nakuru up to Abyssinia in those days, and from there

07:04 we were warned to watch out for Italian aircraft. We were doing a recco [reconnaissance] of that area. And then we flew back to Nakuru. The flight took about six and a half hours. We did other numerous flights around East Africa around Mount Kilimanjaro. We

07:30 was flying high around that area. The airport at Nakuru was seven thousand eight hundred feet above sea level and all the pilots made very hairy landings due to the air. I joined up with a crew. My navigator

was Jack Curtis. He came from

08:00 Hobart; he was a school teacher. And my pilot was South African. I'm trying to recall his name now. And we joined up and that was our crew. We were sent back to Egypt as a crew and we joined 113 Squadron. We carried out a

08:30 a few operational sorties, mainly on reconnaissance around the front lines of the war which was about Marsa Matruh at that stage. After that I carried out a night operation on Bardia. We were caught in the searchlight

09:00 at Bardia and we were very lucky to escape that because the master searchlight was a radar-controlled light, a very blue looking light, and as soon as that hooked onto you all the other lights hooked onto you also. We were lucky to get out of that one unscathed and we got back to the base. Other flights

09:30 we did around the area – nothing of importance. And then we were transferred to JeraBub that's down south Marsa Matruh. It's an area where Australian soldiers took control of the fort a few months previous to us going there.

10:00 The conditions in that area were very, very poor. From there we went to another aerodrome called 125; it was behind the German lines. Some say it was 125 behind the German lines but I'm not too sure of that. And we were bombed very heavily there.

10:30 And there was only one operation carried out from there. However, we had a squadron of Hurricanes with us and they shot one of the JU88s down, and that evening I was detailed to guard the two prisoners of war. One was killed outright and the other two survived.

11:01 The German officer spoke good English and I was talking to him quite freely and he spoke freely to me. He told me that they came from Crete to carry out the operation. I stayed with them until midnight then handed over, but the funny part of this operation was they gave me a Tommy gun but I didn't know how to operate it. But anyhow there were no problems there because they had

11:30 nowhere to go. The next morning I was detailed with another crew to take the prisoners back to JeraBub and hand the prisoners over to the army. They warned us to be very careful because they were both aircrew and they might try and take over. I was sitting in the back with the navigator, and the pilot sat in the front with the navigator of the aircraft.

12:04 The pilot of the aircraft was a Sergeant Keely, an RAF [Royal Air Force] officer sergeant. Then when we got to JeraBub we handed them over to the army. The army always used to take prisoners, not the air force.

12:30 Then we flew back to the landing ground 125 and it was no use staying there because it was well known where we were and we were bombed very heavily. So we transferred again back to JeraBub and then back to Marsa Matruh in Egypt.

13:04 The squadron was broken up then, 113 Squadron. We lost practically all our aircraft on these operations. We didn't do much damage to anything; we were just losing aircraft with bombing raids. We lost aircraft at JeraBub we were bombed heavily there. Then one

13:30 afternoon we were told to go to the RSU, that's the Repair and Service Unit, to pick up an aircraft, and on take off we crashed. Badly. I spent nearly a fortnight in hospital. No broken bones but heavily bruised and sore and such like. The other two pilots and navigator got out of it okay.

14:01 The aircraft was a complete wipe off. After that the crew as transferred to 14 Squadron, also based at the same landing strips. They were all landings strips made out of the rough ground and just bulldozed. It was just a

14:30 flat area. And then we carried out a bit of operational flying around the area. One night we were detailed to do an operation on Bardia. The Germans had Bardia, or the Italians. We bombed that area again. Then we had another

15:00 daylight operation. That was to Gurna that was further to the west of Benghazi. It was a daylight operation. We were escorted by 3 Squadron RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force], the Australian squadron who was based with us in the desert.

15:32 After we bombed I could see two German [Messerschmitt] 109s taking off from their airport and they made an attack at us. I fired a few rounds off at them, but fortunately one of the 3 Squadron Hurricanes escorting us shot him down off our tail, which was a godsend. I think the pilot was

16:00 Clive Caldwell better known as 'Killer' Caldwell. However we didn't get any bullets in our aircraft. But the aircraft on our right received a couple of shots in it, but no damage much returned to base.

16:31 Whilst I was on the squadron I developed a problem with the ear and nose. I was sent down to the RAF hospital in Cairo, but they didn't know what was wrong. They worked on my sinuses and in later years I found out it was a mastoid, which has been removed from my left ear. However I was transferred

17:00 to an air traffic control school. I was grounded, then I was transferred to an air traffic control school in Cairo. And from there I passed the course and was sent to an experimental station at Lake Edku in Egypt, and we were carrying out experiments on brine landings and such like, which was unheard of in those days. It was everybody

17:30 for their own. They just used to come in any way they liked, and we were carrying out experimenting there with what they called the 'mother' and 'babs'. The mother brought you over the top of the field and babs let you down to a safe altitude for a landing. From there I was transferred to another operational unit

18:00 near El Alamein and I stayed there until after the battle at El Alamein. And then I went through with the 8th Army, well behind them of course, to Tripoli in Libya. Then back again I went to Misratah in Libya; that was east of Tripoli.

18:34 I was in charge of the air traffic control there. Whilst I was there the Sicily campaign was going to start and I didn't know anything about it at this stage. And I was detailed to open up another landing area about thirty miles from Misratah. I was not given any details, just to open it up. It was a

19:00 secret mission. And one night they said there was going to be a flight of American Lightning fighters coming in, which to my surprise I had never seen one before. And I thought something must have been happening. And it was the invasion of Sicily. What they were doing was they were escorting the ships from the

19:30 Egypt side to Sicily, when of course there were other ships coming from the North African side to Italy. The aircraft took off the next day and I never saw them again. I don't know where they came from and I don't know where they went to, but I assume they went to another landing ground further to the west. Whilst I was there we also had

20:00 a squadron of Beaufighters. They were also doing escorting shipping and one crashed, and it was an Australian crew. The navigator was killed right outright, the aircraft burnt, the pilot was severely burned, but when we saw him he was quite okay. But two days later he died of shock. From there….

20:30 It was getting to the end of 1943 then and word came through whilst I was there that I was returning to Australia after two years and nine months I think I had in Egypt. And due to the campaign in Sicily and Italy, I couldn't get an aircraft back to Cairo. There was no

21:00 transport. And a Canadian crew was coming through. They were going to India in a Wellington. I asked the captain if he could take me to Cairo and he said, "Yes. You know this area better than I do." I went to the room and told the officer in charge there that I had a transfer to Cairo

21:30 and he said, "Okay." And he gave me a dispatch, and I went into this aircraft and we flew to Cairo. From there I went to Kasfareet, the original place where we landed in 1941, and from there… There was five, six air force and seven New Zealanders on the ship. And it was a refrigeration ship.

22:01 We were put in the holds until we came back to Australia. On the way we were just near Aden and the ship ahead of us got torpedoed, but we had no problem. We went straight along the African coast down towards the Antarctic, and then we made a due easterly run and

22:30 hit a big gale and we were back to two knots. The skipper was frightened of the ship breaking up. When we got south of Fremantle. It took us two days to get to Fremantle. Then they offered us a trip over to the eastern states by aircraft or the trains, and we decided we would all go by train

23:00 after being lucky so far. From there I went back to Melbourne. I visited my parents, of course, up in Queensland, then I went back to Melbourne. I went and had another course there in Point Cook air traffic control course. And from there I was in charge of the air traffic control

23:30 at Fishermans Bend. That was the aerodrome that made all the aircraft during the war years. And from there I was a transferred to Bankstown. By this time I was married. I had married my wife. I had met her during 1940 when I was doing my training in Ballarat and she was

24:00 a nurse there, and we eventually got married. Then I was transferred, as I say, to Bankstown. I was there for about nine months and word came through that I was going to be transferred to New Guinea. New Guinea – I arrived on New Year's Day, 1945, Port Moresby by Flying Boat. Then went over to Milne Bay. I was in charge of the

24:30 air traffic control at Milne Bay. Mostly it was an American staging post there then from Australia. And then I was transferred to Dobodura, and from Dobodura I was transferred to Lae. My time at Lae was an interesting one. I was on duty the night an Anson aircraft with all the

25:00 generals from Wewak came down and the pilot had made a false landing on the water instead of on the airport. They were all saved, fortunately. But I was held up then. I had word that I was going back to Australia and I was held up there for the inquiry. Anyway, I was cleared of the inquiry.

25:30 From there I was transferred back to Melbourne, where I met my wife, and I was discharged in

Melbourne in October 1945. I was discharged under the veterans' six year… Anybody with six years' service could get discharged immediately, and I was discharged after that.

And a little bit about post war, what you did…?

26:01 Post war? I joined civil aviation. This was all organised before I retired from the air force. I joined civil aviation as an air traffic controller. I was based in Essendon, Melbourne, for some twelve months and I had a bit

26:31 of a go up to Rockhampton in Queensland, then back to Melbourne. And they were after some controllers to go to open up Launceston airport. Launceston airport, I was there two years then I came down to Hobart for six weeks and I'm still here. I wasn't in charge of the air traffic control here, but

27:00 eventually I became in charge of the air traffic control at Hobart. And then before my retirement I was the airport director at Hobart airport. And I retired from civil aviation in 1982.

Are you enjoying retirement?

I'm really enjoying

27:30 retirement, yes. I used to do a lot of game fishing and after I got a bit too old for that… I had my own boat at Tybana [?]. I used to do a bit of game fishing – I held a few records. One with albacore and another with striped tuna.

28:00 But it got a little too big handling the boat and I had to give it away and sell that. Then I started to do a bit of wood turning. I had to give that away after standing up for a number of years. I gave it away about four years ago. And then I've done a lot of travelling. I've had I think eighteen trips overseas, all told.

28:32 I've been to most countries except South America, which I would have liked to have done. And I had a daughter living in London and we used to visit her quite frequently, my wife and I. And then, when she passed away, we haven't been travelling much since then.

29:09 **We'll go back to the beginning. So if you could tell us about your mother. What was she like?**

My mother, she was very good at handling money. We were fairly poor

29:30 at one stage. Well we weren't so poor until the Depression because we had one of the first motor cars in Bundaberg – a Rugby. And I can still remember the number – seventeen thousand one hundred and eighty eight. That was the registration number. And we had a good life and she was very good.

30:00 And then I think I told you about the…Oh, my father. My father was a wonderful man. He worked at the Millet and Sugar Company. Most of the family worked there. My father worked with the cooper

30:31 at the Bundaberg Distillery, which is part of the Millet and Sugar Company. My three brothers worked there.

What type of man was he?

He was a wonderful man. He was a real Dane. He was

31:00 very, very good with us. He was a very kind and gentle man. And my mother was also kind and gentle. I remember when I was about fifteen, I didn't have very much mother. In 1928, somewhere about that time,

31:30 Kingsford Smith [pioneer aviator] came and I said I wanted to go for a flight. And my brother scraped around and found five shillings so I could go for a flight in the aircraft with Kingsford Smith. And that's when I started the interest in aviation.

So you flew with Kingsford Smith?

Yes.

What was that like?

It was in the Fokker. That was a big aircraft in those days. There were seats along the side.

32:00 No aircraft seats like they've got these days, just seats along the side. There was about twelve or fourteen in the aircraft, and we only went up for about five or ten minutes. It just took off and circled around the town and back again.

Did you talk to him?

No, he sat in the cockpit and he didn't talk to anybody. There was no communications in those days, like RT [radio transmission] between passengers

32:30 like they have now. If you wanted to talk to him you had to go up to the cockpit.

What type of man did he seem like?

He seemed quite okay, but very serious. Very serious. I remember we had a character out there, a chap named Redshaw, and he was a spruiker and he used to try and

33:00 get people to go for flights. And one day he says, “Come on ladies and gentlemen. I’ll even lend you my bike clips.” You know the reason for that, don’t you? It means, don’t be frightened, you won’t poo yourself. He was a character, this Bluey Redshaw.

33:34 **Did Kingsford Smith say anything like that?**

I didn’t speak to Kingsford Smith. I was only a kid.

Was he a hero of yours?

Well I think Hinkler was a hero, our hero, because he came from Bundaberg. He came from Bundaberg and I knew his brother.

34:01 I went to school with his nephew. They had a service station in Bundaberg. East Bundaberg. I knew them quite well.

Did you have a big family? Brothers and sisters?

Yes I had a big family. Four brothers and one sister. Three of my brothers are dead now.

34:31 Two of them were in the services. One was in Egypt and one was not because of ill health. And one other brother was in the air force; he was up in New Guinea. And my younger brother, who’s three years younger than me, he was in the air force; he served in aircrew in Europe.

35:04 **What was it like being part of such a big family?**

Well it was good in those days because we used to go fishing and shooting. We had a shack at Emabella [?] Heads. In those days the fishing was fabulous up there. You could go anywhere and get fish and crabs and such like.

35:34 **Before you said you were close to the family of the Hinklers, was it?**

Yeah we knew the Hinklers. They were down at East Bundaberg; he had a service station there. But I didn’t know Bert Hinkler, of course. I only knew his brother and his nephew, and his nephew went to school with us.

What type of family were they?

They were quite nice.

Let’s move onto the Depression.

36:00 **How did your large family cope during that period?**

My brother had a rough time. Our car was put on blocks for four years. Our father didn’t have any work except relief work and he helped out quite a lot. He’d do a bit of fishing and such like to help us out that way. But my mother was very good. She used to go to the auction rooms and get

36:32 cases of fruit and things like that. She might get a case of fruit for a shilling a case, or she might get a bunch of bananas for a farthing a dozen. Things were so cheap in those days. But she was very, very good in helping us out.

Where were you living at this point?

We were still living in 92 Princess Street, Bundaberg.

37:00 **Was it a big town, Bundaberg, in this days?**

Bundaberg in those days was a town under ten thousand. I can remember when… In those days you had to be ten thousand to be a city. And I can remember when I was a kid they made it a city of ten thousand.

And the Depression hit Bundaberg pretty hard?

The Depression hit Bundaberg very hard because of the sugar industry. Yes, it was very bad.

So did you ever go without food or…?

37:31 No, we always had something. My mother was a very good handler. I suppose that’s coming from French stock, and they’re pretty good with handling foodstuff.

How did the Depression hit your father’s work?

Well he had no work for four years; he had no work at all.

38:00 As I said, our car was put on blocks. And then in about 1932 it all lifted again.

How did you feel during that time?

We were fairly poor. We didn't have shoes. I think I had sandshoes. No shoes, just sandshoes.

38:30 Of course most of us, when we went to school, we used to go with bare feet. A lot of the children in Queensland do that now up in the tropics.

Was it a happy childhood?

Yes it was a very happy childhood, very happy. We were a fairly big family. My three brothers left home during the Depression to

39:00 try and get work.

Even with the hardships of the Depression it was still a happy time for you?

Oh yes, yes. My mother really looked after us. She used to do all her own sewing. She used to make our clothes – pants, shirts, everything. She was a very, very good handler.

And what type of entertainment did you have during your youth?

39:31 There was nothing very much, except we might go to the picture show and it might have cost us threepence. And if the circus came to town we'd probably put our heads under the tent for a free show.

Was radio important?

Radio didn't come in until about 1928-30.

40:03 The first radio station was 2RK, that was the first station that I could recall, and we used to go to another person's house to listen to it. It's amazing.

After the Depression, was it your desire to work

40:30 **in the sugar industry?**

Well there was nothing else to do. Bundaberg was a sugar area. There was four or five sugar mills around Bundaberg.

Tape 2

00:36 **Can you tell us how the First World War affected your family? Did any members of your family participate? Your father, uncles…?**

No, my father didn't go to the First World War. My mother wouldn't sign the papers because she said she had a young family and

01:00 it wasn't right, and she didn't want to end up as a widow. She had four in the family.

Are you from a Catholic background?

I'm from a Church of England background. I don't go to church, only except on special occasions.

01:35 **Your mother she was against the war? The First World War?**

I've never discussed it with her at all, the First World War, but she didn't want my father to go because she didn't want to become a war widow. And I think my father, after

02:00 a couple of years thought it was a good idea not to go because some of his friends got killed and some came back minus a leg or arm or such like. And it would have been very hard for my mother to look after the whole family.

Did your father ever mention anything about the First World War?

02:32 No he didn't mention… Some of his friends that came back said that it was a good thing that he didn't go because it was a terrible war, especially in the trenches. He had some very good friends that went. Some came back and some didn't.

03:00 **Were there lots of chaps from Bundaberg who were…?**

Yes, there was quite a number of people from Bundaberg… There's a memorial to them all in the main street of Bundaberg, right in the centre of the square.

Did you actually meet some of your father's friends?

Yes I met some,

03:30 but I can't recall their names now, who went to the First World War. Yes, my wife's uncles went to the First World War. One of them was in Gallipoli; one was in France. The one in Gallipoli got out of it and went to France. Another one was in France.

04:00 They both got out of it and came back, not mental, but it affected them quite a lot because in the trenches it was terrible.

In your schooling days, what we were you taught about the First World War?

Well, for schooling

04:30 I went to the East Bundaberg State School and I left school when I was fourteen and went to work. I didn't like school; I hated it. We had a very bad headmaster. I would say he was a sadist. He used to belt everybody in those days and he would never get away with it now. He was a terrible man and I never liked him because of that. But I had some very nice teachers.

05:00 One of the teachers was Archie Guymer and he became the head of the Education Department in Queensland in later years. He joined the air force but I didn't meet in the air force. I think he was squadron leader in the air force.

Can you tell us about the education you received at school?

05:35 The leaving age was fourteen at stage. I did my education during the war and after the war. I studied navigation again after the war and I got a Diploma of Aviation. I got up to a

06:00 First Class Air Navigation certificate after the war. But during the war that helped me quite a lot with my education, too, especially when I was doing training. During our training I can recall there was only one person in the whole course

06:33 who had ever been to university, and he was only first year. All the rest had left school at fourteen or fifteen years of age. None of us were educated as we should have been as they are these days. But I did all my education after the war. It was hard, but I did manage to get through.

07:00 **Tell us about Empire. Was it important?**

Yeah I suppose it was important in those days, but to me now I should say that no, I'm not a royalist. Now I'd soon as see it become a republic because

07:30 when I was going to England quite a lot every two years, sometimes every year, and when I got to England I had to go through the foreigners' gates. And I served with the Royal Air Force and

08:03 I've seen the Germans, the Italians, and all the others just walking straight through the gates without anything, which I think is pretty poor. They didn't give us any credit at all, the ex-servicemen who fought with the British.

In the Depression era, was Empire important to you?

I think so, yes.

08:32 During the Depression we looked up to the King – in those days King George V. I think he died in '32, '33, some time during that time. Yes, it was important in those days. We looked up to the royal family and such like. It's a different kettle of fish these days.

09:08 **During the Depression era, how would you get by on food?**

Well my mother was a very good provider. She used to go to the auction rooms and get cases of fruit.

09:32 She might get a case of fruit for a shilling a case. Not oranges, but the southern fruits – apples and pears and things like that. And bananas. And they used to have to bid, of course, at the auction rooms and sometimes she used to get bunches of bananas for a farthing a dozen,

10:00 sometimes a halfpenny a dozen. She was a very good handler of money. We had very, very little money. Of course those days we didn't have much clothes. We had sandshoes if we went out anywhere, but no shoes as they have today.

10:37 **Did you go hunting for rabbits, by any chance?**

There were no rabbits in Bundaberg. We used to hunt for ducks and wallabies and kangaroos, and we used to do a lot of fishing and crabbing.

11:06 **So you would eat kangaroos?**

Oh yes, we'd eat them many times. They were very nice.

What did they taste like?

Just like kangaroos. They were a gamey taste. And we did a lot of fishing.

11:32 **Was bread and dripping on the table?**

No, I don't think we had dripping; we always had butter. Of course, butter was sixpence a pound. I think you could get it for four pence a pound at one stage. We had a friend who had a farm, and they had a cow and they used to separate their milk and keep the cream, and we used to get

12:00 the separated milk, which was okay. A lot of people are doing that now, having separated milk.

You were telling us before about your father not being able to find work during the Depression. How many years was all this?

Four years, about four years. He had relief work.

12:30 In those days they used to have relief work. I think he used to get two days a week or two and a half days a week; they called it relief work. They were putting the sewerage into Bundaberg at the time and he used to work on that. But it didn't supply very much for two days a week. The wage was very low in those days –

13:00 it might have only been a pound.

How did it affect him, not finding work?

Well I think it affected everyone. I think everyone had a problem with it. He was upset and

13:30 we were all upset with the situation. I was only a kid then, but of course my mother was a good provider and it didn't affect us so much as him and my mother.

Do you remember the sustenance workers?

14:02 Yes, you got sustenance if you worked say six months then you would get sustenance for a period of time, and when that cut out you had to go on relief. I remember my father being on that.

Did you come across swaggies? Swagmen?

14:31 Yes, you used to see a lot of them around Bundaberg. You see in those days you had to travel so many miles looking for work to get… Oh, some sort of a handout they used to get. But

15:01 a lot of them in those days used to try and jump the rattler. The rattler is getting onto a train truck to get from one place to another. They called that 'jumping the rattler'. That's how they used to travel. They never used to try and walk, they used to jump the rattler.

15:31 I think one of my brothers got caught jumping the rattler too. When they got caught they were quite happy, because what actually happened they were taken to the police station and put in jail overnight, and that meant they got a good meal from the policeman's wife. All on the government, of course.

16:03 **If times were very tough, how did you get clothes and things like that?**

Well my mother used to make a lot of our clothes. If somebody gave her some old dresses and things like that… She had a Wertheim sewing machine and she used to make the clothes up.

16:33 We were always clothed, but it was pretty tough.

What did you do for entertainment during the Depression?

We used to go shooting. Of course cartridges were pretty expensive in those days. I think a box of cartridges used

17:00 to cost a shilling or something for a box of fifty. You didn't waste them. Now and again we'd go to the picture show, but that didn't cost very much. It only cost threepence or six pence or something. I can remember in the silent days – I think the talks came out in 1928. I think The Jazz Singer was the first one.

17:32 Before that it was all silent and they had an orchestra in the pits that used to play.

What about sport?

Well I wasn't a great sportsman. I played football at school. I played rugby league, a bit of cricket, but

18:01 I never played cricket very much. But I did play for the school. I played rugby league. I did play a little bit of cricket, I suppose. We had a school competition and one of the blokes we used to play against in Bundaberg was the late Don Tallon. Do you remember him? He was a wicket keeper for Australia. He played for North Bundaberg

18:30 and we played for East Bundaberg. He ended up as Australia's wicket keeper. But rugby league was my favourite.

Can you tell us also about the sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants that

19:00 **existed during the Depression years?**

Well I don't know much about that really. It didn't affect us at all. We had a lot of Catholic friends.

19:37 Of course Bundaberg was an area…. It was a migration area of course. A lot of German, Danish and English people there.

20:02 But there was a lot of German settlers and a lot of Danish settlers in Bundaberg, and they were all more or less Protestants. There was a few Catholics in Bundaberg, but they had a Catholic school. I'm glad I never went to them.

You don't remember seeing any problems?

20:30 No, I don't remember… The Catholics used to have their St Patrick's Day march, but nobody worried them. They always used to have St Patrick's Day marches, but there was no problem. I even had a girlfriend there who was a Catholic at that stage. That was when I was in my early teens.

How did your parents react to that?

21:02 They didn't seem to mind.

Did you have a very religious upbringing?

No, no. Not at all. I never ever went to Sunday School. My sister did. I was christened. We had a church next door to us in Bundaberg – a Church of England Church.

21:35 But no, it didn't affect us.

Were you aware about the tension in the lead-up towards war?

Oh yes. We'd hear

22:00 a lot about it on the radio. The night that war was declared I was going on the midnight shift at the Millet and Sugar Company. About eleven o'clock that night war was declared. [Robert] Menzies was in power [Prime Minister of Australia]. [Neville] Chamberlain [Prime Minister of Britain] I think declared war that night and Menzies came on at eleven o' clock that night and said,

22:30 "Australia is also at war."

What were you doing that day?

I was going to work that night. I was on shift work. I was on the midnight shift midnight to eight o'clock in the morning.

23:05 **You felt that the war would start well before it did start?**

I think everybody knew that the war was starting. It was over Poland, of course – Danzig. They went into Danzig and they wouldn't withdraw from Danzig.

23:33 And Chamberlain gave them an ultimatum to pull out or they would go to war, and France and England went to war over that when they went into Poland. They bombed Warsaw.

24:05 **What about your older brothers? How did they react to the war starting?**

My older brother, Conrad, he was in Sydney and he joined up immediately. He was on the first draft to go to the Middle East on December 1940. He was in the 6th Division.

24:30 He had a first aid certificate and such like and he went into the medical service. And he was on the first crowd that went to the Middle East in December 1940, and I think it was on the Empress of Japan. I think that was the ship that he went over on. He was there for quite a time.

25:01 He was at El Alamein; he wasn't in the battle. He was on the way back to Australia on the hospital ship. He had amoebic dysentery and they transported him home. They discharged him in 1944. My other brother, Clive, he was going into aircrew but he failed his initial exam.

25:32 They put him into the mechanical side of the air force. My other younger brother, he didn't join. He was too young. He didn't join until 1943. He did his initial training in Australia and went to Canada, finished his training in Canada. Then

26:00 he was on training in Canada for twelve months, I think, then he went to England and joined a squadron and carried out operations over Germany. They all survived, the whole family, which was fortunate. But I can remember my sister telling me when my father… After I had my accident in Egypt

26:30 a telegram arrived. The police brought a telegram saying I had been injured. My sister said my father went white. He said, “This is it. He’s gone.” But I wasn’t. I survived. And he was relieved, I believe. And you can understand that, can’t you? My sister didn’t

27:00 join the services, but all the rest except my other brother – he was unfit. He had lung trouble.

What were your reasons for joining up?

I was going to do a pilot’s course before the war started. I had saved up my twenty pounds to do a pilot’s course. I was going to do that in Bundaberg

27:31 with… I think his name was Steve Howard. It was going to cost me ten shillings an hour, but I didn’t get selected for pilot training. I ended up as a radio operator air gunner. But we all thought that it would be good getting away going overseas. But we found out differently of course. We all did. War’s not very good.

28:01 **You just wanted to get away from Bundaberg?**

Well I was glad I got away from Bundaberg, yes. There was nothing in Bundaberg for me. I just wanted to get away from it. Best thing I ever did, get away from Bundaberg, get away from the sugar industry.

What was wrong with working in the sugar mill industry?

Well it wasn’t a continuous job. It was a seasonal job and you didn’t work

28:30 full time there. Another well known bloke, I won’t mention his name, he told me he was glad to get away from it too. He told me; he’s a doctor. He said he was glad to get away from the place, too.

29:03 **Was it because of the boredom and all that?**

There was no future. There is no future in Bundaberg at the moment either. The sugar industry has gone down, as you know. There is a lot of troubles in the sugar industry. There was a bit of a boost after the war. But now it’s gone right down. Now they’re asking for handouts.

29:40 **Tell us what you did when the war started as far as joining up was concerned? Or the first steps you took?**

The first steps I took. In December 1940 I got word from the air force

30:00 that I could be accepted into the air force. And go to the police station and get the magistrate to put me on reserve, sign the papers and put me on reserve. But after that I didn’t hear anything more until about March. I got a letter from the air force to go to Brisbane to have a medical, and if the medical passed I would be in

30:30 into the service. I was on the first course of the Empire Air Training Course.

How did your parents feel about you joining up, enlisting into the air force?

I think my parents were very scared. Because in those days I had to have

31:00 a certificate to say – I was under 21 – I had to get a certificate from my parents to joint the air force. In those days it was 21 before you could make your own decision. They were worried. I don’t blame them for that.

31:35 **So was it a problem for you?**

No, it wasn’t any problem. They signed the papers all right. There was no problem at all. They were worried that I might not come back and there was a chance, a big chance actually. Most of my course didn’t come back.

32:00 There was only ten or twelve that did come back that was on my course. Most of them got killed over the years, and surprisingly some of them got killed when they came back to Australia when they went flying in Australia again. They got killed.

Can you tell us why you chose to join the air force and not the army?

Well I was always interested

32:30 in the air force. I didn’t like the army. I didn’t like footslogging [infantry] and especially going into the trenches and anything like that. I thought that was… After what I had been told about the First World War… I was always interested in aviation. As I say, I had my first flight when I was about twelve

33:01 or fourteen. I forget now. 1928. About twelve, I think. I wouldn’t have liked to go into the army. It was a better life, the air force; they looked after you better. Much better than the army.

How would they do that?

Well I think we had better conditions in the air force.

33:30 Okay, if you were flying there was a good chance of you being knocked off. But when you're on the ground you had a pretty good life. You had good conditions. With the army they were sleeping in tents and that. We mainly had accommodation. Not in the desert, of course. In the desert we only had one-man tents.

34:00 And sleeping on the sand, no palliasses or anything in the desert.

You had no straw palliasses?

No, not in the desert. You had a groundsheet and just a couple of blankets. That's all we had in the desert. We were moving around quite a lot in the air force, going from one place to another. I think we changed

34:31 in a few months. I think we went to three or four different places. But when I was in East Africa, of course, we had good accommodation there. We had huts there and beds and such like. But in England they were entirely different there. They had all the home comforts in England. But not us in the desert.

What about in Australia? When you first started training? Tell us about…

35:01 I was on No. 1 Course, Empire Air Training Course and I went to Ballarat, Victoria, and it was cold there. We found it very, very cold; it was in April. The frosts were heavy and we were camping in the showgrounds there. A hundred and fifty of us, I suppose,

35:30 camping in this showground and it was very cold – no heating or anything. Then we gradually moved out to the airport at Ballarat. The accommodation was much better. We had huts out there. About twenty to a hut out there and it was quite good. The food was better also. But of course we didn't have to do any extra duties, aircrew.

36:02 Even in later life in the air force I didn't do any extra duties at all. I didn't have to do any duties as sergeant or anything like that. I just did my duty and I was never called on to be duty sergeant or any other duties whatsoever. Because we were working shift work then, and they just let us go as we wanted to. As long as we did our shifts and

36:30 done our duties we were fine. The duty sergeant used to come around, the warrant officer used to come around and I would be asleep in bed. He knew who I was. He never used to wake me up even. It was quite good.

Was the training hard there?

The training was very hard, yes, for me. Especially the mathematics. I hadn't done a lot of the mathematics that they were training us.

37:02 The radio work was okay. I found the mathematics very hard, but later in life I coped with that because I got up to a First Class Air Navigation Certificate, which is pretty tough. Many problems, but I taught myself that.

37:30 Yes, it was a fairly good life really in the air force.

Where was your first training place?

My first training place was at Ballarat in Victoria. We were on the first course of the Empire Air Training Course there. As I said previously, we were camped in the showgrounds. We weren't doing any flying at that stage. We didn't start flying until we got out to the

38:00 aerodrome and then we did flights around Victoria in Ansons. Some of them were in DC3s, but I only flew in the Anson. We used to get around the place. It was quite good. We used to see a bit of the country. We used to take three trainees up at a time in the aircraft. We used to each have a turn

38:30 on the morse code and such like. It was all morse code in those days – no speech. Speech didn't come in until later in the war. We had a lot of problems with health problems when we were at the showgrounds.

39:01 There was a lot of mumps and flu. The mumps went right through the camp. We had no hospital in the camp and we all went to the Ballarat Base Hospital. And that's where I met my wife. She was a trainee nurse there then. And I eventually got to know her fairly well.

39:36 I kept with her all my training time, then I went overseas and we used to correspond with each other. And eventually I came back and we got married. I've known her now for 64 years now. We're having our wedding anniversary in three days' time.

Tape 3

00:33 **With the Empire Air Training Scheme, how did they select what roles you were to play on the plane?**

Well it was very funny. They selected some pilots navigators, and some radio operators air gunners. Now some of the chaps that

01:00 trained with us were pilots before the war and they were selected as air gunners, which was absolutely crazy. My cousin, Maurie Bellett, two or three years ago they found his body up in New Guinea in the water. He was a pilot before the war and then they put him in as a wireless operator air gunner. Anyhow he finished his training with us,

01:30 but then they put him on another pilot's course and he finished up as a pilot. Now another chap, Jack Hazard, he had the same problem. He was a pilot before the war and they put him in as a….

02:00 I don't know why they did it, but that's how it happened. Anyhow eventually they woke to everything and they transferred some of the blokes back to their pilots' course.

So what was the selection process then?

Well the selection process was fairly easy. I went to Brisbane from Bundaberg and

02:30 I had a severe medical examination, then I was asked a few questions, then I was accepted. There was nothing else to it. Then they put me on this course to Ballarat.

When you say severe medical, what do you mean?

It was severe. You had to have good eyesight,

03:00 good hearing, no health problems whatsoever. It was an A1 medical they put you on. Better than A1. You had to have no problems whatsoever.

Did you have to do written tests?

No, we didn't have to do any written tests at all.

03:34 When we went out to Ballarat we did what they called an entry examination, but that wasn't very severe. Anybody could get through that. We had one chap with us there. He was a friend of Errol Flynn [an actor].

04:04 He also fought in the Spanish Civil War. I don't know what happened to him. Halfway through the course he completely disappeared and nobody knew what happened to him. He just disappeared from the course. Where he went to or what happened to him… We were all wondering what happened to him. He was with Flynn there on his trip around Queensland

04:30 and up to New Guinea. We had some unusual blokes with us, some young. Some of them were only 18 or 19. Had some chaps up to 30, 32. They found it difficult, some of them. But one of the chaps, you've probably heard about it,

05:04 his son was a television chap after the war. Graham Kennedy, his father was with us. He survived the war, but he was in his 30s. He survived and got back to Australia. We had them from all ages. I think the eldest was about 32

05:30 down to about 18.

What was Graham Kennedy's father like?

He won the war. No, he was quite a nice bloke. He was an outspoken bloke, very outspoken. I didn't see him after the war. This is what other people told me. I think

06:00 he went to the Middle East too, but I never did meet him over there because we were all attached to different squadrons. When I went there there was no RAAF squadrons there. We were all attached to the Royal Air Force. Actually we were even given RAF pay books. They only paid us RAF rates of pay, and the money that

06:30 we had accumulated was kept in Australia for us. We could get that when we came back. If we came back we could have got it. I left mine to my mother in case anything happened to me, but she saved it all for me when I got back.

So when you joined up the Empire Air Training Scheme were you joining up for Australia or for England?

For Australia,

07:00 but it was a scheme that had all the British Commonwealth nations in. Like England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. We were all mixed up together. And eventually they had some Australian squadrons and some Australians

07:30 on RAF squadrons some on New Zealand squadrons. They had us all mixed up.

Did you think the war was far away?

When we were in Australia? No, I thought it was pretty close. I suppose in one respect, everybody thought that something was going to happen in Japan. And there was a bit of strife when

08:02 the Japanese came into the war. There was a lot of discontent in the Middle East about the Australians being there when they should have been home in Australia. The three ministers of religion – Davies was one; he just died recently – they put out a letter to us all.

08:31 They wanted to bring us all home. But the British government wouldn't let us go, be relieved, and they kept us there.

So there was a feeling Japan was going to enter before Pearl Harbour?

Oh yes, there was certainly that. If you've seen some of these television

09:00 shows you realised that they were going to enter the war. They had an agreement with Germany.

And so you thought that Australia was directly under threat?

Oh yes, and as I say they wouldn't release us to come to Australia. The RAF kept us there. And I think there was a lot of problems, if I can remember

09:30 right, with Churchill and [John] Curtin [Australian Prime Minister]. Curtin wanted to bring Australian troops home. Churchill wouldn't let them come home. Anyhow, eventually Curtin won and they left one division in the Middle East. That was the 6th Division; that was at El Alamein. But the other two divisions came home. But I think one of them was caught in Singapore. Yes,

10:00 it was a bit of a problem.

What did you know about [Adolph] Hitler [Chancellor of Germany] when the war just started?

All I knew about Hitler was… Who was that actor in The Great Dictator? Charlie Chaplin put a show on. But it was well known that he was bad a bad man. And

10:30 a lot of people knew what was going on there with the concentration camps. I've been to a concentration camp, I've been to Dachau. That was a sad thing for us to go to. The wife and I went. She didn't want to come. I said, "You better come with me to Dachau," because we wanted to prove to ourselves that it was there. We went there in 1970 and they still had all the old

11:03 huts and incinerators and everything there. Oh yes, I think we all knew what was going on. But fortunately they didn't treat the prisoners of war badly because all aircrew, I don't know about the army, but all aircrew was given to the Luftwaffe, they were treated fairly well. Except when Hitler

11:32 interfered with that great escape. They shot fifty of the aircrew that escaped. That was our aim. We always had to escape. All aircrew was given the instruction that you had to escape if we possibly could. I was in the Middle East so we would have been taken to Germany and put in the

12:00 prisoner camp there. But we were told that the best way to get out was to get to the underground somewhere then go to the Pyrénées and go into Spain or Portugal or Switzerland. The Swiss weren't very much of a help. They used to send some of the blokes back.

Why were you told that you had to escape?

Because it cost a lot to train us. It cost a lot to train aircrew.

12:33 That was always… They said the best way to escape is just about the first day that you were captured. They weren't so alert then.

Back to training, did you originally want to be a pilot?

Yeah, I did want to be, yeah. As I say, I was going to do my own. I had my twenty pounds to get a pilot's licence

13:00 before the war and it was ten shillings an hour to learn. There was a training school in Bundaberg. But it never happened. I was not sorry. I had a pretty good life. I've done pretty well in my life. I stayed in aviation until 1982 from 1940.

13:30 That's forty-two years. I've had a good life.

So what did you think when they selected you to be a wireless operator?

It didn't worry me at all because I knew I would be going flying.

What does that job entail? What do you have to do?

Wireless operator air gunner? You normally were trained as gunnery. I was on Blenheims,

14:00 that type of aircraft behind you there. You can see the turret on the back – that was my position on the aircraft. I had a radio set beside me and I used to pump out anything that had to be pumped out on the morse code.

14:30 And also used to keep the pilot informed of any attacks on the rear or anything like that. No, it didn't worry me. I thoroughly enjoyed it while it was going. But unfortunately I got my problems with my ear and nose troubles.

That was later on?

No, I had it during the war years.

15:00 I got it from high level flying. It first started off when I was down at Kenya. We used to get to about eighteen thousand feet. We didn't have any oxygen or anything in those days. Our hands used to be blue – lack of oxygen, blue cold. You couldn't touch anything it was that cold. I flew with a cold. You shouldn't fly with a cold because they weren't pressurised, of course.

15:30 They were only atmosphere.

So it was the pressure that affects…?

Yeah, the pressure. I had a lot of trouble with it. I remember after the war I used to have trouble with my ear. I used to roll around the floor here with abscesses in my ear until they eventually decided that it wasn't a mastoid and they operated on me and took the ear out.

16:01 And that's why I have no hearing now.

So you were selected to be a wireless operator air gunner. And I guess that's what the WAG [Wireless Air Gunner] is?

Yeah, that's the WAG.

Did they first start training you on the coded messages and so on?

No, we learned morse code. First we had to know the wireless set.

16:32 To repair and change frequencies, things like that. You had to know the set. They trained us on the set. But eventually they had a much better set. You used to press a button like you do on a modern TV now. In those days we used to have to put different things into the set

17:02 to change the frequency and things like that. But now of course they don't do that. It was basically all morse code. We had very little RT. And mostly we were on radio silence anyhow because of information given away. You only used to use radio in an emergency. But other

17:30 than that you didn't because it would let the enemy know where you were. They had RDF [Radio Detection Finding] and such like that they could hook onto you.

Did you use a code box?

Yes, I had a code, but it wasn't a very secure one. It was only in a code that'd probably last a day.

18:00 They'd soon break it. It was a very, very simple code. You were given it every day, the different codes. Like you may have a A for an X or something like that. And you put it in this little box and you pressed the thing and it would give you the code. A five letter code it was.

Can you describe the code box? Was it dials?

18:30 No, it was only press buttons. You just pressed buttons. It was only a little box about that size, six or eight inches long, but we never used it. We had no use for it. Well I didn't, anyhow. I think they used it in England quite a bit, the code.

So what would be the process? The message comes encoded, then what would you do?

19:01 Well then you would decode it again. You knew the code of the day. You would have a code of the day. Also you'd have the colours of the day. If you think you might be being attacked by your own aircraft you would just fire the code of the day. It was a Verey pistol. It might have a red green white code.

19:30 You fired that off and that was the code of the day. That actually happened. There was one case where an aircraft attacked Heliopolis airport near Cairo. That day the Germans shot down a Beaufighter they got the codes of the day and that night they sent an aircraft over to Heliopolis,

20:00 fired the codes of the day off, and they lit the airport up. Then the Germans came in and done it over. Made a hell of a mess.

One last thing. Was it like a typewriter, and the code would come in…?

Yeah, it was just like a typewriter, yeah. We hardly used it because of radio silence. Even my brother, he

was a WAG too. He said they never used to use it.

20:30 They always had radio silence. The only time they ever used it was if they were in problems. And then it was speech. In the later part of the war it was speech and it would be in plain language. But some of the crew used it if they were doing weather reconnaissance, they used to use send out messages of what the weather was like, they used it then.

21:04 **Did they train you on the gun as well?**

Oh yes. I did a gunnery course at Evans Head. We lost a crew there. Chap by the name of….

21:35 On Fairy Battles. We were on Fairy Battles there. And it just happened that they crashed on gunnery practice. And then of course we did gunnery practice again when we were down in East African when we were on Lake Nakuru.

22:00 We did a lot of gunnery practice there. Firing forward; the pilots used to follow forward and we fired backwards.

The Fairy Battles? What was that?

It was a single engine aircraft something like a Spitfire, but under-powered. Very under-powered. They used them in England during the early part of the war, but they had to take them off because

22:30 they were getting shot down like flies. They used to use them at Evans Head on training.

Was that the first plane you trained in?

No, the first plane I trained in was the Anson, Avro Anson. The Avro Anson was a twin engine… Well it was supposed to be a bomber during the early part of the war, but it was no good.

23:00 I think it was developed in the late 1930s. But eventually they were only used for training. It had a turret at the back. They used them in Australia for coastal reccos and things like that, but we never used them in the Middle East – they were very slow. And there was three to a crew, but we

23:30 used to have about five or six of us when we went up training. We used to do half an hour on the morse and such like, then somebody else would take over and then we used to sit back and enjoy the flight.

Before you were saying that when you were getting trained on the guns… What training would occur on the guns?

We used to have to…Mostly Browning.

24:01 Browning guns. And we used to have to take them to pieces and put them together again. We had a lot of problems with them in the Middle East with the dust. They used to jam all the time. That was when we were attacked that time with the 109. That chap shot off the tail. That jammed on me. That was due to sand.

24:30 Sand used to get into everything there. Like the engines. The maintenance… You used to go down and collect an aircraft down to Cairo from the RSU that's the Repair and Service Unit and you would get halfway back and have a motor problem. Well one day we went down to get a new aircraft at Cairo and on the way back

25:00 we did one motor, and fortunately it was very close to the landing area. We did one motor then the other one started to crack on us. It was blurting away and backfiring and such like, but we managed to make the field. But this was going on all the time. A lot of discontent in the squadron with them. The maintenance, they had the same trouble with the fighters with the

25:30 air intake and such like.

They weren't very reliable?

The Blenheims were very unreliable. They had to take them off in England because they were getting shot down like flies. They sent them out to the Middle East then. But eventually in late 1943 they took them off the list altogether. The reliability was no good at all.

26:01 There was a lot of discontent amongst the crews with the aircraft. Very poor. Our squadron should have done a hell of a lot of operations, but we didn't do very much. We were always having unserviceable aircraft. I was on

26:30 three types of Blenheims. We had a fighter Blenheim. That had a cannon through the nose of the aircraft and the navigator used to put on drums of twenty millimetre rounds. He looked after that. But the pilot had the firing thing. We used to use them for night fighter operations

27:04 and also strafing. We had the bombers and we used to do a bit of recco too. Sea recco and such like.

How loud were the guns that you were firing?

We didn't hear them very much because you were travelling all the time. But you'd hear them on the

ground. You'd hear them a bit.

27:32 **One of the things that we've come across, there were a lot of deaths in training….**

Yes, but we didn't lose very many. We lost this chap in Evans Head, Pope his name was. One of the Popes from the Pope washing machine company. We lost him

28:00 at Evans Head. We didn't lose any at Ballarat. But pilots, they were the ones that… Most of the pilots on the training, they were experienced pilots. They weren't just out of school; they were experienced. They had done their training and had plenty of experience.

28:30 But the pilots on the training schools, that's when they lost a lot of crews. Not so much on the lighter aircraft; they lost a lot when they went onto the heavier type of aircraft.

Why was that?

Inexperience I think, and also they had a lot of trouble at Sale. You've probably heard about all the problems

29:00 they had at Sale. The Beaufort, they found a problem with the controls. One of the crew that came back from the Middle East – we were all in Brisbane at the embarkation at Sandgate and he went down to get on the squadron down at Sale, and the next thing we hard that he was dead. After he had finished his tour in the Middle East.

29:31 They had a lot of trouble with the Beauforts.

When Mr Pope died, did you know him personally?

Oh yes. I've got a photograph of him somewhere. We don't know what actually happened. They were an awful aircraft. We had a lot of undercarriage trouble with them. Sometimes they used to come back and

30:02 try and put the undercarriage down and it wouldn't go down. Sometimes one leg used to go down then they used to fly around and do kangarooing, trying to flip it down. And then if it wouldn't go down they used to belly land. Terrible lot of trouble with them.

30:30 **What type of bloke was Mr Pope?**

He was a nice chap. He was from Adelaide. Of course we were all pretty well respected when we got selected in the early days. We were pretty well checked out and such like.

31:00 I think later on the aircrew was more selective when they had all the blokes. I think they were more selective then, better educated too. None of us were really highly educated, none of us.

Did you feel special being in the air force?

Oh yes. I'm still mixed up with the air force. I still

31:32 go to some of their dos and go to their dinners. I always get an invitation from them. I was very friendly with them here because I had a lot to do with them. Even when I was in charge of the airport out here I had a lot to do with the air force. And some of the commanders that I know are very good friends of mine now.

32:01 They were wing commanders and such like in charge of Hobart. I'm still friendly with them. It was a bit of a privilege to get into the air force.

How was an air force man different to an army man?

Well we used to wear ties. You've probably heard

32:30 of the Blue Orchids and Menzies' Mannequins haven you? There was a big fight in Melbourne one time with the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] and the air force over somebody yelling out, "Here comes the Blue Orchids!" And the air force got stuck into the army and it ended up in a very big fight in Melbourne.

Did you see that personally?

No, no, no. I wasn't there. I didn't want to see it either.

33:01 They used to always call us the Blue Orchids or Menzies' Mannequins. We all had ties; they didn't have any ties or anything. We were much better presented really.

What did you hear about the big fight in Melbourne?

It was well known. I heard about it.

33:32 You've probably heard about it?

What did you hear about it? What happened?

Well I think somebody made a comment to some of the air force blokes and the air force blokes got stuck into the army. And the same thing happened with the army and the Americans up in Brisbane. Everybody was

34:01 a bit keen in those days. They could take it.

Who won the fight?

I don't know. I wouldn't have a clue. But you always used to hear it walking along the streets, "Here's the Blue Orchids."

Did you find terms like that derogatory?

No, they didn't worry me. I used to laugh at them.

34:36 Yes, but the army are wearing ties now, aren't they?

When Mr Pope died, was that the first death of a friend you had during the war?

Well he wasn't a personal friend, but I knew him quite well. Yeah, he was the first one that I knew. Yes, he was the first one that got killed in

35:04 the course. Of course in the Middle East they went off like flies then.

How did you feel when he died?

We were all sad. All sad. He was a very big man for a young man. And he was a nice bloke.

35:30 But that's life, I guess. They're still getting killed in the air force now and again. Yes, Evans Head was… That was only a course for one month. When we finished that we were given leave to go home and see our parents and then we

36:01 put into the embarkation depot at Bradfield Park.

Before the war, did you know the consequences of death and the horror of it?

Not really, I suppose. No, I don't think so. I knew from the First World War. I can remember seeing a movie All Quiet on the Western Front.

36:34 That was about the trenches. I think that was one of the first movies they made about the First World War. That was about the German army, but we found out later though. Yes, war is… I'm against war now really

37:02 because I think it's unnecessary. Like it is at the moment. I don't think we should have gone into Vietnam. I was against that. I didn't go public, but in my own mind I was against it. I had a couple of arguments with blokes about it. I don't think we should have

37:31 gone in there and that proved right. Iraq, Afghanistan… I don't know anything about Afghanistan, but I don't think we should have gone into Iraq so soon. That's been proved now. The war there, the Americans are finding out now what war is all about.

38:05 They've declared peace in there, but they haven't got peace. They're losing more men now. Today I noticed they've lost another four in today's paper; they lost two yesterday. They're losing more than they lost when the war was on.

When Mr Pope died, was that when you realised what war was about?

No, I don't think so.

38:30 I think we had to accept what happened. It could happen to anybody. It can happen in a car accident or anything like that. It's just a part of life actually. It's happening now amongst aircrew. There's one a week. There's one

39:00 light aircraft going in and getting killed. There is an accident just about every day, sometimes three or four killed in aircraft.

So when there were accidents during training, what did it do to the morale of the rest of the squadron?

It didn't seem to do anything at all actually. We just had to accept it.

39:33 We knew what war was all about. We realised I think when we left Australia. I was on the Queen Elizabeth to go to the Middle East I think then. I thought, "Am I going to come back or am I not?" Because I was leaving Australia.

40:00 But if I had been living in Australia I wouldn't have thought so much. But when I was going around to Fremantle on the ship, the New Zealand band was playing the Maori's Farewell and it was a very sad time, I felt, to leave Australia. We thought, "We won't even get back now. This will be the last time we

see Australia."

40:30 Which happened to a lot of them – they didn't see Australia again

Tape 4

00:34 **We were talking about your maiden voyage on the Queen Elizabeth in '41. How long was the voyage for?**

Three weeks it took us to get to Port Taufiq. The first trip was to Fremantle. We stopped there two days. We weren't allowed off the ship. The second one was to Trincomalee and

01:00 Ceylon. We stayed there two days. We were escorted by the warship Australia part of the way, then that disappeared and we were unescorted from Trincomalee to Port Taufiq. We were unescorted.

Tell me what your Fremantle stopover was like?

01:32 We couldn't do anything at Fremantle. We had to sit on the ship and just twiddle our thumbs because we weren't allowed off the ship. The convoy consisted of the Queen Elizabeth – she was the leading ship – the Queen Mary, the Aquitania, the Mauritania and the Il de France. They were in the convoy.

02:00 The biggest convoy to ever leave Australia. Bigger than World War I? I should imagine so because they had the world's biggest ships in the convoy. The Queen Elizabeth was eighty-seven thousand tons. The Queen Mary was eighty-five, eighty-six thousand. The Mauritania and the Aquitania, they were about forty-odd thousand

02:31 and the Il de France was about forty thousand. It was a fast ship. They tried the Queen Elizabeth. It was her maiden voyage out of Australia. Actually it left Scotland and came out here unescorted, and from there it took the troops on.

03:00 We were very fortunate on the ship. Another chap and myself had a cabin, but a lot of the others were put four or five in the cabin. But my friend Tommy Wicks and myself, we had a cabin between the two of us. And we were offered ten pounds if we'd give our cabin up, but we refused because we knew we were on a good thing.

03:33 **Were there any submarine scares on the way?**

No, the Japanese weren't in the war then. There was no scares at all. We weren't allowed off the ship, even at Trincomalee. It was a beautiful harbour.

Can you tell us what Trincomalee looked like?

To me there wasn't very much there, but it was a British naval base.

04:02 There was a narrow entrance into the harbour and the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth were there. Only two ships were there. I don't know what happened to the other ships. I think when we were crossing the Indian Ocean some of them went to Singapore.

What were the activities you would do on the voyage

04:30 **to keep yourselves occupied?**

The air force we used to have PT [physical training] exercises. And being sergeants – we were all sergeants; there was only one officer on board. And we were all given detailed jobs on board. I was on the anti-vice squadron, which was hopeless, particularly with the AIF. You couldn't do anything with the AIF or they would have thrown you overboard.

05:00 They would too. One bloke threatened to throw me overboard if I stopped them from gambling. The anti-vice means that you stopped them from gambling. They were a wild crowd, the AIF. They wouldn't take any notice of us. And some of the chaps were on anti-aircraft. We were

05:30 all given different details on the ship.

Were you frightened?

No, I just laughed at them. But I wouldn't trust them all the same because some of the AIF chaps were very, very tough blokes. Some of them were even crims [criminals], I think, in those days to get away from Australia.

06:04 **How did they see the air force?**

There didn't seem to be any problem at all on board the ship. They seemed to treat us well; we treated them pretty well. They respected us and we respected them. In those days we were sergeants. We had a bit of authority. And

06:30 there was a lot of privates and not many sergeants amongst them. There was about thirty or forty of us air force on board the ship, and I think there was about six thousand AIF. The meals on board the ship were excellent. Three course meals every day. You could have what you liked,

07:00 like steak or roast and all the trimmings. They were beautiful meals. But when we got to Egypt we found it a little bit different because the RAF couldn't get any supplies in. More or less the Mediterranean was blocked off to them by the German submarines and such like.

07:33 Malta was blocked off. They used to send aircraft in there, but it was very difficult to get anything from Malta. And everything had to come around the Cape of Good Hope.

How did you deal with the anti-vice problem on the ship? With the AIF?

Oh well, we

08:00 used to not take any notice of it really, just tell them not to do it any more. But they didn't take any notice. Because it's very difficult. They knew where they were going to. They knew they were going there to fight and they may not come back. And it's the same with anybody who knows they are going to war. It's a haphazard sort of system really.

08:33 **Why did you say they would actually throw you overboard?**

I don't know whether they would have or not, but one bloke said, "I'll throw you overboard one day if you stop me." They used to play two-up; the air force didn't. Because we were all in a different category to them; we were all sergeants. There was only one officer on board of the air force. But we used to do PT on board the ship, the air force.

09:04 As I said there was about six thousand army and about thirty or forty air force, that was all.

Tell us what happened when you got to Port Taufiq?

When we got to Port Taufiq we stayed on overnight on board the ship. But that night there was an air raid.

09:33 They were after us, no doubt. But they didn't touch us. They got the Georgia. She had no troops on board, fortunately, but they run her aground. That was a big ship. That was about forty thousand tonner. They run her aground when she was hit by bombs. Fortunately they didn't touch us that night. And when we got off the ship

10:00 the next day we went off on barges. We didn't go to any wharf or anything like that. We all got on barges at Port Taufiq. Then by train up to Kasfareet, the embarkation depot. And that's when we had our great big breakfast the next morning.

10:34 A hard-boiled egg, a raw onion and a hard biscuit. That was our breakfast. There was no food there much in Egypt at the time. They had to bring all the… It either came from New Zealand or Australia, the food, or it had to go right around the Cape of Good Hope.

Can you tell me about experiencing a major bombing raid on first coming there?

11:05 Well it didn't affect us. We heard the aircraft at night over the top and we had a blackout, of course. But they knew we were there, but they'd mistaken the Georgia for us, that's all. They didn't hit us. Yes, she just run ashore because she was hit pretty

11:30 badly. They actually repaired her. They took her down to South Africa and repaired the Georgia. She was a cruise ship after the war and I met a chap who was the steward on board recently.

How long did you actually stay in that depot for?

I was there for about a week. They gave us some leave and we ended up in Cairo,

12:00 a couple of us. Then we came back – more leave. I got some leave and I went over to try and find my brother over in Palestine, but unfortunately he had been transferred up to Syria. I didn't even see him. And I came back to Egypt. Then I was there for about another month.

12:31 Then I went up to Cairo again and we caught the Flying Boat down to East Africa.

Can you tell us a bit more about your Cairo trip?

Well that was

13:00 a shocker when we first went there. We didn't know what it was. It was pretty dirty and such like. At that time the AIF and some of the air force were coming back from Greece. Greece had been taken by the Germans. One night in Cairo they went mad, the AIF, and

13:30 was firing off guns in the street. It was really wild. Not hurting anybody, just firing off guns and revolvers in the street. Of course we all dived for cover. Anyhow they quietened it down and everything

settled down again. But it was an eye opener getting into Cairo. And of course we all went along and had a look at the bad areas, the brothels and such like,

14:02 see what they were like. And I saw a lot of boys go bad there.

I'd like to know more about the brothels in Cairo.

The main brothel in Cairo

14:30 was Burkha Street. The Shepherd's Hotel was the best hotel in Cairo and that was right beside it. The medical corps always had a medical officer there in the brothels to dish out condoms and

15:02 some ointment or something. The girls were all lined up; there was hundreds of them. The whole street… I should say that Burkha Street would be from here down to the high school long, all full of brothels, the whole area, all the buildings up to three storeys high.

15:37 **How many did you visit?**

How many did I visit? That's giving a secret away now, isn't it? I don't know.

16:02 Let's say that there was lots of brothels there. But most of the boys said, "Well we may not last long. Let's go to the brothel."

Is that the way you felt?

That's the way most of us felt. Our doctor on 113 Squadron got

16:30 VD [venereal disease]. Yeah, he got gonorrhoea. He came back to the squadron with gonorrhoea. That was a joke.

How did the joke go?

We used to laugh about it. The doctor

17:00 getting VD. But I think I may have told you my brother was in the AIF, earlier than that he was a medical orderly in the brothel. They always had medical officers there in the brothels.

17:32 **And what would these medical officers do exactly?**

Well they would make sure the girls were clean or try to make them choose girls who were clean. But there was also an officers' and senior NCOs' [Non Commissioned Officers'] brothel in Cairo. It was Room Eternity Number Five – that was an officers' and senior NCOs' brothel.

18:00 **Did you ever get a chance to go up the…?**

No, I never went into that one. In Alexandria it was Sister Street. That was where all the big brothels were in Alexandria.

Which ones were better? Alexandria or Cairo?

I wouldn't know. I've never been into them.

18:30 **Which ones were the most popular?**

You wouldn't know. It all depends which city you were in.

Well in Cairo…

The Burkha was the main brothel there. Burkha Street. And the officers' and senior NCOs' was the Room Eternity Number Five.

Did you know any friends of your who contracted VD?

I knew one who contracted it in India.

19:00 He shot himself.

He killed himself?

He got syphilis and he was the son of a minister of religion. I won't tell you his name. He shot himself. But I was looking at the records

19:30 on the computer, I think it was 'killed in action' they've got down.

And that would have happened, I presume, a few times?

Well I should imagine it would have. But the same thing happened in the First World War.

20:00 My wife's uncle, we got his medical records last year, actually, and his medical records… But he survived.

Did he have syphilis?

No, he had gonorrhoea.

Was gonorrhoea a real serious problem amongst the Australian…?

Yes, it was pretty bad. It wasn't so bad in the brothels.

20:31 It was the street girls. The girls in the brothels, I understand, were checked out. They didn't have it. The street girls were the ones who had a lot of VD.

What were the Egyptian girls like in the brothels? Were they attractive?

Some of them were very attractive, yes.

21:04 **Can you describe to me the inner workings of a brothel, like its actual interior? What did it look like, generally speaking?**

Oh they were well kept because the British army kept a good check on them. I don't know anybody that ever

21:30 contracted VD in the brothels. But I know that they did outside the brothels. I think we better leave brothels alone. We might get too involved.

We do have an understanding. Brothels were a very important…

They were very important for the troops.

22:02 **Not just Australians, but all troops in the Middle East?**

All troops, yes. It was an important part. For the boys, well it might be the last one.

Was that going through your mind as well? That everyone thought they might die?

Yes, everyone thought they might die.

22:31 Well most of them did die. Not very many out of my course lived. I should say a dozen, I suppose, out of the course I was on. They all 'got the chop', as we used to say.

What other things could you do in Cairo?

There was lots to see in Cairo. It's

23:00 quite an interesting city. The pyramids, we used to go to the pyramids. I've been right inside the pyramids. Sometimes I've seen some of the boys climb the pyramids up to the top. That's not permitted now at all.

23:30 We'd been right through. The museum there is wonderful. Especially the Egyptian Museum. It's got all the old… Tutankhamen's body

24:01 was there and all the gold. It was wonderful when I went over last time, the year before, and it's very similar to what it was when I was there.

There's another question I want to ask you about the entertainment industry in Cairo.

24:33 **Did any of your mates, or do you know of any stories where Australia soldiers had actually formed relationships with some of the prostitutes?**

No, I don't think so. I knew one when I was in Ismailiyah. There was one RAF sergeant formed

25:00 a relation with a Greek girl. There were a lot of Greek people in Egypt. He formed a relation and eventually married her, I believe. But my navigator had a friend there. Her father and mother were English and they used to see each other. He was married, but he didn't have a serious relation with her.

25:34 So I don't know of anybody. It was different in England – entirely different there. They had a lot of relations in England.

What were you warned about when you were in

26:00 **Cairo and Alexandria?**

Watch out for VD.

So VD was the number one enemy?

Oh yeah, the number one enemy of the troops. It was supposed to be that if you got VD you would get the chop. There was a written law in the services that if

26:30 you got VD it was your own fault, and you could be up for court martial. They said it was a self-inflicted wound.

Did you by any chance see a wax museum in Cairo? Especially for VD?

Yes, I saw that. That was the Museum of Hygiene.

Could you tell us more about that please?

27:00 Well it showed you all the diseases you could get in Egypt. It had wax… Shown all the diseases and what they looked like and such like.

What were the main diseases to worry about?

Oh well there was lots. There was lots of diseases you could get there.

27:32 I'd seen a lot of elephantiasis there. That's the elephantiasis where the feet grow big. You probably know about it. I saw it only with the feet. I didn't see it anywhere else. And there was other diseases. But that was the main thing.

28:03 Probably VD was the main thing that we were worried about. There was also malaria. You could get malaria around parts of Egypt. Lake Edku was a bad area. I was based there for a while, and there was lots of malaria there. For me, I never ever had malaria and I'd been into some of the bad areas

28:31 of East Africa and lots of the places, and it never worried me. I don't know whether I'm immune to it or not. I've been to New Guinea and it never worried me. Yes, I've never had anything at all. And

29:00 we didn't get any tablets over there.

In the Middle East?

No, no tablets. Lake Edku that was a dry salt lake used for an aerodrome. That was one of the highest places in Egypt for malaria and it never affected me there.

29:30 **How did you find the culture shock of Egypt?**

The culture shock? Well it was really a shock. When you'd be going along the roadway and you'd seen an Egyptian pull his pants down and have a poo on the side of the road, or lift their penis out and have a pee.

30:01 It was a shock to see, coming from Australia. It was a bit of a shock. You got used to it.

That is a bit of a shock, isn't it? Seeing people urinate on the road…

Oh yes. But they'd pull their pants down and have a poo on the side of the road

30:33 in front of everybody. It was a bit of a shock. And the dress, you know, was pretty poor with some of them. Yes, it was a good experience; it was a wonderful experience. As I said, I've been back there twice since I was there.

31:13 **Do you want to tell us about that Empire Flying Boat of the Nile?**

Yes, an interesting flight. A posting came through for

31:30 about fifteen of us to go down to East Africa. And we packed up our bags and we went to Cairo and we went down to the Flying Boat place on the Nile and we took off. I think we landed at Wadi Halfa, then Khartoum. We stopped overnight at Khartoum. And sitting beside me

32:01 I had Sir Seymour Hicks. He was going to South Africa. He was the historian and author. He wrote quite a number of books. I had quite a good conversation with him on the way down. There was no night flying on the Flying Boat, it was all daylight flying. And from there we stopped at Khartoum.

32:31 We stopped overnight at Khartoum. Then we went down to Juba, I think that was the next landing on the water of the Nile. And from there we went down to Port Victoria – that's Uganda. That's the port on Lake Victoria. Then we flew from there

33:00 over to Kisumu, that's the port for Kenya on Lake Victoria. From there we caught a train up to Nakuru and we started some of our operational training there. But the Flying Boat was a beautiful trip going all along the Nile. We flew right along the Nile.

33:30 We were only flying at about three or four thousand feet, too, and you could see everything. Especially when you got near Lake Victoria the swamp area. I've seen it on television a number of times since. There's a big swamp area on the west hand side of the Nile.

34:00 **What was your destination?**

The destination of the Flying Boat was Kisumu that's the port on Lake Victoria for Kenya and then we

caught a train from there….Kisumu is right on the equator. And from there we caught a train. I think it took us two days. It was a very slow train to Nakuru – that's in the highlands

34:30 of Kenya. Seven thousand eight hundred feet I think it was. Very high. And we did our operational training there. One of them was a bit of an operation. We went up into Abyssinia.

How many stopovers did you have until you got to Nakuru on the Nile?

35:02 I think there was five stopovers altogether, but I can't recall the others. I think there was five. Two on this end and three on the other end.

35:34 It was a remarkable trip that. It was an amazing trip. The aircraft, when we left it at Port Kisumu, that went down to South Africa. It was a British overseas airline flight,

36:00 the same aircraft that used to operate into Australia. Australia used to take it through to Singapore, I think, and the British Overseas Airway Company pilots used to take through to Cairo. Corea Linus I think the name of the aircraft was. They were all named after stars.

It must have been an unforgettable trip.

It was. It was a remarkable trip. And we came

36:30 back the same way on the Flying Boat. Some of us did. I did. And a few of the others went by ship.

Can you describe to me what Nakuru looked like?

It was a very, very small place. It was mainly

37:00 rural. It was about seven thousand feet above sea level, right up in the highlands. It had a racecourse and one of our boys rode a race on the… He was a bit of jockey back in Australia. A chap by the name of Winchester. And they gave him a ride on one of the racehorses, but he didn't win, though.

37:30 Lake Nakuru, you often see it on television. It's a very salty lake and you see the hippos and such like and also the flamingos – it was full of flamingos. And a beautiful sight to see them. We used to do bombing raids on one side of the lake and sometimes you would hit a flamingo

38:00 as you were going through and it caused a bit of damage sometimes if it hit one of the motors or the windscreen. But Nakuru itself was only a small town. Mainly English settlers there. And my father had a cousin there, which was good. And I visited him.

38:30 He had a farm and we went out and spent a couple of days with him when we had a bit of leave. And there was another lady, she used to entertain us. Mrs Rhine. She eventually came to Australia and I believe she went to Brisbane, her and her husband, and she used to entertain the air force.

39:00 She had a soft spot for the air force. The settlers in Kenya were very good to us.

The British colonial settlers?

It was British colonials at that stage, yes. The wildlife was immense, even on the airport, which was an all-over field. No runways, an all-over field. We sometimes had to go out and

39:31 chase the deer off the aerodrome so you could take off. It's a beautiful place, Kenya. We used to do a lot of flying around the area.

40:00 We used to go up to Kilimanjaro and follow the coastline to Malindi, then back to Nakuru. Another trip we used to do was over to the Belgian Congo, across the lake, then back again across the lake to an area south of Lake Victoria,

40:30 then land at Kisumu, refuelling, and then back to Nakuru. Another one we used to do was from Nakuru up to Abyssinia. The Italians still had Abyssinia. We were warned to see if we could find anything up there, but we never saw any aeroplanes or anything. And then from there over to…

Tape 5

00:33 **Did you interact with any of the natives in Kenya?**

No, it was taboo, taboo. No, nothing at all. We weren't allowed to have any relations whatsoever with the natives. We all had a native batman each, but no women.

01:00 The batmen used to do our washing, clean our rooms, clean our shoes – nothing else. No relations…

So each soldier had a batman?

Yes. We used to pay him, but it didn't cost very much. It was shocking what we used to pay them.

01:30 We were only supposed to give them a certain amount of money, just what the going rate was. It was very low, very low.

How was that organised?

I think it must have been organised through the air force, through the mess, in the mess.

02:00 The meals in Kenya weren't bad compared to Egypt. Egypt was shocking, terrible. I went over eleven stone six and I came home to Australia two years nine months later and I was still eleven stone six. I didn't put on any weight or anything

02:30 and I was twenty three and a half when I came back. You normally put on a little bit from your youth.

What type of things did you eat in Cairo?

In Cairo? That was when we used to get a bit of extra food. A couple of us used to go into one of the cafes there and we used to have sometimes

03:00 fish and eggs. Fish and eggs – that's an unusual meal. And sometimes we used to have a bit of camel steak. No good steak, just a bit of camel steak. And very, very thin – about an eighth of an inch thick. And very tough.

03:30 The Australians used to have a canteen there, but that was pulled out by the time we got there. That was over in Palestine. The New Zealanders had one there and we used to go there and we used to get a very good meal there with the New Zealanders. Never saw any butter at all until we went to the New Zealand canteen. They looked after the troops pretty well.

04:04 On the squadron, all we used to get was no butter just a bit of margarine, but it was axle grease, the colour and everything. On a hot day it used to melt like oil.

And what did you eat in Kenya?

The meals there were

04:30 fairly good. We used to get steak and normal meals, actually. It was quite good there. It was in a rural area. When we wanted an extra good meal we used to go to the hotel of a night. And we could have a hotel meal there.

And why was it taboo to mix with the natives?

05:01 I don't know, but the same thing happened in New Guinea. They weren't allowed to mix with the natives up in New Guinea, the native women. When I was there you could see the tension building up in Kenya with the Mau Mau because they used to look at you with a glarey look. And we all said there was going to be

05:30 trouble there eventually, and sure enough there was. Straight after the war, or at the end of the war with the Mau Mau. They didn't like Europeans, the natives. Look how they murdered after the war. In the later part of '45 they started murdering all the Europeans.

06:00 **When you weren't allowed to mix with the natives in Kenya, was that an order that came down from the top?**

Probably it was, but we never did. There was very few women there in Kenya, and they were all married. As the saying goes, "Well are you married or do you live in Kenya?" They were all European women there,

06:32 farmers and such like. There wasn't any young women to mix with in Kenya. They were all married. As I say, the saying was, "Are you married or do you live in Kenya?" And they mixed it up between themselves. Just before we were there that murder… I just can't think

07:00 of that now. Forget about that. No, there was no young women there.

No brothels in Kenya?

No, no brothels in Kenya. Well none that I know of. But it was quite good there. Nice and cool. We were up about seven thousand feet or a little big higher, up in the highlands.

07:30 There's some pretty high mountains around Kenya. Mount Kenya is seventeen thousand feet. That wasn't very far away from us. That is snow covered all the time. Mount Kilimanjaro is covered all the time. There was a couple of other mountains there with snow cover.

Were natives used in any way for intelligence and so on?

In Kenya? Didn't know anything about it. Nothing

08:00 to my knowledge. It is a beautiful country. I didn't get to move around Kenya except flying. We only landed at Kisumu and I never did get to Nairobi. We used to fly

08:30 over those places. Mainly Kisumu and Nakuru. We were based in Nakuru all the time.

How long were you based in Kenya?

Two months. It was a wonderful experience. The wildlife and such like. I never did see any lions, but they were there if you went looking for them.

09:00 We used to see a lot of hippos and all those things and saw a few elephants and deer flamingos. Lake Nakuru has the largest flock of flamingos in the world. You often see it on television.

09:30 **Was the wildlife dangerous at all?**

Not to us, no. We never had any problems there. As I say, the only thing was they used to have to chase the deer off the aerodrome at times.

And you were flying Blenheims at this point?

Yes, Blenheims Four.

What squadron were you in at that time?

It wasn't a squadron. It was an operational training unit.

10:01 **And then you finished training and what happened then?**

We went down to Kisumu – we caught the Flying Boat again – and up to Egypt, and I joined 113 Squadron then.

How did you join that? Were you picked or selected?

They just told us we were going to 113. Before we finished our training we had to crew up. I crewed up with a

10:31 South African, Harold Wright. I've got his name now, couldn't think of it a while back. Harold Wright. He's from South Africa. He's still alive as far as I know. The navigator was Jack Curtis from Hobart. He died three years ago. I still contact his wife. He was headmaster at Latrobe High before he died.

11:00 He was our navigator, and a very good navigator too.

So how many on the squadron for 113?

It was a full squadron. It had twelve or fourteen aircraft. But it was a useless squadron. We didn't do much activity. Very poor. In fact when Jack Curtis was alive we used to discuss it.

11:30 We said it was a waste of time being there. We only did a few operations. Just a waste of time. The aircraft was U/S [unserviceable]. We could be on an operation one time and they'd say, "No, it's scrubbed now."

What type of operations were you doing?

Bombing. Of German

12:00 areas. It was a bit of a waste of time, we've often said that. Also we were at… Just near Tobruk… Bardia. We'd moved through and Bardia was still

12:30 under German control, it was surrounded by troops, and our squad was given the task of bombing it. But none of the junior crews got the chance. But all the senior officers got the chance to build up their operations. That really made us mad a lot of us, these junior crews. The senior officers used to do two

13:00 or three bombing trips a day and we were left out all the time. I didn't do one op [operation] on Bardia. It was a bit of a disaster as far as we were concerned. We often discuss it. Jack Curtis, he agrees. Well he brought it up. He said it was a waste of time half the time.

13:30 **Did that affect morale when the officers were flying off?**

Oh yes, it did because we weren't given the opportunity. We should have had the opportunity to go on these raids with hardly any risk. There wasn't any risk. They were just bombing. They were surrounded and they couldn't do anything about it. They were just bombing them. Some of the officers used to go two or three times a day. Just

14:00 drop bombs. We didn't do one raid on Bardia. I did a night raid, but that was a different matter.

Was the term 'lack of moral fibre' used at that point?

Yes, the term was used. It shouldn't have been ever used.

14:30 They don’t use it any more.

Did you know people who were accused of it?

No, not that I know. I think it was mostly in England. A couple of them on our squad, they objected that some of the aircraft were

15:00 unserviceable and they got into strife over that. They reckoned they shouldn’t be flying them. But a lot of the aircraft were unserviceable all the time. The aircraft were no good at all. Unserviceable. We brought a brand new aircraft back, well after being on the RSU, and we’d done one motor and the other one packed up as we were

15:30 coming in to land. That happened often. We crashed one on take off. Motor trouble. And blokes were having trouble all the time with the serviceability. The serviceability in the desert was bad because of the sand. It’s hard to realise how fine that sand is, particularly when the Khamsin winds blow. The Khamsin wind is that desert wind.

16:00 They’ve had it recently in Iraq. Remember recently when they were going to do that operation there? And the Khamsin wind came on and they had to cancel it? Well that’s the wind you get in the desert. It’s a very fine sand, very fine, and it gets into everything. You can fly above it and you can look down – it’s like a sort of a fog – and you can see the ground, but if you

16:30 go that way you can’t see a thing. You wouldn’t see fifty yards if you were flying into it. But looking down you can see the ground.

Did people die from that?

Well people… Not actually dying, but you put your handkerchief over your nose and mouth. Terrible wind.

17:00 **Lack of moral fibre. Was that a big term used generally in the air force?**

Not really, I don’t think. No, I don’t think so.

17:30 I think it happened in England. Well that VC [Victoria Cross] bloke, Hannah. I think he was a VC and he was accused of it. He wouldn’t fly any more. And he had a VC.

What did the people around you at the time think of that term?

Everybody thought it was awful.

18:00 It came out in the First World War. It’s not used any more. I think the only ones that use it are the RAF.

So it wasn’t as prevalent in the Australian…?

No, it wasn’t used in Australia.

Did you know English flyers who…?

No, I don’t know any. It happened in England quite a lot I believe,

18:30 but you can’t blame them really.

How’s that?

Well it’s like shellshock. Look what happened in the First World War with shellshock. They went crazy.

19:00 **So what were the advantages of using the Blenheims?**

Well in 1938 they were the front line aircraft of the British. They used them in Britain at the beginning of the Second World War and they got such a bashing. What they used to do in England,

19:32 the boys that volunteered to come out into the desert instead of flying in England, because they knew they only had a couple of weeks to do, what they used to do was take six aircraft out. They used to leave at a certain point and they were given an area two minutes flying along the Dutch coast for these flak ships and that,

20:03 Each of them used to do two minutes and then come home. But half of them never came home. The boys were telling me when they came out to the Middle East you could be a sergeant pilot and you could be the squadron commander in about a month if you lived that long. There was no future. They all used to volunteer to come to the Middle East.

20:30 Not all of them, but a lot of them did. This is what they told me. I met a few of them. They were just no good for the… They were out of date. They only cruised at a hundred and… You might get two hundred knots out of them, probably less.

21:00 **You said they used to try and come to the Middle East. Why was that?**

Because they didn’t want to get killed. They wanted to survive a bit longer.

What kind of resistance did you have to put up with? Was there firing from the ground or were there fighter planes?

There was both there was ack-ack [anti-aircraft fire] and

21:30 fighters.

Did you have any experience with those?

Oh yes. I think it was Derna. We did Derna over one day. There was six of us in the flight and we had an escort of Hurricanes,

22:03 3 Squadron – they were the original squadron in the Middle East – and we were attacked by two fighters. 3 Squadron shot one down. I saw them shoot him down off our tail. He didn't hit us, but the fighter hit one on the right-hand side. We were in a formation of six.

22:39 They were very, very good fighters the 109s.

And I guess you were firing away from your turret?

I was firing, but I got a jammed gun then and I couldn't do anything about it. But anyhow the fighter saved us.

23:00 I think it was Caldwell. I'm not sure of that one. It was either Caldwell or Bobby Gibbs that shot them off our tail.

And what's that like being in the middle of that fighting going on up in the air?

When it's happening,

23:33 it's funny, I don't think you're that scared. It's going in you're more scared. Everybody gets scared, I don't care who it is. They'll tell you that. Even the best of them. I've just been reading that book, The First World War there,

24:05 and they all said the same thing. Their life was only seventeen days in the First World War, which is not very long.

Does your training kick in when you're in the middle of that fighting?

In which way?

24:30 **Your training to defend yourselves and so on.**

Oh yes, you're always trying to defend yourself. But as I said you can't do much when the gun is jammed. And it's not only that, even fighters get their guns jammed and they have to break off. The problem in the Middle East, there was so much dust and sand. Everything used to lock up at times. Even motors,

25:00 they used to get trouble with the intakes of the motors, the intakes in the front for air to come in, and they used to lock up motors and they used to get motor failures. Even in the fighters. It's all dust. You've got no idea of the dust.

I guess the ground crew becomes even more important?

Yes, yes. They do their best, but they don't always succeed.

25:33 **How long were you flying those missions at that time in...?**

I was only on about six months, but I didn't do very many operations. As I say, I only had six. We were a waste of time there half the time.

So you're there, you flew a few missions, then where did you move on to?

When I had this problem with the ear and the nose I went on a course in Cairo called Flying Control. I did a course there and then various

27:01 postings around the place. I was in the Middle East hospital. ET [Ear and Throat] blokes saw me there. What was his name? Broadsman, I think. He couldn't do anything for me. I had things shoved up my nose and such like. They didn't know it was a mastoid at that stage because they didn't have the x-rays and such like in those days.

27:33 When I came back to Australia they played around again with my ear. Eventually a new doctor came to Hobart, a chap by the name of John Sherry, and I went to see him. He was a specialist from England.

28:01 He got me x-rays and he had me on an operating table within a week. He said, "You were very lucky." He said, "If the abscess had have gone in, you would have been dead in two hours."

And that formed in the time you were in the desert there?

Yeah. I was lucky. Sometimes

28:30 I used to get the pain and I used to roll around on the floor. And then it would burst, the eardrum would burst, and then it was all right. Blood used to come out of the ear and such like.

What would you do in your down time in Alexandria?

29:02 **You were based in Alexandria were you?**

Just near Alexandria on flying patrol there.

And what would you do in your down time?

You mean on leave? Sometimes we would go into Alexandria, but there was nothing much in Alexandria. We would have a look. There was an

29:30 aircrew home they had there. I think it was called Hurricane House. There was one in Cairo also, called Spitfire House I think it was. It was a place we could go and stay. But we never used to stay there very much. We used to stay in a hotel. We found it much better.

Did all these places seem very exotic to you?

Not after a while, because

30:00 being there two years and nine months, it didn't really. We knew our way around all these places.

What were the weather conditions like, besides the terrible dust and sand?

Well the rain used to come every year. You used to see little bits of cloud about November,

30:30 coming over the Mediterranean, and it would get thicker and thicker. And then about Christmas time it would pour down for about two days. It even stopped the war a couple of times in the desert. About Christmas time all the tanks and that were stopped. Then the clouds would gradually go back over the Med [Mediterranean] and become clear again.

31:04 An unusual thing happened when I was over there with the governor-general on that trip to El Alamein. This was in October and we had a heavy rain shower. There was water everywhere. Which was most unusual to have rain that time of year.

31:35 **Did you think something special was happening?**

Yeah, it was really heavy rain.

Can you tell us about Bardia and what happened there?

Over Bardia? Yeah we were detailed for a bombing raid. I don't know how many aircraft, whether we were the only one or not. I'm not sure now.

32:04 We made an approach into Bardia and we got caught in the master searchlight. The master searchlight was a big blue light, radar controlled, and it hooked onto you. And then when that hooked onto you all the other white ones hooked onto you. It was like daylight when you're

32:30 getting into a cone of lights. All the ack-ack used to come at you everything. They could shoot at you to try and bring you down. Ack-ack's a funny thing. If you see ack-ack coming towards you, you don't have to worry about it. It goes under. You pass over it. But if you see ack-ack in front of you, that's the one you've got to

33:00 worry about. Because it curves up like that, ack-ack, when it's coming towards you. That's the one you've got to worry about. Anyhow, fortunately we were in it for about two minutes or something and the pilot did some manoeuvring and got us out of there. We got into cloud and we

33:30 got home safely. We didn't get a scratch. We were very fortunate.

What goes through your mind when you see that ack-ack coming up at you?

Well it's frightening. You should see it. It's very frightening. Bursting all the way around you, underneath you. Like stars are shooting at you. It's all a sort of a tracer.

34:02 **Does it affect the plane at all?**

Well if it gets close to you, you get a bit of a rock, a bit of a shudder. As long as it doesn't hit you you're all right. Or parts of the fragments of the shell. There are two different types of ack-ack. There's heavy ack-ack – it goes up to about thirty thousand feet. And the low ack-ack is about eight to ten thousand feet.

34:31 If you're at ten thousand feet with low ack-ack you've got to worry about the heavy ack-ack then. But if you're down below six thousand feet they can get anything at you.

What would you usually fly at?

Well we were at about eight thousand over Bardia that night, and we dropped our bombs and got out of it. He manoeuvred and got into cloud

35:00 and that's what saved us. We would have been a goner otherwise. We couldn't have got out of it.

And when you're in the middle of all this do you think, "This is it. It's all over?"

Well I suppose you're a bit worried. You do get a bit worried about it. That blue

35:33 searchlight, the radar controlled searchlight. Other blokes have told me about it – in Europe they had the same trouble. My brother, they were caught in it and got out of it.

And how much was known about radar at this time?

Not very much at all. Also on the aircraft we used to have a little box. We called it

36:01 IFF Information Friend or Foe. And we used to switch that on when we were coming into our own area. There was a rumour at one stage there – switch it on and it will affect their radar control. But I didn't think that was the case.

So how did this operate?

It was a sort of transmitter.

36:31 It let the radar know on our side that we were friendly.

Did it work?

Well it worked on our side. They were carried in Europe, too, my brother was saying.

So how many times did you actually go through that ack-ack resistance on missions? Was this a once-only time?

37:01 It was the only time we ever got caught in the radar, the only time we ever got caught. Fighters, we got fighters onto us.

37:33 **So a lot of other crews experienced this as well?**

Oh yes, in the Middle East… Benghazi was a bad place for it, I believe. I didn't do anything thing in Benghazi. The heavy bombers used to do that – the Wellingtons used to do Benghazi. We were only medium bombers, night bombers. Our squadron comprised of

38:02 night bombers, fighter bombers… We had night fighters. One night there was an attack on the area and one of our crews went up with a fighter bomber and he found the JU88 [German bomber]. And it fired a burst at him

38:33 and the gunner from the JU88 fired back and hit his air speed indicator. The pedo [pedometer] head sticks out of an aircraft and gives you the speed through the air. Of course he had no speed indicator and he had to fly around and around until daylight to land.

39:00 He landed on his rev [revolution] counter.

Did you hear many stories like that of people making those landings?

That was the only one that I know of, that one. But there was always something happening. That's one that I can remember quite well. He flew around for hours, just flying around

39:30 because it would be very dangerous to land without any indication of speed. But in daylight you could more or less judge. And that's what he did.

You had all this ack-ack action, but it sounds like from what you said earlier that it was nothing compared to what was happening in Europe?

No, no. They used to get ack-ack….As soon as they hit

40:00 the French or Dutch coast they would probably get ack-ack all the way through. Not continuously, but different areas, they would get it. My brother was saying that.

Tape 6

00:32 **You were telling us before about the anti-aircraft fire you experienced and this was on your first proper bombing mission as well. Tell us about the actual scale of anti-aircraft fire?**

Well in the area of the Middle East the concentration of ack-ack fire was normally like the built-up

places.

01:00 Like Bardia, Benghazi, where the army was. It was pretty intense in those areas, but outside of those areas there was nothing. You could fly outside of the areas and there was no ack-ack at all. It just concentrated in certain areas.

Was it thick ack-ack? Heavy?

Oh it was quite heavy. Especially the medium

01:30 ack-ack. That went up to about eight or ten thousand feet. We never went up that high. The heavy ack-ack guns that went up to about thirty thousand feet…

Was that the eighty-eight millimetre?

The eighty-eight millimetre, that went up high.

Thirty thousand feet?

Yeah. But they never hit anything

02:00 up there much. Normally it was concentrated at a bit lower than that, about twenty-five thousand. But we didn't get any of that. They'd get it at Benghazi.

What sort of planes were you flying there?

Blenheims.

What were the deficiencies of the Blenheim bombers?

The deficiency was the maintenance.

Can you be more specific?

02:30 The maintenance? Well we had a lot of motor failures, mainly due to the maintenance of dust in the motors and the intakes and everything like that. You would go down and get a new aircraft from the RSU and you'd be coming home and you'd have a motor failure. That was happening all the time.

03:00 It was due to the dust. They weren't built for the Middle East. They were built for a colder climate like England.

Not very good for bombing either?

They weren't much good. We only carried four two hundred and fifty pounders. That's a thousand pound we carried, which is nothing these days.

03:33 We were on fighter Blenheims. We didn't carry any bombs on the fighter Blenheims, but I never did any fighter Blenheims.

How did you react to coming under heavy fire? Flak?

It's not very good, especially when you see it in front of you. When you see it in front of you, that's the dangerous area, but if it's coming at you you don't need to worry, it goes

04:00 underneath you. When ack-ack is coming at you it's like a curve coming at you. If you see it in front of you you know it could be dangerous. But if it's coming at you you're not worried too much because it goes underneath you and you're okay.

Would it explode near your plane?

Well it's always exploding. But not the medium

04:30 ack-ack, that's normally a Beaufort type of…about a two inch. That normally doesn't explode at you. That normally goes into your aircraft. They do have explosive shells too, but normally they were straight-out bullets.

05:05 **What were your targets on that mission?**

The targets was bombing barracks in Bardia, but intelligence told us we bombed the hospital. That was accidentally.

05:30 When you're bombing, you don't know where the bombs are going.

What was the altitude you were bombing at?

Eight thousand feet. That's a dangerous area for medium ack-ack.

What about enemy planes?

No. We didn't

06:00 see any night fighters or anything. I don't think there was any night fighters much in the Middle East. They had them in Europe, of course. Very severe over in Europe. But I never heard of any night fighters in the Middle East. Our squadron used to do a little bit of night fighting.

06:30 That was a fighter Blenheim. I was mentioning a while back about the pedo heads getting shot off and one of our aircraft went up at night and he flew around until daylight because he lost his air speed indicator.

So what would happen in you were doing a night bombing mission? I presume Bardia would have had searchlights?

As I say, we got caught in the master searchlight

07:01 in the radar. It was a blue light they used to put up. They had a radar, and once that locked onto you all the other little lights used to flick around and cone you.

And that happened to your aircraft? What happens when all this light comes up like that?

Well the pilot tries to manoeuvre and

07:30 dives and twists and such like. But we were fortunate. We got into cloud and got away from it. That's how we got out of it. Fortunately there was a bit of cloud that night.

08:00 **What was your reaction to bombing an Allied hospital?**

Well you don't do it intentionally. I'm only going from what the intelligence officer said what we did.

Was it a German hospital?

Yes. A German hospital. But that went on all the time. They used to do the same with us. I don't think they done it intentionally.

08:31 But when you're bombing at night-time you can't tell where the bombs are going to go. Not really. Some of the bombers in Europe, they were bombing twenty miles away from their target. They made it much clearer to the bomb aimers later because they had… Mosquitoes used

09:00 to go out and drop flares and it was more accurate later in the… We never had anything like that… Oh, yes we did. Not in ours. The navy used to go out and drop flares for the Wellingtons at Benghazi. They used to drop flares. But we never ever went to Benghazi.

09:30 **What sort of other missions did you do around there?**

As I say, I only did six altogether. We did one day and we came back with motor failure again – one motor.

10:02 We did Derna and we did a reconnaissance over the lines looking for German tanks and such like. A few things like that. But they were the main bombing ones

10:30 Bardia and Derna. That was the one where we got attacked by fighters at Derna.

You got attacked by enemy fighters? Tell us about that mission?

Well six aircraft went out on a daylight run into Derna. We bombed an airfield

11:00 that had bombers on it. JU88s I think they were. But a little further over the Germans had a fighter squadron. Little did they know we had a fighter escort – No. 3 Squadron Australia. And these German fighters attacked us. He got one burst in, but he got shot down by our fighters. I don't know what happened to the

11:30 other ones, whether he broke off or not. I know this one was shot down because I confirmed it for him. I saw it go into the water. We were over the sea at that time coming back.

How long did that dogfight go on for?

Not very long. Probably one or two minutes.

The Germans lost that one?

12:02 They lost an aircraft. I know one aircraft got shot down. I saw him go into the water. He didn't hit us, but he hit an aircraft on our right-hand side. He only got a couple of bullets into us.

12:37 **I'm also curious to know how operations were undertaken when you didn't have fighter escorts?**

When we were behind the German lines

13:00 we went out one day and we had to come back with one motor out. That was where they were fighter

bombers at that time. No escort on those. That was low level. All you could do is go along the roads and shoot up the convoys on the roads and come back. There were no fighter escorts on that. But normally on daylight operations when you're doing medium

13:30 level you had fighter escorts.

Did you ever spot any enemy vehicles on your reconnaissance missions?

Oh yes you used to see them on the ground. The line there was near Marsa Matruh. And you used to see

14:01 convoys and such like. You'd report them when you got back. They probably knew about them anyway. They could probably see them themselves. But nothing attacked us or anything like that. We were at eight thousand, I think, going along the lines. The front lines. Fortunately we didn't see any fighters or anything.

14:30 The navigator would log anything he saw. Or if I saw anything I would tell him and he used to log it.

Can you walk us through a very hard mission that you had to do in the Middle East?

Bardia, that was the hardest.

15:05 We were very lucky to get away with that.

You also mentioned before that when you did your training in Kenya that there were different Commonwealth crews there from different countries?

15:30 We had Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, English, and I think there was a Rhodesian. They were all the British Commonwealth nations. I didn't see anyone from Ceylon, though.

16:07 **How was the process of crewing up conducted?**

Well, what actually happened, after you finished your initial training you were going to the mess or the operation room and you used to go, "Will you crew up with me?" And so and so. And that's how it worked out.

16:31 They did the same thing in England, too. You weren't forced to fly with anybody. You crewed up with mutual agreement. That's how its crewed up. I was crewed up with a Tasmanian navigator and a South African pilot.

17:03 **How did you find the differences?**

They all spoke English, no problem. On 113 Squadron we had an unusual crowd there. We had an Israeli… Well it wasn't Israel in those days, it was Palestine. But he was a Jew. We had a Brazilian.

17:39 We had a… But when I went to the 14 Squadron I was crewed up with a… Harold Wright when I was on 113 Squadron, he went on fighters. He didn't want to

18:00 stop on bombers. So he asked the South African CO [Commanding Officer] to put him on fighters. So then we went to 14 Squadron, my navigator and myself, and we flew with an Argentinean, Lynn Francis. That wasn't his correct name, Francisco or something like that his name was, but we called him Francis.

18:30 He was a madman. He was really mad.

Why was that?

He was just crazy. He was mad. We were in a tent one day and a whole lot of us were drinking a beer or two. And he had a gramophone, one of those wind-up gramophones. It wasn't playing the right tune, he said, so he got out his revolver and went bang bang bang bang.

19:01 He blew it to pieces. Of course we all scattered. He was absolutely crazy. Anyway, later I believe… When Jack Curtis and myself left him… Jack went onto transport, I think, and I went onto air traffic control. And he got another crew and the last they saw of him he was shooting up

19:30 Monte Carlo. But he was absolutely crazy. Yes, he was shooting up Monte Carlo.

Did you know of any chaps who got white feathers?

I never seen anything like that. It was in the First World War they used to get them, didn't they? But I don't think there was any white feathers in the Second World War. I've never heard of it. In the First World War, yes, they used to get white feathers. But that was due to the fact that the bloke didn't sign up.

20:30 It was volunteer in the First World War, you know. You didn't have to go in the First World War. They had a plebiscite on that.

But it was quite insulting to send a white feather to somebody.

It was insulting, yes.

You didn't hear of any stories of chaps receiving white feathers through the mail?

No, no. I never heard of it, not in the Second World War.

21:06 **Can you tell us about JeraBub Fort?**

Yes, sure. JeraBub Fort it was south of Sidi Barrani, I think about one hundred and fifty miles south. It was a fort that was held by the Italians,

21:30 an old fort. And the Australian Army went in and took the fort without any casualties at all, I believe, not for the Australians in there. And that's where we went with 113 Squadron into there. There was also an oasis there, a beautiful oasis about three or four miles from the fort.

22:02 We were there. We had a couple of swims in the oasis. But JeraBub itself was a wild place. There was a big escarpment all the way around it. There was no vegetation much except around the oasis.

22:32 And the area where the airport was, there was a big escarpment. It went up to about four or five hundred feet, maybe less than that, and there was a sort of a basin. But when we went in there just after the army went in there

23:03 a lot of the Italians weren't even buried properly. You could see some of their boots sticking out. I've never seen so many flies in all my life.

The Italians were there before?

Yes, Fort JeraBub was an Italian fort.

23:32 **How long did you stay there for?**

We were there for about three weeks or so, but there was no operations carried out from there, though.

Were you attacked?

Oh yes. We lost most of our aircraft there at one stage. We were attacked by the ME110s. They attacked there and we lost most of our aircraft there.

24:00 We didn't lose any personnel. We had a flight squadron there and they shot one down. It was a… When we were at JeraBub they had listening posts all the way around. About twenty-five miles around all around this area. And what they used to do, I think they may have been long-range desert patrol blokes,

24:30 and they used to radio in if it looked like there was any attack coming. So they used to give us about five minutes' warning so we used to rush to the hills to get away from it. One was shot down and that was shot down by an American chap. He was with the RAF. Squadron Leader Wade, I think, was the American bloke that shot this 110 down.

25:04 And I did meet him later when I was in Misratah, but he eventually got killed.

How did you deal with the death of colleagues and people that you had known?

Oh well, you accept it I think.

25:37 Yeah, it was accepted. We lost one aircraft one day. But that went missing in the desert in the Sea of Sands. There's an area there they called the Sea of Sands. We sent out aircraft

26:00 looking for him, but we never ever found him. I was reading a book in the 1950s, an aviation book, and they found that aircraft in the 1950s. It was found by an oil exploration team after all those years.

26:30 The Sea Of Sands was just like a wave of mountains.

It must have been terrifying to be under air attack from the Germans?

Yes, the navigator and myself, if we went to a new aerodrome we always used to dig

27:00 a slit trench. We always did that. Just to take the two of us. We were very good friends and we used to look after each other. When we were at Blanning [?] 125 – that was behind the German lines, we dug a slit trench just

27:30 enough so that you could get down and a big piece of shrapnel of the bombs landed right in front of the slit trench. But we always used to dig a slit trench. He was a

28:00 very good friend of mine. We flew together so we ended up very good friends, and after the war ended we were still good friends. We used to visit each other. He was a headmaster up at Latrobe High – that's in Northern Tasmania. He died four years ago. I still contact his wife, ring her up every now and then and see how she is.

28:30 Yes, we had some very good laughs after the war. The different episodes what we used to do. He was a very good navigator. He was a well-educated man; he had a couple of degrees. He was a headmaster, he was a French

29:00 teacher, very well educated. Yes I was very sorry when he died. I used to go up there and stay with them.

29:30 Yeah, I left him when I had problems. He left the squadron too. Then he went onto transport aircraft. He eventually ended up in India. He never went on any more operations either, he was just on transport. In India

30:00 they used to ferry pilots backwards and forwards to different airports transferring materials. Then he came back to Australia and he went onto Flying Boats.

30:30 **How many times were you actually attacked and strafed by the Germans and the Italians?**

Always Germans. We got attacked at Marten Bakesh, we got attacked at JeraBub and we got attacked at

31:00 125 when we were behind the German lines. We only stayed there three days behind the German lines. We knew we were gone. It was the most dangerous areas to be in and they wiped our aircraft out on two occasions. We lost quite a number of aircraft

31:32 on the ground. This was happening all the time.

And on both occasions you were ambushed by the German air force when they strafed your airfields…

I don't quite get what you mean on that one.

At JeraBub you got strafed

32:02 **with your planes on the ground. You didn't have any early warning system?**

Yes, I told you we had a ring of listening posts.

What about radar?

No, there wasn't any radar. I don't think there was any radar in the Middle East except for the searchlights. We had no radar at all.

Did you have enough anti-aircraft defences?

32:31 We didn't have much at JeraBub and we didn't have very much at 125 either. We had fighter support at JeraBub and we had a fighter support at 125 and they both shot an aircraft down. We captured the two Germans out of the one aircraft and the gunner was killed out of the aircraft. And that's the one we

33:00 flew back to JeraBub and handed over to the army.

What was it like flying in the desert? What were the difficulties?

Really there was no navigation problems. It was straightforward really. No, I don't think

33:30 there was any difficulties there. You were more or less flying coastal. Most of the time you'd see the Med, except when we went down to JeraBub and we went to 125. Sandstorms were a problem.

34:02 We used to get these sandstorms when the Khamsin wind came in and it used to lift up the sand. Visibility went down to zero. Sand used to get into everything. Motors and radios and guns. It was just a fine sand. It used to ruin the motors. It used to ruin

34:30 the guns. The guns had to be cleaned. And when you wee flying above a Khamsin you could see down clear. But when you tried to land you couldn't see anything in front of you. It's like fog sometimes. You can see through a fog, but you can't see this way. You wouldn't see fifty yards through a Khamsin. They used to come

35:00 up quite frequently. The wind came up and sometimes they used to last three or four days, five days. If you remember just recently they had a problem in Iraq with the Khamsin wind. They had to give up some of the activities.

So the major problem was sand?

Sand, oh, sand everywhere.

35:30 **So what sort of countermeasures would you take to try and stop sand affecting your engines?**

You couldn't. It used to get in everywhere. The finest area? It would move in. We used to put things around our face. What do the Arabs say?

36:01 “If it blew for a week you could kill your friend,” or something. They had a saying, the Arabs.

Could you speak Arabic?

I could speak a little bit of it.

What sort of things did you know?

Just the basics, “Molesh,” it doesn’t matter.

36:30 I used it when I was over there just recently. You get to know it and it comes back to you sometimes. I can’t think of some of the other words now; it’s been sixty years. But I could speak a little bit of it one time. When we were in base camp like at

37:00 Ismailiyah we used to have some of the Arab boys who used to look after our barracks and that and we used to pick up a bit from them.

Do you remember any of their slang words?

No.

Were there any typical swear words that the Australians would pick up from the Arabs?

No, I don’t recall any of that.

37:49 “Igori,” run away. I just forget them now.

38:15 “Bint, shifty bint.”

What’s “bint?”

“Show me a girl.”

38:42 **Would you pick that up in Cairo?**

I picked it up yeah, or Ismailiyah mainly. That was the big air force pre-war station, Ismailiyah. That was a fairly big station. It had all barracks and everything.

39:02 It was the defence aerodrome for the [Suez] Canal area. It was the area where the Canal started from the Great Bitter Lake to Port Said.

39:35 **Can you tell us how you lived in the desert, generally speaking?**

I can tell you it was bloody awful, putting it mildly. Bloody awful. The food was no good. You were eating sand half the time. Sometimes we had an individual tent.

40:00 Sometimes there might have been a couple in a bigger tent. And had nothing to sleep on. All we had was the groundsheet and a couple of blankets. It the winter months it was cold. In the winter months I’ve seen water bags frozen solid overnight.

40:30 By eight o’clock in the morning it was warm. Poor conditions. And you used to get this very cold air. That was due to the…

41:06 You’d get the cold air of a night-time. That’s the winter months. I’m not talking about summer months. That’s about December, January. It was very cold in the desert.

Tape 7

00:31 **So what did you know of [Erwin] Rommel [German Field Marshal] while you were there?**

We thought he was a good general. He was a very good general. He was very lucky to escape the long range desert patrol. Have you heard about that? The long range desert patrol. Colonel Keys was in charge of them and his long range desert patrol used

01:00 to go behind the German lines and destroy aircraft and all that sort of business. And they went to his headquarters one night hoping to get him and he was at a dinner party somewhere else and they missed him. If he had have been there they would have captured him and brought him back.

And why did soldiers admire him?

Rommel?

01:30 He was a pretty fair general. He wouldn’t do anything out of the ordinary with the prisoners or anything like that. He was well respected by the opposition. He was, too.

Was he regarded as a great general even then?

02:00 Yes, he was regarded as a great general.

What other dealings did you have with the Germans themselves?

The only thing was those prisoners of war that we had. I guarded them one night when they were brought into the squadron. And

02:30 I had a long conversation with the captain of the aircraft – he spoke good English. I don't know where he came from; I can't recall after sixty odd years. The other navigator didn't speak English. They were unhurt. I had to guard them up to

03:00 about midnight then handed over to somebody, then I left and the next morning we took them through to JeraBub and handed them over. They didn't give us no trouble.

What did you talk to them about?

Oh everything. Where they came from. The captain, he was the only one that I could talk English to. He told me where they came from,

03:30 which is unusual for a prisoner of war. But they say when you get a prisoner of war like that, get into them straight away. Don't let them think too much because they will tighten up. And the best way to escape, too, is the first day if you can get away. That's what we were always told.

And these POWs [Prisoners of War] where did they come from?

04:01 They flew from Crete to bomb us at 125.

And were you surprised they spoke English?

No, I wasn't surprised. A lot of people spoke English in Europe. Practically everyone speaks English in there now. In those days they used to speak English.

04:30 And a lot of English people used to speak French or German and vice versa.

Were you impressed by them at all?

Oh, they were well dressed, as I showed you in the photograph. Polished boots, tie, beautiful pressed uniform, cap. And we were a scruffy lot. We were scruffy.

05:00 We used to get around any way in the desert. Anything we could put on, we would put on. I reckon we were the scruffiest lot of the lot.

How so?

We used to wear anything. I remember some of the boys in the squadron putting German caps on walking around until the CO clamped down on it.

05:31 **Was that because of the conditions?**

Yes, the conditions, I think due to the conditions. You never had a shower or bath or anything in the desert. You might have been able to have a little wash, but that's all. Nothing else. There was no water. We only had a water tank delivered to us. We were allowed a certain amount of water a day

06:00 in the desert. There was absolutely no water at all except on the water tanks that used to come in.

And how does that affect you generally? Did the place stink?

I suppose you stank like everybody else. There was no water for washing clothes or anything like that. Except when we went back to base we used to get a bit of water.

06:30 **So when you see these Germans, what are you thinking?**

Oh, they were doing a job the same as we were. Yes, they were doing the job. They were there because of their politicians and so were we.

But they seemed in much better condition than yourselves?

Oh yes, they were, because they came from Crete and

07:00 well, you know, Crete is a good environment. There is plenty of water. There is plenty of everything there in Crete. It's very, very clean.

Did you think when you met the Germans face to face that they were just human beings?

Yes, yes. I had a good conversation with the German. But it's hard to recall everything I said to them. Sixty years is a long while.

07:30 I found them quite nice, especially the one that I spoke to. He wasn't bombastic towards me or anything like that. I don't think he was bombastic to anybody else either. He was captured and he may have thought, "Well this is it. I'm right now. I will survive the war." Which he did, I suppose.

08:00 But I would have liked to have his name or remembered his name and such like because I've been to Germany, I should say a dozen times or more. When I go to Denmark we go down to Germany. It would have been nice to catch up with him again.

Did they seem frightened?

08:35 They didn't seem to be frightened. I suppose they were in shock. Shock. They had lost their crew member – he was killed – and the other two were okay. We would have been the same, I imagine. If you lost a crew member you would be in shock.

So the policy on POWs was to take POWs?

09:01 Yes, we used to hand them over to… We only ever captured those two, anyhow, from the squadron. I looked after the navigator and the… The navigator on our aircraft… I don't know who he was now. I know the pilot's name was Keely, but it wasn't

09:30 our own crew. And I had a forty-five revolver on him all the time in case he wanted to take over. Because that did happen, you know. An Australian crew took over an Italian Flying Boat during the war and flew it back to Malta.

When was that?

I've read about it. They were prisoners of war, they were.

10:01 The Australian crew took over the Flying Boat, and they captured their revolvers and such like and put a revolver to their heads and made them fly to Malta. They nearly got shot down by our own fighter pilots. That happened during the war. And that's what you've got to worry about. The Germans, well, they are…

10:33 As you know, they're a pretty bombastic sort of a nation. But they seemed to be okay to me.

Did they seem like the enemy when you had them there?

Well they were dressed as the enemy, yes. They were the enemy. They bombed us, but fortunately they got shot down.

11:01 **When they were in the camp area, did others feel very bad about them being there?**

Well the CO, he was a little bit against them. I won't say what he said, but it wasn't very nice. We were pleased they were okay.

11:30 It could have happened to us.

What type of thing did he say?

Well he said we should get rid of them. But we objected to it because it could have happened to us if we got captured. He was against them.

12:03 We thought they were all right.

And at this time you were still flying, then you stopped flying. Why was that?

No, I was flying after that again. I went back to… That's when we went back to Marten Bakesh and they broke up the squadron. And eventually that squadron went to

12:30 India and I went to 14 Squadron then. I did a couple of ops from there and then I got this bad ear, the mastoid.

What ops [operational flights] did you do in 14 Squadron?

I think we did… That's when we did Derna and I think we did a couple of reccos along the coast. Nothing much.

13:01 Nothing much was going on with the squadrons over there really.

Why was that?

Don't know, don't know. It was the aircraft, I think. The aircraft serviceability was shocking, very shocking.

And when you went was it more or less dangerous than

13:30 **where you had just been? When you went to 14 Squadron was it less dangerous?**

Oh yes, we were back in Egypt territory at Marten Bakesh. That was well behind the lines, seventy or

eight miles behind the lines there. We got bombed one night.

14:00 But nothing… We didn't get any damage. Sorry, we didn't get bombed there. It was 55 Squadron down the escarpment was bombed. They got an ammunition train there and it blew up. That was going off for days.

14:35 **How much damage was there from that?**

Well the whole train blew up. We didn't get touched. 55 Squadron down on the escarpment. They hit the train and blew it up and it was going off for days – ammunition and that. There was a train line that went

15:00 from Alexandria through to Sidi Barrani. But I don't think the train line is there now because I didn't see it last time I was over in Egypt. El Alamein was one of the stations and I didn't see any train line there. The last twice I've been over, I didn't see any.

What year were you in El Alamein?

15:30 That was in '42 I think. Yeah, '42.

And what were you doing there?

I was on flight control then. I used to look after the aircraft, any search and rescue, anything like that.

What was that period like?

That was all right. I was behind the lines and there was nothing much there.

16:02 Any search and rescue we used to carry out and things like that. There wasn't very much there. We were thirty or forty miles behind the lines.

Were you disappointed when you couldn't fly any more?

I'll tell you what, I was relieved.

16:30 I didn't care. I think we all said the same. In some ways it was, I suppose, it was a difficult period for me. It was a fairly difficult period. I had flown a little bit after that, but

17:00 on operations. I used to get terrible aches in my head and I used to get these things breaking out in my ear. And later on it got worse. And I used to roll around on the floor here sometimes.

That was a difficult period because of the pain?

17:32 Oh, it was difficult.

It was simply because of the pain? There wasn't any other circumstances?

Well I lost my hearing. I did eventually get some of it back and then it went again. It went completely then. I went to the RAF hospital in Cairo

18:01 and I went to see the ear specialist there and he put me off flying.

Was that a surprise to you when it happened?

Well it was up to a point. I wasn't much use with no hearing. I had this ear. This is not bad, this one. I have no hearing in that ear. I used to have sinus washouts. Have you seen sinus washouts?

18:31 A big needle they used to stick up your nose and it used to pump fluid out and all the pus and everything came out.

Why did you need that?

Because of the sinus infection. They couldn't clear up the infection in the desert. The trouble in the desert there was the dust. The dust in the desert. And it gets in your nose.

So what you had,

19:00 **was it common?**

There was a few blokes that lost their hearing and sinus, oh yes. I know another chap in Hobart, he was on a squadron and he had the same trouble. He was grounded with it. Well-known bloke, too, in Hobart. He's still alive.

19:30 He's 90-odd now. There was a lot of ear troubles and nose troubles over there. It's the dust.

And also the flying at altitude?

That's what started it off – flying in Kenya at high altitude. Nineteen thousand without oxygen or anything, it's unheard of. But they wouldn't do it now.

20:01 You used to go blue.

As an air traffic controller... How did you become that?

They sent me on a course in Cairo and I was lucky to get the course in Cairo. I did that and they put me on air traffic control. I was on

20:30 a few aerodromes and then gradually as the 8th Army went through. I went through behind them and I ended up in Tripoli in Libya. Then I came back as far as Misratah and that was where I was when I came back to Australia.

What was Tripoli like?

I didn't have very much to do with Tripoli. I've only been there a couple of times, stayed a couple of days

21:00 at different times. I think it's pretty good.

Compared to the other cities you saw?

Cairo's not bad. Alexandria is a pretty city. Alexandria is on the Med, of course, and the city itself is a strip city along the Med. It's a strip,

21:31 I should say about half a mile inland, is the city and then it's a native quarter and it's a very poor area after that. But along the foreshore it's very beautiful.

What war activity was happening in Tripoli?

They were preparing for the invasion of Sicily.

22:01 **And how were they doing that?**

All the aircraft were concentrating and transport and such like were organising their… Not only Tripoli. Tripoli was a big transit station. All the aircraft used to land there from Europe. They also went to India from there.

22:30 Well from Cairo to India and then over. It was a big station. Aircraft everywhere.

Who was in charge of the Tripoli operation, getting everything together?

I wouldn't have a clue on that. It was a bit operation into Sicily. Then I went down to Misratah and that

23:02 was about a hundred and thirty miles towards Cairo from Tripoli, towards Cairo again. I was there for quite a number of months.

What was that place like?

Nothing. Just the airport a sealed runway. The Germans must have sealed it. And I was in charge of the air traffic control there.

23:33 One day I was called into the office and I was told I was going on a mission, and that's when we had to open the aerodrome up for this secret missions for the Americans that came in one night. They came in under darkness. They had been escorting the convoys along the Mediterranean.

24:04 This night they came in about eight o'clock. I don't know where they came from – they didn't tell me. The next morning they went off again. I don't know where they went to. They came in under darkness because they didn't want any security. We also had a Beaufighter squadron there. That's when

24:30 one of the Australian crew was killed there. That was an RAF squadron and they crashed on takeoff. The navigator was killed outright and the pilot was burned. He was quite okay – I saw him. And they put him into hospital and he was dead two days later with shock.

25:00 **Did that happen often?**

You'd often get crashes. I remember once one of the crews was bringing new aircraft back to the squadron and he did a shoot up of the mess. And the mess had a pole in the centre. He hit the pole, hit his aileron – killed. Three crew were killed. Oh yes, there was always a lot of crashes.

25:34 **How many would there be on a typical day?**

It wouldn't be every day. No. Every now and again.

Were these more mechanical failures or pilot error?

It was pilot error, that one. He shouldn't have been flying that low. He hit this pole sticking up out of the tent. He was flying

26:00 that low he hit it with his aileron and it flipped over.

Just going back to the Americans. What dealings did you have with these special troops?

I didn't have much to do with them. The night that they came in I was on the end of the runway, and I set up the runway for them, the runway lighting and everything, and as

26:30 they were coming in I just gave them a green light to land from an Aldis lamp. No radio contact with them, just a green light. And as one approached I gave him the green light when I knew the other one was clear of the runway. That went on every time one made the approach. We had no radio contact because I don't think the

27:01 security warranted making radio contact. Anyhow, we didn't have any radio contact at the approach anyway. We had what they called a 'chance light'. At the end of the runway, about thirty forty feet to the side of the runway, and it had a beam on a touchdown point. And that's where they had to touch down.

27:30 And as they were making their approach one had landed and we could see he was clear, and the next one we'd give him a flick of the green light. If it wasn't clear we would give him the red light and he would go around again and come back again. I think there was twelve aircraft – it was a pretty busy night. But the next morning they disappeared. They took off and we never saw them again. That operation only lasted

28:00 three or four days. Then I went back to Misratah.

Did you know what they were up to?

No, at that stage I didn't. But I did find out later it was escorting shipping along the coast for the invasion through to Sicily.

Just the basics of being an air traffic controller, what was your role and what did you do for that job?

28:37 **Day to day, what was the actual job?**

Well, alerting anybody if there was a crash or an emergency. If an aircraft didn't turn up you used to send a signal away to say that aircraft… You see we used to get signals in to say to expect aircraft in.

29:00 If that aircraft didn't turn up we used to send a signal away and they'd put out a search somewhere. It wasn't for me to go searching for them, it was up to the operation side to do the search. I was only the aerodrome side. If there was any accidents I would alert the fire services.

What type of equipment did you have then?

29:30 We didn't have any radio. We had a phone to the fire services, that's all. What do you call the phones between two persons? Just a direct line to the fire service or something like that. A hotline.

Was it a satisfying job?

30:00 I rather enjoyed it, and I continued it in later life all the way through. All my life I was in air traffic control.

What did you enjoy so much about it?

I had a lot of contact with pilots. I had a lot of contact with a lot of people. It was an enjoyable job.

30:32 I was mixed up with flying all the time. Search and rescue and things like that, alerting search and rescue, alerting any crashes or anything. Sending people off to crashes and things like that. It can be

31:00 exciting at times, yes. When I was on civil operations I had one major crash at Hobart airport. 1956, I think it was, an aircraft took off one night and crashed.

31:30 **How long were you at Misratah for?**

I was there for a few months. I came home from there. I had to go to Tripoli to try and get a lift back to Cairo. I got a lift back with a Canadian aircraft that was going to India. It was only low-level; he wasn't high flying. Just scooting along the desert, so it didn't affect my hearing or anything.

What type of operations were you having there?

32:02 At Misratah? I had a South African Beaufort squadron there, they used to do sea reccos. And when I had a day off one of their pilots would take over for me. And when I was at this landing area, one of the South African pilots

32:30 had to take over from me to look after air traffic control.

So you got on well with the South African?

Yes, I got on pretty well with him. If I wanted a day off, one of their pilots would take over for me.

Could you compare the demeanours of the Germans you met and the South Africans you met?

33:05 I don’t know; it’s very difficult. I only met two Germans and they were the prisoners that we had. They didn’t give us any trouble as a prisoner of war. I will say about the South Africans they didn’t treat the natives too well.

33:31 The white South Africans, they had a couple of dark-skinned people and they used to give them a rough time. But that’s changed now.

Where did they get these dark people from?

South Africa.

34:03 They were part of their squadron, yeah. They used to do the dirty work.

And at the time, what did people from Australia think about that?

Well I was the only Australian there. I was the only Australian on the whole unit. It was a

34:30 fully South African squadron. I was in charge of the flying control and all the others were RAF blokes. I was the only Australian on the whole unit there.

And what other type of things would the South Africans do there?

They used to go on sea reccos with their Beauforts.

35:00 They didn’t do very much. They just did a few trips around the Med I think. I never seen any of them go missing; they all came back.

So these black South Africans, they were flying planes and so on?

No, they were only doing the dirty work.

So they brought them specifically to…

It looks like it, yeah. Apartheid was on then, you know. Apartheid, it only finished twenty years ago, didn’t it?

35:30 Or thirty years ago.

Can you describe some of the dirty work that they did?

They used to clean the latrines in the mess and things like that. Drivers, they would do driving, all that type of work. They never used to do any operation things. They seemed to be barred from that.

36:00 There were none flying.

Did you talk to them yourself?

Not very much. I was mainly in contact with the pilots, that’s where I was mostly mixed up with, the aircrews.

When you did talk to them, how did you find them? What type of people were they? The black South Africans.

I didn’t have very much to do with them. I had a lot

36:30 to do with the white South Africans. As I say, I was mixed up with their flying. I had quite a bit to do with them. As I said, if I wanted to go on a day’s leave I would ring them up and ask if they could send a pilot over. And they used to send one over and look after the control tower. We had a control tower there, by the way, too. Another interesting

37:00 thing there at the control tower we had an Alsatian dog that the Germans left behind. It used to guard the control tower. He used to look after us.

37:30 He wouldn’t let anybody in the building, except I had an LAC, a leading aircraftsman, with me all the time there, and he used to do any of the other jobs I wanted him to do. He actually found this dog and brought him back in. Anyhow this dog used to look after us.

38:00 **You’ve seen a lot of pilots in your time during the war. Who was the best?**

I couldn’t say.

Were some better trained than others?

I don’t know. They all had their individual jobs. I couldn’t say about pilots. In civil, I knew most of the

38:30 Australian pilots in civil aviation. But they’re all retired. Half of them are dead now.

How strong was the bond between yourself and the people you were in the war with? Your mateship?

Pretty good. I had some good friends. My navigator,

39:01 I used to see him after the war. Another friend of mine that I was with during the war, we used to see each other. He was in Sydney but I've lost contact with him some way. Another friend of mine, Byron Lewis in

39:30 Victoria, he ended up system director general of civil aviation. We contact each other. He was on the same course. My very good friend, he got killed – Tommy Wickstead. We were with him for quite a time. We were on the ship together and he was in the same cabin as me.

40:00 He got killed. And another good friend of mine, he got killed on his first or second operation. He was a pilot. He was from Queensland. He got killed around near Algiers. He disappeared over the Mediterranean.

What do you think forged this bond?

I don't know. I didn't know any of them before the war. I suppose we got on together. You click with different blokes.

Tape 8

00:42 Throughout your entire experience of the war, can you tell us if you ever encountered cowardice?

01:00 No, I don't recall that. If you had have been you would have been branded 'lack of moral fibre'.

Did you know of any guys who couldn't cope?

No, I don't. I know a couple of blokes who didn't want to fly their aircraft because they were unserviceable.

01:34 They were pilots.

What about heroism? You must have seen some pretty heroic things in your time? What is the most bravest thing you've seen? Courageous?

I can't recall any. I was never brave.

02:04 I don't think there were too many brave. Not like the First World War after reading those books. I suppose the fighter pilots were. I think fighter pilots were a breed of their own, actually. I think everybody

02:30 tried to do their job and get away with it – not being brave; just get away with it.

What was your view of the Germans?

Well I think they were good fighters and I respect them. I still respect them, actually. I didn't respect

03:00 their leaders. I'm not saying Rommel. I think he was a fairly good man. He was well respected by both sides. He was respected by the British. He was a good general. He wouldn't do anything unreasonable. He treated the prisoners of war well and everything. Going back to the political side, I haven't much time for them.

03:30 As I say, I've been in Germany eight or ten times now, maybe more. And I've been to Belsen, the camp, and I've seen what happened there. That's just outside Munich, the concentration camp there. I've seen where all

04:02 the incinerators and such like there and all the lines of graves. That was political, that. Not only political, some of the German Nazis weren't too good either. But I think the average German fighter seemed to be fairly normal.

04:32 I don't think there was anybody against the average German. It was against their leaders. And some of their SS [Schutzstaffel] troops and such like. But the only Germans I ever come in contact with was those two prisoners of war that we had, and I found them okay. They were quite nice and

05:00 we treated them well and they treated us with respect. I think they were all right. I can't complain. I've got a bit of German blood in me. We've always got something else in us. Mother had a

05:30 slightly German ancestry.

Do you remember the major battles of the campaign? Did you have a role in that?

I don't remember

06:00 the first push into Egypt. I don't remember that at all, but I remember the second push.

Well tell us about that experience?

The second push, we went up as far as near Tobruk but we got pushed back again. But we didn't do much flying. It was a waste of time for us half the time with

06:30 the aircrew there. We had no aircraft half the time, or unserviceable aircraft. It was pretty poor. I've discussed this with my old navigator and he said it was a waste of time for us over there in the desert. That's in the early part. I'm not saying in the later part because I wasn't flying in the later part.

07:00 And we had no aircraft, unserviceable aircraft, sand used to get into the motors. Very fine sand used to get into the motors and you'd have motor failures. Sand, sand, sand. Especially when the Khamsins wind start blowing.

07:30 It's a very fine sand; it gets into everything. We used to wear a handkerchief around our nose just to keep the sand out. And it used to get into everywhere. Even the most minute crack it would get into. It used to ruin the guns, especially the machine guns. It wasn't so bad with ordinary rifles, but machine guns it used

08:00 to get into the workings and it was pretty poor.

Were you in the battle of El Alamein?

I was involved, but I wasn't in the battle.

How were you involved?

I was on air traffic control

08:30 and we used to look after aircraft. That's there anyhow.

Tell us about the air traffic control problems you encountered during the battle?

Well there wasn't very much involved. The squadrons used to look after a lot of the stuff. We were only called on if there was any search and rescue or anything like that.

09:00 On occasion an aircraft crashed and we used to send out fire service and things like that. I was about thirty or forty miles behind the lines at the battle of El Alamein. But we used to see the aircraft going. You might see fifty to a hundred aircraft going in one flight up into the battle.

09:30 Mostly fighter bombers, single engine aircraft. Hurricanes and Kitty Hawks and Spitfires. They were quite common in the battle of El Alamein, with rockets and cannons. But as the battle moved further… When they knocked them out at the battle of El Alamein,

10:01 when the British and the Australians and New Zealanders broke through they were moving two hundred miles a day. They were moving that fast. The Germans had no fuel for their aircraft; they had nothing. They had no ammunition, their tanks were out of fuel, they couldn't do anything. They were

10:30 just rushing backwards towards Tripoli. Two hundred miles a day they were going. That's fast.

Did you ever do any flights from Tripoli later?

No, I was on air traffic control.

What about the invasion of Sicily?

11:00 **What were you doing at that stage?**

The invasion of Sicily I was at Misratah and I was sent down to open a landing area about twenty-five, thirty miles away from Misratah. I was sent down to open this field up. And I didn't know what was happening. It was more or less a secret operation.

11:32 One night I was told there was going to be a flight of aircraft come in and this flight was American Lightnings, twelve of them. They told me there was aircraft coming, but they didn't tell me what type of aircraft. And no radio contact. And what they were doing, I found out later, they were escorting the shipping

12:00 from the Egyptian side for the invasion of Sicily. The next day they disappeared and I don't know where they went to then. They went to another airport along the line. We also had a squadron of British Beaufighters there. They came in

12:30 all hours of the day and night.

What did you find the difference was between Lae and Cairo?

Lae? Cairo was a dry area and Lae in New Guinea was a moist.…

13:02 It was still hot, but it was very moist and humid area. We always used to be perspiring, but in the desert it was a dry heat.

So what were the problems you encountered with aircraft at Lae in New Guinea?

13:30 We were very busy at Lae. I had up to five hundred movements a day there at Lae. We had an Australian squadron there – 33 or 34 – and we used to get a lot of American C47s. That was a big twin engine type of aircraft. They used to come down from Finschhafen to train there.

14:00 They trained at the airport. And we used to get up to five hundred movements a day there and I was the only one on control most of the time. All daylight operations, by the way, unless there was anything special. And they used to let us know there were aircraft coming in. Fortunately at Lae we had the one main strip

14:30 and the strip on each side. We could land them. When they were doing training the Americans, we used to have one on the end of the runway, one on the middle of the runway, and one just touching down. This was going on all day, all day. We had radio contact with them all the time. It was a very busy airport.

15:00 There was a night one night we were expecting this Anson in from Wewak, and it was the generals on board, and the pilot made a miscalculation on landing and he landed in the sea with all the Australian generals on board. One of the generals had a torch.

15:30 I put the alert out when it didn't land. I put the alert out. And this general had a torch and he flashed SOS [Save Our Souls]. And an American landing barge was coming across the bay in the mouth of the Markham River and they saw this, and they changed direction and picked the whole lot of them up and the generals were saved. There were three or four generals on board.

16:01 This pilot, I won't say his name because it's a bit dicey, he hadn't flown night operations for two years and they let him fly all the generals into Lae. He didn't make Lae. He landed in the water.

16:30 I was due to come home to Australia under the scheme of five years' service and you can come home and get discharged. I had a job organised in civil aviation. I was held up there because of the enquiry. I was cleared, anyhow, of the enquiry and I came home.

There was an enquiry into that?

Oh yes.

17:00 They would have lost all Australian generals. They were coming from Wewak to have a conference with Blamey. He was in Lae and that was the main headquarters. I was lucky I got cleared.

What did you think of General Blamey?

I had nothing to do with him.

17:30 I don't know anything about him.

Who was the Australian commander for the air force? Overall command of the air force? Who was the air commodore?

I don't know, couldn't remember, didn't know.

18:02 **What was your view of the Japanese? When you went to Lae you would have found out a lot of things about them?**

Well, as you know, at Lae there was a hospital there – an underground hospital. They opened it up, I understand. When they took Lae they sent someone in there and he never came out. So they

18:30 locked the entrance up and I think it stopped locked. All the bodies are still in there, I think, if I can remember rightly, in the hospital underground. There's a little hill there in Lae. That's where the hospital was – the underground hospital in there. But I didn't have much time for the Japanese.

So an Australian guy went in there and never came back?

One of the officers went in there to see them for the surrender and he didn't come out again.

19:00 And then they blocked the whole up. The Australian Army blocked it up, I believe. I believe it's still there. I think they have been in there, but I don't know what happened. That's near the strip at Lae. But they don't use that strip now, I believe. They use Nadzab.

What sort of stories did you hear about the Japanese in New Guinea?

19:30 Well nothing very much, but it all came out later about Burma. All that came out. They were a pretty awful crowd. I remember one time there just before the Japanese gave in, the air force

20:00 brought some of their comfort girls into Lae. I saw them. They caught them on Bougainville I think. I

don’t know what happened to them, but I remember them getting out of an aircraft. They had these comfort girls. I don’t think much of the Japanese and yet one of my grand-daughters is married to a half Japanese now.

20:30 An English mother and Japanese father.

How do you feel about the Japanese now?

Oh, we tolerate them.

You’re not too happy about it?

I think they treated our blokes pretty grim. I don’t think a lot of people will tolerate them much.

21:02 **Have you forgiven the Japanese for what they did?**

I suppose over a length of time you’ve got to forgive them a little bit. I had nothing to do with the Japanese. I didn’t fight against them. I had nothing to do with them. I was up in New Guinea in ’45 and there was no Japanese

21:30 in New Guinea. There was a few Japanese over in Bougainville still alive, and some over in New Britain – they used to bomb them. But I had nothing to do with them.

Can you tell us about the Italians and how you saw them?

22:00 I never had much to do with the Italians either. The only thing that I had with the Italians, when we went up to Libya there was a lot of Italian settlers there, of course, in Libya. They were growing wine grapes along the Mediterranean. They were civilians. But I never met any Italian prisoners.

22:30 Never. They took a secondary role in the Middle East after the Germans went there. We never used to see any Italian fighters either. They took a secondary role. The Germans took over.

Why do you think that happened?

I don’t think the Italians wanted to fight.

23:04 In that second push they captured five hundred thousand Italians there at one time – they just gave up. They didn’t want to fight, the Italians. And yet they did fight pretty well at El Alamein, I believe. But after they knew they were going to be beaten they just gave up and they took all the prisoners. There was a big prisoner of war camp at

23:30 Kasfareet on the Canal area. And they were all happy. You used to hear them singing every morning. They were very good singers.

What were you doing when the war ended? The day the war ended?

The day the war ended I was in New Guinea waiting for

24:00 the inquiry to happen. The night the war ended there was big celebrations at Lae. People were firing Verey pistols and cartridges across the aerodrome. It was a real celebration. Flying stopped. There was still a little bit of flying went on in latter days because of the transports

24:32 back and forth to Australia, but there was very little flying went on after that. Everything was quiet. But the night the war was finished there was big celebrations. Everybody got onto the grog if they could. If they had any.

25:01 **What about yourself?**

I was anxious to get back to Australia because I was being discharged under that five year plan, and I knew I had a job to come to because I was organised to go into civil aviation. I had something like four months’ leave up my sleeve I took that and

25:30 then I joined civil aviation in 1946 on the 26th of February. I went straight into civil aviation as an air traffic controller. I was fully trained. I was very fortunate. I had the training in civil aviation. And at that time there was only about eight of us in Australia

26:00 as civilian air traffic controllers, and I was one of the ground boys that went in. After my leave I was based at Essendon. That was the main airport in those days. I was based there for nearly two years and then I went down to Launceston. I was there as operation

26:30 controller there, tower controller. We did everything there. And then we took over from the air force there and then they wanted to open Hobart up. So I came down here for six weeks and then we liked it down here. I could have gone back to Melbourne, but I had a young family then. So we decided we would stay here as long as we could, and I’m still here.

27:06 I was a controller out at Cambridge Airport in that day. Cambridge was the main airport. And then in 1956 we moved over to Lanhoon [?] the new airport. And I ended up chief air traffic controller at Hobart Airport and before I retired I was Airport Director at Hobart Airport.

27:35 **That's quite an impressive career.**

I've had a good career.

And this was all created by the war?

Yes. If there hadn't been the war I would have been left in Bundaberg without anything. Without anything.

28:00 If I went back to Bundaberg there wouldn't have been anything there, just the sugar industry. There's no future in the sugar industry. They've found that now. They're subsidising everything now. I got out of it as best I could.

28:34 I started off without much education. I left school at fourteen. I studied I got through my aircrew training. After the war I did a promotion course for the Commonwealth, which was equal to the First Class

29:00 Air Navigation Course. Of course that's not used now either. And then I did another course in Melbourne – an international course. That was when the chap from Ceylon was there. And that was a Diploma of Navigation.

That's quite an amazing career from the war…

I would have had nothing otherwise. And there's a few of us like that.

29:39 **Did you find that it was difficult for you to adjust to post-war life?**

I used to get a little bit depressed. And sometimes I used to have dreams that I was a prisoner of war, things like that.

30:00 But that's disappeared completely now, completely disappeared. I don't even think of it now. Not that much, I suppose. Not like some of them. Some of them went to the pack completely after the war. They really went to the pack.

30:30 They couldn't adjust after the war. Even some of the pilots couldn't adjust after the war. They went to the pack. They ended up with nothing. But I had a young family and I was determined I was going to do something. I wanted my children to have a good education. They've all had tertiary education.

31:02 And I was determined.

You said some of your friends had gone to the pack?

I didn't say my friends, but I heard of some of them had gone to the pack. What I meant by that is that they ended up with nothing after the war. They just didn't adjust to the conditions after the war.

31:36 **Are your strongest memories your wartime memories?**

Yeah, I've got a pretty good memory. I haven't lost it as yet. As you probably know, I've still got a pretty good memory.

32:00 **Since you say that, can you tell us what you did on leave in Alexandria?**

On leave in Alexandria I used to visit the museums and go to a movie show or something like that. Nothing else.

So you went back to the Middle East…

I went back to the Middle East and I had an enjoyable time while I was there. I

33:00 went into Cairo and it was remarkable. I met a taxi driver there and I hired him for all the time I was there. It didn't cost me very much and he took me around to all the old spots that I used to visit. Then I went to Alexandria and had a look there. I went up to

33:30 to El Alamein had a look at El Alamein, then I came back to Cairo and I made arrangements for him to pick me up there again, and he drove me around for a couple more days and it didn't cost me very much. He was a taxi driver and he had an old Russian car that wasn't too good, but he had a degree in economics and he told me that he

34:00 couldn't live on one wage so he had to do taxi driving. He worked for the government and he did the taxi driving in his spare time. He spoke fairly good English. I went up by train to Alexandria. He bought my ticket and I gave him the money, of course. It was a beautiful train –

34:31 aircraft seats, a television in front of me, they brought a beautiful meal to me. I was in first class, but it didn't cost me very much. On the way back I came back by bus. I wanted to try a bus trip. And I had a beautiful little girl beside me. She had a degree in something. She spoke good English and I was talking to her

35:00 and she was telling me that for anybody in Egypt now they must have the English language or they can't get a good job.

That's quite sad, isn't it?

Yes. She said they can't get a good job unless they've got the English language now. And that's the same thing right throughout Europe.

35:35 You've got to have an English language. I didn't think it would happen in Egypt, but that's what they told me.

Did you make any links with people in Egypt during the war?

Not really.

What do you mean not really?

A friend of mine used to visit some person,

36:00 an elderly woman in Cairo. I think she was French. But she was an elderly woman, and we used to go and see her every now and then, this friend of mine and myself, and she used to give us a cup of tea and such like, but that was all. No, I didn't make any real contacts in Egypt. But

36:30 Cairo has changed. When I knew Cairo the pyramids were about five or six miles from the outer city. Now the city goes right up to the pyramids, within half a mile. It's changed.

37:00 And I got to know the ambassador there when I was there and also the first secretary, and I asked the first secretary, King his name is, I asked him, "How many people in Cairo now?" He said, "They really don't know, but it's in excess of twenty million." You've got no idea

37:31 how it's changed. They've got underpasses and overpasses in the main city. And the traffic! We came back by bus from Alexandria to Cairo. We were going to have a reception at the ambassador's residence this night. We got caught up in

38:00 the traffic jam and I don't think we moved any more than a quarter of a mile in an hour in the traffic jam. And not only one lane, there should be four lanes, but there was about ten lanes jammed right up together. It's terrific the traffic jams in Cairo now. Alexandria is not bad at all.

38:30 That's much the same in the main area. Along the foreshore it's much the same.

Did you ever go back to Papua New Guinea?

No, I don't want to go back there.

Why is that?

I just don't want to go back. I don't think there is anything up there for me.

You wouldn't want to go back to see the jungle in Lae?

No, I don't want to go back there.

39:00 My brother-in-law, he was the ambassador for… he was with Shell Company, Shell Oil, and he was the ambassador for the Netherlands when he was up there. He said the security up there, you had to have wild dogs in the backyard so if any people break in and things like that now. It's terrible.

39:32 **It's too dangerous?**

It's dangerous. Dangerous. I've had two trips to Cairo. I was there eighteen months ago with the trip with the [Department of] Veterans' Affairs that was organised. I represented the air force

40:00 I don't know why. I can't understand why. There are more blokes qualified, more well qualified than me.

Is there anything you would like to tell us that you haven't told us

40:30 **for the historical record? Anything of your wartime experiences that you would like to say as last words?**

No. I would like to thank Veterans' Affairs for this opportunity, for selecting me to do this. I thought there would be more qualified people than me to be selected. Also, my trip to Egypt,

41:00 I thought there was more qualified people to go. But anyhow, I was selected and that's it, I suppose. I almost refused to go to Egypt. But then my wife and family said, "You should go. You were selected." The governor-general, when I met him he said, "I know all about you." So they

41:30 must have looked into my records. I don't know why.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS