

Australians at War Film Archive

Thomas Canning (Eric) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:30 **Can I get you to give us an introduction of your life starting from where you were born?**

I was born in Finley in New South Wales in November 1918 where my father was a farmer and we moved. I think distant fields always

01:00 looked greener to my father and we moved to Booborowie in South Australia where he took up farming again and somehow he seemed to have gone broke on that. I think we must of moved from Booborowie to Berry on the Murray [River] about 1924, dates meant nothing to me at the age of four or five.

01:30 He worked on an experimental farm and then moved to New South Wales to a place called Erigolia near Rankins Springs where he became a share farmer. We had some years of drought, which took us into the Depression, and then he moved closer to and onto the irrigation area

02:00 at Griffith where things didn't get any better. In 1936 after some years of Depression, we moved to Queenstown in Tasmania. Where I worked in the mines until 1939 when I joined the air force.

02:30 I was held on reserved until about the middle of the year and I was called up on the 6th November 1939. I did a wireless operators course and when I had completed that course I joined 3rd Squadron, which was going overseas to the Middle East, and we left Sydney on the 15th July 1940.

03:00 As an army co-operation squad where the training was straight out of 1918 as a wireless op [operator] There were seventy-nine wireless operators out of a squadron strength of two hundred and ninety, roughly about a quarter were wireless operators.

03:30 As I said, the training was straight out of 1918 and we were suppose to man the communications with the army flying over the trenches and spotting for the guns, all which proved inapplicable and then to desert warfare and 3rd Squadron turned into a single-seater fighter squadron and we remained a fighter squadron

04:00 throughout the war, and we stayed overseas until the end of the war. We started off in Egypt and finished up in northeast Italy in 1945. There was a surplus of wireless operators and they split the compliment of

04:30 wireless ops from 3rd Squadron into the other two army co-op squadrons that were in the Middle East at the time, the 6th Squadron in Palestine and 208th Squadron in Egypt. I was part of the contingent that went to Palestine and we didn't get down into the desert until the fall of Bardia, which was

05:00 early January 1940. From there on we relieved 208th Squadron and after the desert campaign was virtually completed I found myself up at a place called Ajdabiya in from the Gulf of Sidra from February

05:30 until Rommel made his push on the 1st April 1941 when we retreated from Ajdabiya on the day that Rommel moved northwards forty miles away. We moved out of Ajdabiya the day that he moved in and went out

06:00 through Antalāt and camped over night at Antalāt and the following day we went to Masus [Zawiyat Masus] and we left Masus and we could see the dust of Rommel's advances armoured sections. Through to the escarpment east of

06:30 Benghazi through to Barce, then it was decided that we'd take an advance right back to Barce and do some aerial reconnaissance and nobody knew where the German forces were.

07:00 **Can you tell us briefly in the post war era what you did?**

07:30 I left the air force in early 1946 and did an adult matriculation

- 08:00 at the Melbourne University and did dentistry and after the completion of my dental course I came to Hobart and practiced dentistry until I retired in 1980 or there about's.
- 08:30 **What we are going to do now is move back in time towards your pre war era of life from 1918 onwards to 1939. Can you please give us or tell us about your parents in a bit more detail,**
- 09:00 **your mother and father and their background?**
- My father was a farmer and ultimately through all those post war years, which were not easy, ones on the land, bear in mind that's now seventy odd years ago and things were very different. The Depression occurred
- 09:30 and one lived in an atmosphere of dignified poverty it would be described as a situation that few would realise the severity of which they were hard years for a large part of the
- 10:00 Australian population. After my father had failed to succeed on the land we went to Tasmania where he took a job with the forestry department and became the forestry officer up the Gordon River. The forestry established a house twenty odd miles up the Gordon River where my father supervised the
- 10:30 harvesting of Huon pine, there were several families, the piners and the Huon piners up the Gordon River. All of whom joined the army and most whom were taken prisoner in South East Asia and Singapore or thereabouts
- 11:00 and they never came back to harvesting Huon on the Gordon. They removed the house they built up the Gordon and my father ultimately finished up in Queenstown. I worked in the West Lyall open cut as a miner and I was studying at the time
- 11:30 from 1937 until 1939 when I joined the air force. From then on I never went back to work at Queenstown.
- As I mentioned initially,
- 12:00 having been an airmen all my adult life, spent all my adult life with warfare I had seen enough of warfare to not to wish to continue it.
- Can you tell us about your religious upbringing education?**
- 12:30 I don't suppose I had a very arduous religious upbringing I was brought up as a Methodist more or less. I described myself today as a, by no means a religious zealot.
- 13:00 **Can you tell us how important religion was for you at that time during the Depression years?**
- I don't think it had a great influence in my life.
- 13:30 My parents were a bit more religious than I was.
- I understand that you had siblings, could you tell us about them?**
- 14:00 I have a twin sister who is still living and is living in Canberra. My youngest brother was born in 1927 and he died of a heart attack some years ago and my second eldest brother he joined the army up the day that war began
- 14:30 and he died only a few months ago here in Tasmania. So we have died in reverse chronological order. My sister is still in reasonable health and I'm in reasonable health and we are both aged eighty-five
- 15:00 at the moment. Less life ahead of us that we have put behind us.
- The impact of the First World War, can you tell us what you knew about the First World War when you were a young lad?**
- Many of my uncles had joined the 1st AIF [Australian Imperial Force],
- 15:30 some of whom were killed in action, and I have always held them in considerable reverence. My name sake, my uncle Eric was a Light Horseman and wounded at Beersheba, ultimately killed playing polo in Adelaide,
- 16:00 and that must have been in the late 1920s. My mother's brothers two of who incidentally fought in the Boer War and went to South Africa and took up farming in the Transvaal and finished up dying there.
- 16:30 One of my father's brothers was killed in action in France and two other brothers went to New Zealand, both are now dead of course, so that pretty much accounts for my
- 17:00 uncles. My father was medically unfit he had very serious surgery and was fortunately rejected for the army. So I held my uncles in considerable regard.

17:30 **The uncles that did survive did they talk to you or tell you about the war?**

No, about as much as I have spoken to my nephews.

18:00 For many years it wasn't until the year of remembrance 1985, fifty years onwards that one started to recall these events. One's war experiences, one was encouraged to reproduce them, and otherwise most of us have

18:30 forgot about them, put them in the back of our memory. Many of my close friends I never even knew what part they played and many of them served in the army and air force and we never ever discussed it until the year of remembrance and we were encouraged to

19:00 recall these events, or our war experiences.

You found that the previous generation, the First World War generation were identical in that regard?

Yes. It's pretty pointless talking of war experiences to others and one's peers

19:30 who have a better understanding of what one is talking about. It's pretty pointless talking to people who have no concept of warfare,

20:00 about one's experiences in wars.

Weren't you curious, you must have been curious as a young chap about their own experiences in the First World War?

Yes, one used to pick up snippets here and there when one's uncles were talking amongst their peers.

20:30 Of course these were fairly tremendous days internationally, the rise of Adolf Hitler during the 1930s was commonly featured in the press and one could see war coming,

21:00 one automatically assumed that one would be part of it, during one's late teenager years, so it turned out that we were.

Under this cloud of war developing during the 1930s can you please tell us how the Depression impacted on you and your family?

21:30 I recall it was a period of considerable poverty and all of one's associates seemed to be poor. There is a big difference in the economic situation in Australia in the

22:00 1930s to which that pertained after 1945 when we had full employment and ever increasing national prosperity. All that happened in the 1930s was never ending poverty and seemingly no great hope for the future. I can't put it any more explicitly than that.

22:30 **Under those circumstances how would families entertain themselves?**

To the view point of entertainment we had

23:00 gone through the transition from the magic lantern to television, man on the moon and all sort of advances that one couldn't envisage them ever happening.

23:30 One became more self-sufficient in one's conduct and amusements. One of my firmest recollections was the freedom one enjoyed as a boy in the outback of New South Wales where one hunted, shot and

24:00 carried on with reckless abandon. I was horrified to see the other day where some school child took a live round of ammunition to school and his parents were ostracised, or his father was for permitting this heinous deed. We used to take a rifle to school and shoot rabbits on the way and no one thought twice about it.

24:30 I'd shuddered to think what would happen today if a school child took a rifle to school. We ultimately gave it up because it was a waste of time, we had to drive ten miles in and ten miles out to primary school in outback New South Wales in a horse-drawn vehicle. We couldn't waste

25:00 too much time shooting rabbits, so we ultimately gave it up, or didn't do it very often. We had a pet Wedge-tailed Eagle that used to eat a couple of rabbits a day so we had to keep it supplied. We generally made our own amusements in those days.

25:30 It wasn't the age of instant gratification like the present ages, our expectations were not great.

In what regard were they not great?

26:00 You can imagine there was not much money around the place and one did things for one's self.

26:30 You could imagine there wasn't a great amount of prefabricated amusement out in the scrub of New

South Wales or anywhere in the Commonwealth, other than in the cities.

27:00 **Can you tell us about rabbit, was it a stable part of peoples diet at that time?**

Yes. One very largely lived on them for quite a period of time.

27:30 My mother had a great repertoire of diversity in preparing rabbits, cooking rabbits and I still like them. I've got a few here in my own backyard but one allows them there freedom and one doesn't have to shoot them.

28:00 Which is a heinous offence these days to carry a firearm with the presence of, legally in this over legalistic age one is not suppose to discharge a firearm within five hundred metres of a dwelling, or something of that sort.

28:30 You could imagine the horror if one discharged a firearm to shoot a rabbit in the backyard.

I'd certainly be stunned if you did it.

It would almost be a capital offence.

On the topic of food, what were

29:00 **the regular meals that people would eat at that time?**

We were never short of food, there was always plenty of food in the scrub of Australia it might have been a bit

29:30 harder to get in the cities. I can't describe one's daily diet, I've forgotten that long ago.

For instance bread and dripping?

It wasn't too bad living on bread and dripping. There always seem to be an adequate amount of food.

30:00 In days of semi starvation as a POW [Prisoner of War] in Europe I use to look back with some nostalgia at the availability of food at that period, but to describe the daily diet is beyond me.

30:30 **You have probably heard the term the 'broken years' that had been cloned the 'Depression years' for Australia, was it really that tough for you as it was for many other families, did you encounter that sort of hardship?**

One was growing up

31:00 and one had gone from childhood into adolescence and my dominant memory is the freedom with which one enjoyed. There didn't seem to be a great amount of hope for the future, one didn't nurse other than

31:30 unrealistic ambitions. One couldn't see any vast hope for the future but when you are young you don't particularly look for those sorts of things. Jobs were hard to get and when we moved to Tasmania I worked in the open

32:00 cut mine at West Lyall as a labourer and then as a surface miner and then as a sampler to the mine and then I joined the air force. I took what was to come as it happened

32:30 and it lead to all sort of adventures, unpredictable.

Quite an interesting start to your working life being involved in a mine, how old where you when you first started working in the mine?

Seventeen or eighteen,

33:00 never regret the experience, I worked in West Lyall mine which was seventeen hundred feet above sea level and looked out westwards to South America. You couldn't see South America but it was in the sweep of the roaring 1940s and weather was frequently abysmal. We would suffer blizzards, snow, hail

33:30 and sleet and one worked in this environment. Management permitted the workforce to knock off if the conditions became too severe, there were three of us that never knocked off, and we never allowed the weather to interfere with us.

34:00 But mind you when the rest of the field knocked off there wasn't much we could do, so we modified our activities accordingly, but it was good training for things to come.

Having said that what do you mean exactly?

34:30 One of my recollections was when I joined the RAF [Royal Air Force] Squadron in Palestine and these Englishmen they are the greatest complainers on earth, they use to complain about the heat and the conditions and so on.

- 35:00 When we got down into the desert they'd complain about the dust and the heat, and North Africa wasn't never any worse than outback New South Wales to me. But I thought after all these people come from a moderate climate and desert conditions were probably not very conducive to their enjoyment.
- 35:30 When we got into Germany with the snow and the freezing temperatures they use to complained bitterly about the cold so it seemed that they would complain about anything. We were not altogether well adapted to change. Whereas
- 36:00 my upbringing, no hardships, no weather or no conditions of weather were any worse than I had experience in my period of growing up regardless of where one was. Apart from the fact that the winters of Northern Germany were
- 36:30 pretty miserably, there was six inches of snow around the place with inadequate food and it was a most unpleasant existence. I once swore that I would never live north or south of the tropics again but low and behold, I ultimately came to Tasmania.
- 37:00 **You don't get six inches of snow here on a terrible winters days?**
No, but its colder than most other parts of Australia.
Can you please tell us what Empire meant to you at that time?
- 37:30 One took it for granted and one was part of it, one was proud of it, not overtly so but it was one had a sense of belonging to it, nothing more nothing less.
- 38:00 Those were the days where the sun never set on the British Empire and we were part of it, nothing very involved about it it was just as simple as all that.
- 38:30 **You were strongly pro Empire?**
When one comes to review the historic process of the world,
- 39:00 despite the errors and failures that have occurred in the British scheme of things, the society to which we belong
- 39:30 has probably made the greatest contribution in the civilising process of any nation on earth. One has lived through dictatorships of the proletarian, one has lived through Nazism and been subjected to certain stringencies under it. One has lived in Italy
- 40:00 during the Mussolini regime and one has seen the collapse of these systems. And one has realised that, from those small isles in the North Sea, England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales,
- 40:30 they have made the greatest contribution on any nation on earth to the civilising process, and after all you are here from Ceylon.
And I thought we civilised the British.

Tape 2

- 00:30 **After you finished school did you continue to study?**
Yes, and I only did two years at high school which is different in New South Wales and then I had to go out and get a job. When I went to Tasmania I studied at the School of Mines
- 01:00 and did metallurgy and I was a bit interested in chemistry. I had applied pre war for a pilot's course in the air force to be taken on as a pilot but wasn't accepted, I really wanted to fly an aircraft in combat. They came around recruiting for
- 01:30 wireless ops so I applied and was accepted as a wireless operator. I joined the air force on the last permanent air force wireless course before Empire Air Training Scheme took over. I was really a member of the permanent air force, which ceased to exist from 1940 onwards.
- 02:00 All the training was done under the Empire Air Training Scheme. My career in the air force was somewhat cut short and altered by me being taken as a POW, which was quite involuntary.
Were you always interested in flying as a child?
Yes I was. My greatest ambition at the time was to fly an
- 02:30 aircraft in combat and I never achieved it, and I'm probably alive by virtue that I had never achieved it.
What is your earliest memory of wanting to be a pilot?

When I was a boy I had a flight in a Gypsy Moth, which must have been about 1927

03:00 and then again in the mid or early 1930s Kingsford-Smith Southern Cross, when he had completed the first flight across the Pacific and I thought that that was for me.

Was Kingsford Smith a big hero at that time?

He was indeed.

03:30 After all he was one of the great pioneers of aviation in the 1930s and flew the Pacific, they flew the Pacific in the Southern Cross in the

04:00 mid 1930s, just a little bit before the war. He was lost up in the Kimberley's in Western Australia in the 1930s and ultimately lost his life, he and his mechanic were flying to London in the

04:30 Indian Ocean somewhere. These were dramatic days of aviation, the war of course gave it a great film. Peter Isaccson and his crew brought a Lancaster out to Australia in 1943,

05:00 just flew it out as a matter of course across the Atlantic and across the Pacific that was a making event.

On Charles Kingsford-Smith did you fly with him any time?

No.

We have had some children of the time that actually did joy

05:30 **flights with him.**

He was always a bit short of money and I think they used the Southern Cross to earn a few bob, barnstorming around the country here and there, but I never did. He never turned up where I was.

Was he a hero throughout

06:00 **the community or just a select...?**

Not really justly so he was looked upon as a great pioneer in aviation, and so he will remain for the remainder of history. His nephew Roland Kingsford-Smith was commander of 460th Squadron

06:30 in England, Bomber Command. Highly decorated airman and he is still alive. Have you interviewed him?

No.

Well you have missed out.

By the sounds of it I think we have.

He lives in the Central Highlands and he's still going strong.

07:00 **At this time it's about 1935 was there much about Hitler and what was going on in Europe at that time?**

Yes, it was standard component of the news of the day. It was inevitable that we were aiming at another world war.

07:30 It's a common human abuse of power, a common characteristic.

08:00 And dictatorships of course lead to the fulfillment of that human weakness, it was happening all over Europe into Asia. Communism and the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republic],

08:30 the Nazi's in Germany, passives in Italy all new political creeds, all of which had to reach their ultimate fulfillment and destruction.

09:00 **As a teenager you understood all that at the time?**

I suppose as a teenager and even the adults of the day were ignorant of what was yet to come, ignorant of the magnitude of what was to come.

09:30 Apart from entertaining an unease through the great religion of our century rose and fell between 1917 and the mid 1950s, fifty years and it had adherence all over the world.

10:00 They wanted to see old Joe Stalin on the throne of England the greatest murderer in history, and millions bowed the knee to him. Saw in the creed he was espousing as the future of mankind, and what a future it was.

10:30 Eighty to one hundred million men dead throughout the world, all bowing the knee to this sacred religion called communism. Worse than Nazism and bad as it was.

- 11:00 Even non-sapiens under go periods of cyclic insanity and we have been through one of its worse exacerbations and one wonders what is yet to come. Our last century was probably one of the blackest in the history of mankind and I only hope this one doesn't transcend it.
- 11:30 **I hope so too. You talk about communism, was communism seen as a big threat before World War II?**
- By the communist entity it certainly was, by others it was looked upon as the salvation of mankind. It must have come as a great shock
- 12:00 to the faithful to learn of its final collapse and the degradation that had occurred in its name but I wasn't one of the faithful.
- With all this happening in Europe did it seem far away from Tasmania?**
- It was far away
- 12:30 from a viewpoint of distance, but as it turned out not far away from the group who were involved because it embraced the whole world.
- 13:00 That is one of the problems we balance in civilisation and the civilising process and we are seeing plenty of it today. Civilising process being by no means uniform,
- 13:30 we happened to enjoy the zenith of it, or our enjoying it and I hope we continue to do so.
- Do you remember where you were and what was happening when Britain declared war?**
- I remember it quite well. I was held on reserve for the air force at the time and I knew that I would get involved with it.
- 14:00 I was in Queenstown in Tasmania working as a miner and I only had two months to wait before being called up.
- 14:30 From then on there were great changes in my life, as did millions of others, it wasn't anything unusual.
- 15:00 It was a period where the destiny of millions was altered within a very short period of time and countless millions didn't survive it.
- You said you joined the air force reserve before the war, why did you decide to join up with the reserve?**
- 15:30 It wasn't the air force reserve I was held in reserve because there were only limited opportunities in the air force in the 1930s. They were taking in twenty pilots a year or something of that order,
- 16:00 not many more other aircrew, so you just had to wait your turn. I applied in the middle of 1939 and was accepted and just waited my turn to be called up because they only ran the wireless course at Point Cook
- 16:30 and one had to wait for the previous one to pass out before one passed in. I was called up on the 6th November 1939.
- What was the motivation to join up, you wanted to fly?**
- Yes I did.
- 17:00 It was apparently the amendment that we were aiming at war and I just wanted to be in the air force before the war finished. I didn't realise that
- 17:30 I would be in it for the next six years, and under the circumstances, it was hardly from my choosing.
- Did you join up with friends or colleagues or on your own?**
- 18:00 One other who was dead when I was a prisoner of war, but the future is not ours to see when we are not able to predict these consequences.
- 18:30 **When you joined up together was it for a sense of adventure or a sense of joining the British Empire what were you thinking at that time?**
- 19:00 To recall the complexity of ones thoughts it's so long ago it's beyond me, if complexity is the right word.
- 19:30 Ones thoughts were probably not very complex at all.
- 20:00 **Were you looking forward to possibly going overseas?**
- Yes, very much so.
- When you joined up were you going as part of the Empire?**

- 20:30 Things have changed, its difficult to compare the modern concepts with those, which existed in 1939. You weren't alive then but even without consulting his
- 21:00 parliament the prime minister of the day Menzies, on behalf of Australia declared war on Germany by virtue of the fact that Britain had declared it and no one objected, it was expected of us and we expected it of ourselves. I don't suppose that state of affairs will ever exist again,
- 21:30 it existed twice in twenty odd years from 1914, it happened and in 1939 it happened, it was only a space of a generation in between. It was just a normal expectation, Britain was at war so we were at war.
- 22:00 Things have changed, it won't happen again, Britain might be wise enough not to get itself involved in another one anyway.
- You never know do you?**
- You never know.
- Can you take us through the process of enlistment, what happened where you turned up and how you got involved?**
- 22:30 It's a pretty standard process anyone who enters the armed services undergoes a period of drill training. To begin with bashing around the barrack square with a rifle and bayonet with a drill instructor that inspired terror into ones heart.
- 23:00 I was just reading in the history of the Empire Air Training Scheme where one trainee pointed out the terror that was inspired in him by the drill corporal infinitely greater than the air officer commander that he met later on in the Middle East at the rank of air marshal, the corporal inspired in him a far greater terror. I must admit they never inspired terror into me, but
- 23:30 it was personified authority and one got use to it.
- How would they attempt to inspire terror?**
- They just personified authority, you became subservient to it
- 24:00 as all military personal do. Admittedly in many instances with not a great amount of dedication.
- Was that the type of thing you expected when you joined up?**
- Yes. It was common to all new recruits,
- 24:30 there were limits to the authority or the acceptance of it.
- What were those?**
- One can't enumerate them. You have only got to join the services to realise
- 25:00 the incipient capabilities of the abuse of power, and its acceptance and its resentment and so there is a matter that is continuing throughout the whole of ones service career.
- Did you find that you were accept more than not?**
- Yes, its there for a purpose I suppose
- 25:30 and one becomes subservient to the purpose.
- What was that purpose?**
- To act as a unified body and where each becomes to a degree
- 26:00 dependant on the other, personified in particularity, in the aircrew where everyone is dependent upon the other.
- Do you feel that happened during training?**
- Yes.
- 26:30 Training was aimed at that end, simply with aircrew and as it turned out I never flew, trained as aircrew but I never flew because of special circumstances that pertained to our squadron when it entered the battle zone.
- 27:00 **How were the crews selected, was there a testing procedure initially?**
- It becomes a more complex problem than that and as it turned out I was never part of it.
- 27:30 Recruiting of a single seater fighter is a simple procedure, it is a pilot and nobody else. When one gets into Bomber Command with multiple duties such as pilot, navigator, bomb aimer, wireless operator,

gunners there is a difference in

28:00 duties and each compliments the other. Everyone is dependent upon the other and bomber crews become very involved with each other.

28:30 Again it depends on the aircraft that they are flying, some only have two. The Mosquito for instance has two a pilot and navigator, observer, whatever you'd like to call them. The same thing with the Beaufighter,

29:00 the Flying Fortress carries a crew of nine and so it goes on.

How did you find yourself as a wireless air gunner?

I wasn't an air gunner I didn't do an air gunners course at all. When 3rd Squadron took over some ten air gunners

29:30 I think all of whom had to be posted out to other squadrons when 3rd Squadron turned into a single seater fighter squadron, suffered thirty three percent deaths as the war wore on, three out of those ten were killed very shortly,

30:00 but I was long a prisoner by that stage of the game.

Where did your first training happen?

At Point Cook in Victoria,

30:30 the oldest still existing air force station in the world, so it is said. Now no longer used as a training air force station.

Could you describe the scene at Point Cook at that time?

It was just a standard

31:00 training station where pilots were trained and wireless operators were trained. From then onwards they went out onto squadron postings and furthered their training

31:30 and furthered their experience, this was before the Empire Training Scheme was instituted. Point Cook was the only training station for the Australian flying corps in the First World War, so it had a long history.

How many people were on this base at that time?

32:00 I have no idea.

Was it hectic?

Typically well ordered, it was a flying training base for rookie pilots and radio operators

32:30 and undoubtedly for mechanics, the complexity of people that make up an air force.

Were you proud to be in the air force?

Yes, of course. It has been and still is a great

33:00 institution and the image is that anybody that is in it should be proud to be there. I don't think its ever disgraced itself, it has

33:30 put a stamp on its name for history.

Often we have heard that people look at the air force it might be simplistic to say, but at a higher level than the army and navy and so on, there was a more of an adventurous side to it.

Did you feel or see that?

The personnel are admittedly different, and each service its characteristics to assume superiority

34:30 is a poor concept. They each had their jobs to do in a manner befalls them and there

35:00 are differences. The air force is made up of a great complexity of people whose function is to man and maintain aircraft

35:30 in warfare in terms of battle usage, which they do. I suppose it could be said that the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] behaved as creditably as any other force, put its stamp on history and behaved very creditably

36:00 in the scheme of things. It suffered nine thousand dead in the RAAF.

36:30 **Did you see any accidents in training while you were at Point Cook?**

Yes. The air accidents were most common right throughout most service experience, much more common

37:00 in the experience of others after all you wouldn't expect to see too many air accidents in the four years I was a prisoner of war. There was a pretty high mortality due to accidents in all commands of the air force, all the air forces.

37:30 **What do you think were the main reasons for that?**

Men are flying dangerous pieces of equipment, which required great skill, and it's in the gathering of that skill

38:00 that accidents do happen, the more experienced aircrew there happens to be the less their accidents are.

What was the rate of accidents at Point Cook, one a day?

38:30 I have no idea, not great but after all by modern standards they had been training in pretty primitive aircraft. The climate was excellent.

39:00 They weren't sapling icy conditions so the accident rate in my experience, which was pretty little. I spent six months at Point Cook and one wouldn't expect death and desolation on a large scale in six months in a

39:30 relatively peace time type of atmosphere. After all, war never hit Australia very severely and certainly never touched Point Cook.

How many accidents did you personally see?

I didn't see any until I got to the Middle East

40:00 and then I didn't see many.

How did they treat the accidents that happened at Point Cook when they occurred, what would they do?

I don't think I ever saw an accident at Point Cook.

40:30 But after all any accident has a pretty simple method of resolution, you

41:00 do a rescue and recovery.

Would there be a memorial or a funeral?

As I said, at Point Cook I never saw one.

Tape 3

00:30 **Can you describe to us what the training to be a wireless operator entails?**

In those days it was fairly simple, the air force only had a standard transmitter receiver and one had to learn Morse code up to twenty-five words a minute and all the other

01:00 procedures that go with it, such as direction finding, it's not so terribly involved. It was a matter of constant practice at Morse code and radio theory and what have you.

01:30 With the advent of better radio equipment as the war wore on it became simpler. The T283 combination that was standard throughout the RAAF, Canadian air force, and New Zealand air force,

02:00 it required a bit more expertise to use effectively than it did the automatic radio machinery that came into being later on in the war. I think it was the main transmitter receiver,

02:30 even for fighter aircraft that was subjected to all sorts of problems without the skills of a wireless operator to operate it, and any improvement on it would have been quite an improvement. Undoubtedly as the war was on more sophisticated radio equipment was invented

03:00 but all that was beyond me, that happened after my active period. We weren't issued with radio sets in prison war camps.

What was the technology like when you joined up?

From modern day standards very primitive

03:30 now a days they have even done away with Morse code, I don't know how you codify messages without Morse code, I haven't followed it up, it's beyond my sphere of interests.

Is Morse code a difficult thing to learn?

04:00 This is later in life.

I mean as a twenty year old rather than learning it as an eight year old as language?

One learns it by constant repetition and when you learn anything by course of repetition it gets implanted in the brain.

04:30 Inevitably at the end of ones six month course one could transmit and receive twenty-five words a minute. Some radio operators could do much better than that. Bearing in mind these were the days of radio infinitely, and a lot of hand operators

05:00 on our course that made radio their dominant interest.

What about codes and so on, were you taught codes?

One uses codes where they were used but they were determined by other bodies not by

05:30 the radio schools. Messages were coded and decoded frequently by radio operators but certainly others determined the codes.

Was it understood at the time that codes would be very important to the war effort?

06:00 Yes. You don't want to shout your intentions to the enemy. As it turned out Rommel had a great advantage. Rommel had a signals intelligence unit 621 which comprised

06:30 of a bunch of very skilled radio people who did crypto. It was captured on the 10th July 1942 at the commencement of the El Alamein battle, but that's a different story. Where Rommel had a great advantage in that

07:00 he knew his enemies intentions as it happened. He was never able to replace the skills of unit 621 in the length of time he was in Africa. Britain, bearing in mind had ultimately, with all the intentions of

07:30 joining the command, a tremendous advantage in warfare.

Do you know if Australia had anything similar to that?

No, not to my knowledge. Australia was part and parcel of the scheme of things, which benefited or suffered

08:00 as a result of the expertise or the lack of it. I don't know of any record where Australia initiated any great discoveries in these matters.

Before you joined up and went to war

08:30 **what was your concept of war?**

Death and disaster, and what's changed?

You knew the dangers when you joined up?

09:00 Dangers are never great until they happen to you.

A great line.

You don't expect warfare to be other than a dangerous procedure,

09:30 it turns out to be that way and always will be.

After you were at Point Cook where did you move onto from there?

10:00 We were stationed in New South Wales where I joined 3rd Squadron preparing to go overseas.

How long were you there for?

Only a month, if that.

10:30 One went on pre-embarkation leave and then we joined the squadron in Richmond and carried on with a bit of training and then embarked on the [SS] Orontes

11:00 and sailed for overseas on the 10th July 1940.

Was the training similar to what you did before?

It was just advance training with particular emphasis on army cooperation and as I said before, straight out of 1918 and we had other things to learn.

11:30 One of which was that 1918 training was no longer applicable. Our squadron duties the 6th Squadron AIF was reconnaissance,

12:00 and 3rd Squadron turned into fighter, ultimately fighter bomber and played a very dominant part in warfare in Africa as one of the original fighter squadrons, which was

12:30 short on the ground in those days.

On the training techniques of 1918 can you describe some of those?

It was fairly simple it was a matter of a simple procedure that went on

13:00 between observing aircraft and ground stations. Nothing very involved about it at all it was merely a matter of receiving and transmitting information from spotting aircraft to the recipients on the ground.

13:30 With mobile warfare it became more a matter of reconnaissance.

What techniques should they have been teaching you?

14:00 The mere techniques of transmission and receiving and that's about it. After all that is what radio communication is all about. A means of transmitting information from the observer of it to the receiver on the ground,

14:30 its just as simple as all that.

While you were in training did you use the term 'mateship' to describe how you got along with everyone?

Everyone was of common interest and everyone got along perfectly well with everybody.

15:00 It is a feature of any armoured services, you all have a common interest in a subservient conduct to that end. That's true of every branch of the services army, navy and air force

15:30 in any particular branch of it.

You had people from all over Australia doing your course?

Yes.

Did you learn things from them from their own experiences in other states?

16:00 Life is a learning experience, and why shouldn't it be? Naturally to a greater or lesser extent.

Was it fascinating to you what they were saying?

It was all a new experience to you, you can imagine any eighteen year old not so terribly well versed in life's experience by virtue of the paucity of his years. All these are expanding and new experiences and go to make up the

17:00 foundation stones of life.

At what time did they say you were going to be stationed here or in Australia, did you know where you were going?

17:30 When one passed ones course one then had the opportunity of joining a squadron somewhere or other, New Guinea, Darwin, Brisbane,

18:00 Amberley, Victoria, Pearce in Western Australia, I think they were the only stations. Which was New South Wales, Amberley, Queensland a station near

18:30 Point Cook, and Point Cook was a training station and there was another aerodrome only a few miles away. Pearce in Western Australia, and I wasn't aware that there was one in South Australia. The air force was in it's infancy in those days and I volunteered initially for Port Moresby and or Darwin, and then

19:00 I got to know that 3rd Squadron was going overseas so I got myself transferred onto that.

Why did you want to go to Port Moresby or Darwin?

Because I hadn't been there before.

Good enough.

Why else?

Did you think the air force was an opportunity to see all these places that you hadn't been to before?

It obviously was because

- 19:30 how could it be otherwise, that's why I didn't volunteer to join the Victorian one, which meant only five miles away from Point Cook. The course split itself up and quite a few of us went to 3rd Squadron and went overseas, a few,
- 20:00 others went all over the Commonwealth. The first member to lose his life was a wireless operator flying a Hudson out over the Coral Sea and it went into the drink only a month or two after we passed out.
- 20:30 Others met varying degrees of misfortune, some were in it short periods of time which happens in warfare. The first air force prisoner was John Parr who was captured when Tobruk was being invested,
- 21:00 going around the wireless sets on the guns firing into Tobruk in a sand storm and ran into, before they had realised they had gone too far, and in turning around they had driven within a hundred yards of the perimeter of Tobruk in a sand storm. Where you couldn't see too far ahead
- 21:30 of you, and come under intense fire and one member was killed, Vic Jarvis was killed and John Parr was machine gunned behind a camel bush for half an hour before he was taken prisoner. It is said that the poor old guy lost a stone in weight and I'm sure he did. Ten days afterwards
- 22:00 he was recaptured by the diggers who took Tobruk. There was John Parr brandishing a pistol and he had several hundred Italian prisoners under his command, they had surrendered to him.
- 22:30 I was to meet John Parr in England four years later in London, when I came out of Germany and he was there in some capacity or other. He's now dead, as are many of ones contemporaries
- 23:00 and that was sixty-four years ago.

When you joined 3rd Squadron instead of going to Port Moresby and Darwin was that because they were going overseas or

- 23:30 **was that because you wanted to be part of that squadron?**

No, it was because they were going overseas, it automatically came to pass that one was a member of the squadron. The squadron is still in existence its flying F18s at Williamstown and has been in existence since 1916.

- 24:00 **Did it have a great history about it?**

Yes, indeed. It still has a very active squadron association of which I'm a member.

- 24:30 **When you went overseas did you go by plane or boat?**

We boarded the Orontes to Bombay we left Sydney on the 15th July 1940 and called into Melbourne,

- 25:00 I forget if we called into Adelaide but called into again at Fremantle and then up through the Straits to Singapore and from there to Ceylon and from Ceylon to Bombay and from there we transshipped onto a British troop ship the [SS] Dilwara and from there up across the Indian Ocean up to the Red Sea to

- 25:30 Port Tewfik and from there we entrained for the Suez Canal.

On the trip through Bombay what was Bombay like?

- 26:00 I didn't see much of it because one was given a day's leave at the place and as you would expect different. Millions of people everywhere sleeping on the streets a different social order all together.
- 26:30 One was about to be acquainted with very different social orders in the places one visited. India, Egypt very different to what one had become accustomed too. All very exciting experiences I suppose to the
- 27:00 young and ignorant. After all, bearing in mind none of us were very worldly wise at that stage. We were in there for a concentrated period of life experience and that was the beginning of it.

Did you know that at that time or did you feel it that it

- 27:30 **was going to be that concentrated experience?**

It was yet to come.

You had no idea?

One was open to expectations and got it.

Could you describe the social orders you saw?

No, I won't bother.

It was vastly different from what was at home?

Of course it was.

28:00 The differences are still there to be seen, however my description of them would be facetious.

I doubt that, but if you feel that way, but I doubt it. We have heard from a lot of veterans who have been to those places, it makes them realise how much

28:30 **home means to them and how good life in Tasmania and Australia is.**

In this country we happen to be the beneficiaries of an advance social order and wherever one goes one is hard pressed to find something superior to it. That means

29:00 that most of it is inferior to it, we can count ourselves very lucky to have been born into a social order such as the one we enjoy. But the lesson at the stage we are talking about was yet to be impressed onto me.

29:30 **Would you like to describe what that experience of travel and so far away from home was like, just the journey itself?**

It was an ever increasing experience, no one part of it any more worthy of description than another.

30:00 One saw new social orders and one saw different nationalities, different languages and different customs.

30:30 **Did you have a knowledge or did you read about these different nationalities and different customs?**

Yes, but in a superficial way, all part and parcel of ones juvenile education. It came under the heading of history and geography, and

31:00 one was to learn more about it as the months unfolded. One got a concentrated lesson in both geography and history.

Was it vastly different from what you had learnt and read compared to what you had experienced with those cultures?

It was just a continuation of it.

31:30 **It gave you a greater depth of understanding?**

Of course.

When you were traveling through these allied countries did you feel that they were on your side so to speak?

32:00 A bit more supreme in India and in Egypt, she was running a mandate over Egypt, the British High Commissioner Sir Miles Lampson was

32:30 virtually to dictate the procedures that was expected of the country, they weren't too happy about it I'm sure, as history has turned out. Britain was dominant in the field in India, Egypt and Palestine.

33:00 When we moved into Libya again there was a very different society under the Italians who had taken it in 1912 and they lost it in 1943.

33:30 You see we were living in a period of concentrated history, the concentrated changes of the historical process and just adapted to the changes as they occurred, what else could you do, it was already made.

34:00 **Where there other people in your squadron who found it harder to adapt than yourself?**

I wouldn't think so there was no difficulty in adapting I don't think anybody had any great difficulties in adapting, that's what we were there for.

Did you meet any locals in Bombay yourself?

Yes,

34:30 No, but I can't even remember who they happen to be.

What stuck out about them what do you remember?

I think the one thing you strike is the poverty of the land.

35:00 Unimaginable poverty where people sleep on the streets and whole generations have slept on the streets, and probably still are.

Was the weather

35:30 **hot and heavy?**

Yes. We had passed through, we had crossed the equator and we were in the tropics. Bear in mind a third of Australia is in the tropics as well, and it is said that the hottest places on earth are Hay, hell and Booligal and one does not live far from Hay.

36:00 Climatically the differences were not great from Australia, very easily adapted to.

After Bombay where did you head off to then?

Across the Indian Ocean up to

36:30 the Red Sea to Port Tewfik.

What occurred there?

Disembarked and went by train to Ismailiyah on the Suez Canal where there was a RAF station. There the squadron was commenced to be equipped with Lysander aircraft

37:00 which was the only cooperation aircraft used by the RAF and this must have been August. In a month or so we moved to Helwan up the Nile from Cairo, twenty miles from Cairo where the squadron was equipped with

37:30 Gloucester Gladiator fighter aircraft.

How impressive was the Nile?

A pretty big muddy looking stream at that stage of the game, this was well before the Aswan Dam.

38:00 Very artistic in many ways with the Egyptian palookas sailing, the ancient sailing ship that has not changed since the days of Cleopatra. Don't drink the water

38:30 it's full of bilharzia [Schistosomiasis].

What would that do to you?

That would cause all sorts of problems, caused elephantitis, blockage of the lymph system, and an epidemic along the whole course of the Nile.

Did they warn you about this

39:00 **before anybody drank it or after?**

'You inherit dangers of drinking the apparent waters of the Nile', over its whole length.

Was it an amazing country to be there with the pyramids and so on?

39:30 It was a very interesting country to a new comer. It would have been more interesting if one had been free to move along its length but we weren't there for the purpose of touring, but it was a very interesting place to be.

40:00 To see the pyramids and the sphinx and the various pyramids up the Nile, the various excavations all very interesting in the short period one had to appreciate them, after all we weren't there as tourists.

You had opportunities to go to these places?

40:30 Yes.

But there should have more time?

One only had a couple of months there before one moved to Palestine, where again we were in the holy land where the Judeo Christian civilisation began, so

41:00 the place was full of interest.

The armed forces at that time seemed like quite a nomadic type of existence?

Naturally you were there to ultimately indulge in battle. It would have been disastrous to put us straight into battle,

41:30 I suppose it would have been.

Tape 4

- 00:30 When we moved to Helwan we transferred to a single seater fighter squadron and we had wireless operators so they flipped us into three bunches. A third stayed with 3rd Squadron and a third went to 208 RAF and another third went to Palestine to 6th Squadron at Ramla,
- 01:00 half way between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I was a member of the contingent that went to 6th Squadron. 208 did army corps, so called with the advancing troops in the first Libyan campaign which terminated at the end of February 1941 where the Italians were driven out of
- 01:30 Cyrenaica. Then the dominant infantry division the 6th Division Australian AIF and it came back to Egypt and went immediately to Greece where it met up with a degree of disaster. When the Greece and Crete campaign
- 02:00 failed where the Germans in a month or so concurred the whole of Greece and then moved onto Crete our troops had to either escape assisted by the Royal Navy or become prisoners of war. That denuded Africa, wayward forces in Africa,
- 02:30 and it was at that stage that the Africa Korps was sent to Africa, it had initially landed in Tripoli in February 1941 and then had a thousand miles or so of coastal desert to traverse and begin
- 03:00 its attack on the 1st April 1941. I was at Ajdabiya inland from the Gulf of Sidra at that stage and we had been there for some six weeks and we had relieved an advance flight of 6th Squadron RAF had relieved its equivalent to 208 Squadron and we were there for some six weeks
- 03:30 before Rommel began his push on the 1st April 1941. When we commenced our retreat from Ajdabiya on that same day. The Africa Korps occupied the airstrip that we vacated on the same day that we left it. So we slowly but surely we went out through Antalât and Masus,
- 04:00 Antalât we camped the first day and Masus we moved to the second. We moved then from Masus on the third day and we saw the dust of Rommel's armour advancing in the distance when we left Masus. We went back to Barce and onto the lead to Derna
- 04:30 and I think we arrived at Derna on the 5th April and on the 6th it was an advanced flight Hurricane aircraft back to Barce. Back to Barce to fire a bit of advance reconnaissance
- 05:00 to try and find out where the Africa Korps happened to be. We got somewhat near our destination when one of our aircraft dropped a message on us to tell us to return. When we returned we were diverted out into the desert road
- 05:30 away from the coast road and at the junction of the Derna, Mechili, Gazala, Berta and Tobruk road we ran into a German anti tank and machine gun post and we were taken prisoner. Five miles from the Derna drome, which was our destination
- 06:00 and that was on the 6th April 1941. In the early morning of the 7th April the headquarters company of the 2nd 8th Field Ambulance ran into the same place where we were held prisoner and at the back of their convoy was a staff car containing General Neil and O'Connor,
- 06:30 and they were taken prisoner. I remember as the story goes the lead truck was driven by Private Bill Carey a farmer from Kangaroo Island and I only rang him last night and he is suffering from Alzheimer's disease but a great old warrior, old William. Another one of the
- 07:00 members on the truck realising that we were being held by Germans much to their surprise they had never seen one before. Bluey Taylor who now lives at Port Augusta or somewhere, went back along the line of traffic in the dark to tell them that they were being held by Germans. When he approached the last vehicle
- 07:30 which was the staff car, a senior officer stuck his head out and said, "What is holding us up my man?" And Bluey said, "The Germans has got us." General O'Connor said, "Impossible." And Bluey said, "Well what's that fellow coming down here?" In the dark down came a German storm trooper with a machine gun at the high port and O'Connor looks at him
- 08:00 and said, "What a bloody mess," and so it was. The German storm trooper said to O'Connor, "Rouse." Which they have got a habit of saying, so O'Connor roused, "get out". Two senior officers of the army of the Nile were captured at that moment
- 08:30 by the Germans. That was on the 7th April, two days later General Carton [de Wiart] was sent out by the British government, he was a bit of an expert on retreats, he had organised the retreat from Norway, and was sent out by the British government
- 09:00 to Cairo to go to Greece to advise the Greek army military. They landed at Malta in a Wellington bomber and the machine was serviced overnight and on the

- 09:30 9th April they took off for Cairo in the dark. Unbeknown to them the Germans had, I think, marched into Greece on the same day that they had left, on the 6th April, my dates I am a little bit unsure of. They got to the Gulf of Bomba
- 10:00 heading to Cairo when the engine cut out. The skipper instructed Rush Jenkins, a New Zealand navigator, thinking they might have exhausted one wing tank of petrol, to even up the petrol in the wing tanks on the Wellington, and 1A I think it happened to be.
- 10:30 It has three coxes, one of either side of a central one, the two unbeknown to Rush, the two side coxes even upped there, interconnected the petrol supply, and the one in the centre was the jettison. But Rush turned that on so next to no
- 11:00 time the next engine spluttered and conked out and General Carton [de Wiart's] aircraft fell down into the Mediterranean, so he was taken prisoner the next day. Within three or four days three senior generals of the British army were captured by the Africa Korps. Its just as well the other two, Jumbo Wilson and General Wavell
- 11:30 weren't there at the same time because the whole senior officership of the British army would have been captured.

I wanted to ask you some questions about your time in the campaigns before this. Tell us about the climate in North Africa

- 12:00 **and how it affected the troops who you knew and yourself inclusive?**

Our entry into North Africa happened in winter. The 'Grazi' [Italian] army at Sidi Barani was pushed back in November 1940 and that

- 12:30 was the commencement of the northern territory, hemisphere winter. That campaign avoided the summer heat of the North African continent. Bearing in mind a few hundred miles south is the Sahara Desert and on the
- 13:00 north is the more fertile coastal strip, still not terribly fertile and subjected to dust storms. It became a common place for all troops in the North African campaign to become familiar with fairly violent dust storms, it just became a part of life.
- 13:30 It even rained heavily at one stage of the game in the middle of January 1941. We had tanks and things other than those of coastal bitumen at Sidi Barani became immobilised
- 14:00 with mud, doesn't happen very often but it happens. It was those conditions that one just had to acclimatise oneself with. Dust storms and sand storms were common.

- 14:30 **Was it the case that sand would always get in everywhere?**

Yes everywhere. You ate it, got into your nose, eyes, ears and your bedding, those sorts of conditions are not unknown in outback Australia so it wasn't new to me.

- 15:00 **What kind of counter measures could you take?**

Put up with it, tested ones capacity to endure which is a hallmark of service life anyway, there is nothing unusual about that.

When you first arrived in North Africa how much of the onshore campaign

- 15:30 **had taken place against the Italians?**

We went down into the desert in the first week or so of January and the campaign had begun in November, so two months after the attack on 'Gratsi' army that had moved into Egypt as far as Sidi Barani

- 16:00 so the campaign had been going two months. 3rd Squadron my apparent squadron had been involved all the way, they had their first mortality at Sidi Barani in November 1940 and they flew fighters
- 16:30 and preceded to give air force cover to the advancing army of the Nile. They remained in North Africa until the
- 17:00 middle of April, retreating all the way until they were moved back into Palestine where they were equipped with American fighters. They then gave air cover to
- 17:30 the Syrian campaign.

Did you experience any Italian or German bombing raids?

Yes they were common throughout, it was almost a daily occurrence when we were at Ajdabiya and I spent six weeks there, to be bombed by the Luftwaffe [German air force].

- 18:00 We scrounged an Italian twenty millimeter anti aircraft weapon with a fifty calibre machine gun so we use to get into action on enemy aircraft with these weapons. I don't think we ever hit anything,
- 18:30 but you felt better firing at them.
- Can you tell us the difference between the tactics used by the Luftwaffe and the Italian air force?**
- One didn't see much of the Italian air force during this whole campaign. They use to night bomb Benghazi from
- 19:00 Italy I suppose, or Crete, no Crete hadn't been occupied by that stage of the game so probably from Italy. I never saw an Italian aircraft in those few months in daylight. The aircraft that we had to contend with were all German
- 19:30 which would come over in support of the Africa Korps, I would take it. The day before we evacuated Ajdabiya we were subjected to an air raid, we had got a message from base to expect an attack at
- 20:00 eleven o'clock, the bombers were escorted by fighters. We had got this message early in the morning and 3rd Squadron was to fly up and give cover, fighter cover. We hardly believed the accuracy of this sort of intelligence but it was found out to be accurate because 3rd Squadron had flown from Benghazi, one hundred miles north and took up
- 20:30 position in the sun a bit before eleven o'clock. Flew around in the sun invisibly and at about quarter to eleven over came two Messerschmitt 110s, and 3rd Squadron descended on those and shot down one and it went into the earth and exploded
- 21:00 about a mile away from us. The other was hotly pursued. It pushed its throttle through the gate and took off at great speed and out distanced the pursuing Hurricane. 3rd Squadron had virtually been flying
- 21:30 for an hour and a half and still had one hundred miles to return and had limited fuel supply so it formed up and flew on back. A few of us took a vehicle and went over to where this plane had hit the earth, and before we got there over came fighter bombers and we turned to go back but they out distanced us to go back on our guns.
- 22:00 And they laid their bombs right across the anti tank defenders position, the Royal Horse Artillery were defending us with ack-ack [anti-aircraft] guns and took off unmolested. 3rd Squadron in the meantime was heading its way back to its base.
- 22:30 I remember Squadron Leader Jackson looked at his fuel in the Hurricane and discovered that his needle was on empty and he turned to come back just in time to see the bombs drop. By the time he landed back on the airstrip we got back to our gun,
- 23:00 three bombs had gone off within a nine yards radius of us, and our ears would have sung if we had been on it and we would have been uncomfortable. The gun next to ours, the gun layer was dead, his clothes were burning and his ammunition was alight.
- 23:30 The officer in charge was wounded, two others were wounded on the gun. Just as Jackson landed and taxied by us. Reading the accounts of Jackson's memoirs two other pilots
- 24:00 claim to have engaged German 110, which they didn't. Jackson fueled up and went off and the other two pilots that made these claims, one was dead within a week and the other one in six months, and Jackson was ultimately killed weeks later over Port Moresby.
- 24:30 The three active participants of that squadron were dead in no time, in just a few months. Its interesting how, reading the history of these events, how everything comes together.
- Your role as a wireless operator would have kept you quite busy during all of this, can you tell us exactly what your tasks were?**
- We were handling wireless communication
- 25:00 between our advance post at Ajdabiya and base. At the stage that we left Ajdabiya on the 1st April, there were four wireless operators from 3rd Squadron, four Australians handling the
- 25:30 communications. It was our duty to send and receive messages to send back to base, the results of our aircraft reconnaissance and to receive instructions from base. It was the same as any normal wireless organisation.
- 26:00 My old partner Snow Campbell was a hand operator of some note, and nothing he liked better than to sort out a message in amongst all the interference that was occurring. At one stage he was trying to get a message back to base and was bothered by constant repeats.
- 26:30 So he sent a mixed signal which interpreted 'put a competent operator on' only to find the operator at

the other end was the commanding officer of 6th Squadron who began his air force career as a wireless operator. He was highly annoyed to have this indignity placed upon him.

27:00 It took our commander at Ajdabiya some time to calm him down so I'm told. Our duties were duties that normally become the lot of wireless operators anywhere.

27:30 **Can you tell us how people reacted when Rommel first landed in North Africa, was there much known about him to begin with?**

I don't know how far British intelligence had followed the presence of Rommel. We first became aware of it at Ajdabiya towards

28:00 the tail end of March 1941 when a couple hundred motor vehicles turned up at [Al] Uqaylah down at the southern end of the Gulf of Sidra. That came as a bit of a surprise to us but bearing in mind that the British intelligence doesn't tell everybody everything they know.

28:30 That was our first encounter with the presence of the Africa Korps and that virtually occurred overnight. They probably would have done several hundred miles down the coast of Africa during the

29:00 previous day or night so they just appeared much to the surprise of everybody. Our forces were in a very weakened conditions, 6th Division had gone to Greece, the 7th Armoured Division had gone to Egypt for refitting, there was virtually nothing in

29:30 the way of the Africa Korps to impede our advance into Cyrenaica, which they did. There was a generalised panic on it, it wasn't altogether to the credit of British command that we indulged in the situation

30:00 of the Benghazi handicap.

Which is?

The Benghazi handicap, in other words high tailing it away from the enemy instead of them, not what well organised armies are suppose to do, so the situation was quite chaotic.

30:30 **Can you tell us about the state of the weapons and the equipment used against the Italians and the Germans at that stage. Were they up to date machinery, obsolete, what was the state of their condition on what you had seen at the time?**

31:00 Air forces' weaponry lies in its aircraft rather than the equipment of its ground forces. They were flying Hurricanes and they flew to exhaustion. The army was depleted, its arms were poor, and the tanks had gone out

31:30 of Cyrenaica back to Egypt. The remaining forces were very poorly armed and the 9th Australian Division, which ultimately had taken over, had not left Australia. They only left Australia about November 1940. It had hardly got itself established in Palestine before it went down to the desert. It was untrained,

32:00 poorly armed and it was that division that had seconded itself in Tobruk, which held Tobruk, and it learnt quickly and it became a great fighting division. But it learnt the hard way, not by exercises in the field but by one of Germany's supreme commands, the Africa Korps.

32:30 Rommel couldn't break his way into Tobruk much to his annoyance. The 6th Division had a more aggressive spirit than the retreating forces that

33:00 took part in the Benghazi handicap.

You said there was a sense of general panic that was gripping the armed forces in the Cyrenaica region, can you tell us more about that please?

Retreats

33:30 are not aggressive entities, as you could imagine. If you are running away from a fight you are not fulfilling much of a purpose. Lamentably,

34:00 this every man for himself stuff is not calculated to improve the morale of the fighting service. I might remind you that the whole of the BF [British Force] had retreated through Dunkirk. As the Germans pointed out 'all we see of the British are there backs'; it took them some years before they saw there fronts.

34:30 It's a pretty lamentable state of affairs to be involved in retreat, nothing that one can be particularly proud of.

In any one of the

35:00 **army cooperation squadrons were you ever involved in any assistance to the army on the field, targeting ground forces as a liaison officer to the air force?**

No I never, do you mean was I involved in flying?

Not flying but on the ground giving orders to the air force to target a certain area.

35:30 **In an army cooperation sense, like a spotter almost.**

No, for some reason or other when we were occupying Ajdabiya we were conducting advance reconnaissance, we weren't in radio communication with our aircraft, our aircraft radios didn't work. We were dependent

36:00 on them coming back and landing to give us verbal confirmation of what they had discovered. We, at no stage were we in communication with our aircraft. That's symptomatic of the poor organisation that was current at the time.

36:30 **Was it that the radios didn't work?**

I'm not sure that they had radios in their Hurricanes. We had transmitters and receivers on the ground but they didn't at no stage. At that stage, for the whole six weeks that we were at Ajdabiya did we ever communicate between ourselves and the air.

At what stage was

37:00 **3rd Squadron converted to a fighter squadron?**

A month after it landed in Egypt, landed in Egypt in August 1940, and started to convert into a fighter squadron a month or so later.

What happened to the wireless operators as a result of this conversion?

37:30 We were split into three and transferred to 6th Squadron in Palestine and 208 in Egypt, seventy odd wireless operators, we would have been twenty odd, stayed with 3rd Squadron

38:00 and others went to 208th and 6th Squadrons.

Can you tell us what

38:30 **the towns of Sidi Barani and Bardia were like, what they looked like?**

They were small desert outposts of whitish, square buildings that were all pockmarked with gunfire, and half destroyed by bombs. They were very desolate looking places. Tobruk was a little bit better in that

39:00 the destruction of the town wasn't too bad. It had a larger defensive perimeter. And of course Derna and Benghazi were hardly touched by shellfire or bombs. They remained relatively intact probably during the whole war.

39:30 Bardia and Sidi Barani were small defensive towns and received more gunfire probably, than the larger towns like Derna, Tobruk and Benghazi.

Tape 5

00:30 **To the experience of being captured by the Germans, can you tell us about the first camp you were stationed at or posted to?**

A couple of us joined the 2/8th Field Ambulance. I drove a truckload of wounded down into the Derna hospital and the 2/8th Field Ambulance took over

01:00 the medical treatment of whatever casualties happened to occur at that period of time. This was the commencement of the investment of Tobruk, where truck loads of wounded came into the hospital. It was run by Major Ken Beans from Adelaide, a mild little fellow and

01:30 Dr Levin from New South Wales. Major Beans in one instance, and Captain Levin in the other. They, plus the 2/8th Field Ambulance to which we attached ourselves in the hope of finding it easier to escape, conducted for the first month all the treatment of the wounded that came back from Tobruk,

02:00 which were mainly members of the Africa Korps and Italians. I have got vivid recollections of the Germans wearing calf high boots made of canvas - leather boot at the bottom of it and canvas up the calves of the legs. They use to prize these boots

02:30 possessively, so much so the only way to keep in contact with them was to wear them all the time. I remember the pervading odor that I associate with wounded Africa Korps was the smell of rotting blood and stinking feet and that olfactory memory lasted for years.

- 03:00 It has disappeared now after sixty or seventy years, but that lasted a long time that olfactory memory of this peculiar, unpleasant odor of stinking feet and rotting blood.
- 03:30 That was one of my major recollections of the period I spent at Derna hospital under the command of Major Beans and Captain Levin. The 2/8th Field Ambulance was ultimately replaced by German and Italian medical personnel, and our personnel were put into
- 04:00 prison camps at Derna where dysentery was rife and flies were everywhere, the food was bad. I forget how long one spent there, but ultimately we spent a month or so in Derna and then sent to Benghazi where conditions were much better, although it wasn't particularly comfortable.
- 04:30 From the time of capture and the next six months, one never saw a bed - one slept on concrete floors. A sure sign of a prisoner of war in a bath house was his calluses on his hips.
- 05:00 Where one enjoyed what comfort there was on a concrete floor. Three of us escaped from Benghazi and took off into the desert and
- 05:30 we ultimately contacted some Bedouins out in the desert. One of our members was a tank commander from the 7th Armoured Division who spoke a bit of Arabic, and assured us that if we broke bread with these Arabs they were duty bound by historic custom to protect us,
- 06:00 which was kindergarten stuff in reality. They opened fire on us the next morning intent on recapturing us and handing us back to the Italian authorities.

Before you do proceed on that story which is extremely interesting, can you tell us please how you actually escaped from Benghazi?

- 06:30 You can understand that being a prisoner of war is hardly the ambition of an ambitious service, no one likes the restraint and the indignity of being a prisoner of war.
- 07:00 You don't walk out of a prisoner of war camp without being shot so you have got to find a way of minimising the dangers of departing from the restraint. It so turned out that there was a gap in the stone wall of the surroundings of this camp over which
- 07:30 they placed a guard. In keeping this under observation we discovered that the guard, in dereliction of his duty in the dead of night, would disappear, vacate his post. Three officers were occupying the same camp - they were at one end and we were at another. Three officers
- 08:00 taking advantage of this dereliction of this guard's duty fizzled off through the hole in the wall. The next night we did the same thing. I don't know where the guard went, might have been with a girlfriend somewhere. But in any case, he vacated his position in front of the hole in the wall. When he did so we took advantage
- 08:30 of it and fizzled off through the hole in the wall and then made off into the desert. Its just as simple as all that.

Can you tell us how you actually ran into the Bedouin?

- 09:00 We walked all night, the remainder of the night, and found ourselves up on the escarpment beyond Benghazi, where 3rd Squadron had occupied it as a fighting aerodrome.
- 09:30 We were noticed by an Arab who followed us and who was a good human sort of a bloke, and who got us a drink from a well. No one was under any illusions as to who we were. The next day we walked further into the desert and came upon a camp of Bedouins
- 10:00 and we made association with them and had a meal. Then moved on a bit and slept the night and the following morning they were standing guard over us. When I woke up each of us had two Arabs and each had a rifle, and when they saw me stirring they put their rifles under their robes. We all woke up and they wanted to escort
- 10:30 us on our way indicating the way we had already come, so we decided that we weren't going to have any of that. They then produced their weapons and threatened us so we still refused to comply and we just sat down. They went back about fifty yards and kept us covered with their weapons, so there was no future in that so we decided
- 11:00 to get up and rush off, which we did. They made the mistake of running and firing at the same time, which is not good musketeering; they didn't hit anybody, they were terrible shots. Our condition had deteriorated and this was the middle of July and we had been prisoners since the 6th April, about four months.
- 11:30 They out ran us ultimately and recaptured us, but in the meantime they had sent for the Italians at Port Regeba [Misratah] and then we ultimately refused to go where they wanted us to and sat down, and ultimately a vehicle loaded up with Italian soldiers appeared on the horizon and came and retook us.

- 12:00 Our brief escape was over in two or three days. The officers who had escaped the day before us were captured the day after us, which generally happens in these escapes. It's very difficult to finally succeed.
- 12:30 You succeeded in part of it but you haven't succeeded in the ultimate aim. Shortly after that the Italians became aware that the Long Range Desert Group were operating in the desert and harassing them a little bit on their lines of communication, and then moved us up
- 13:00 to Tarhuna, south east of Tripolitania, about a thousand kilometers away into another prisoner of war impoundment.

Tripolitania was an actual region or was it a town?

Libya is split into two provinces,

- 13:30 Cyrenaica in the east and Tripolitania in the west, separated by an imaginary line I suppose you'd call it, about halfway between.

- 14:00 **This Long Range Desert Group, you said that the Italians had become nervous as a result of their activities, they were essentially commandos to my knowledge.**

The Long Range Desert Group was setup by

- 14:30 British adventurers who had probed the Sahara Desert in the intervening years between the wars, interested in the geography and the history of the Sahara. They ultimately established a base at [Al] Kufrah Oasis, way down hundreds of miles south of
- 15:00 the coast, which was taken by the Free French who came up from Chad and took the oasis and passed it over to the Long Range Desert Group in the early part of 1941, a little bit before the time
- 15:30 we are speaking of. They conducted operations sometimes a thousand miles behind the enemy lines for the remainder of the war in Africa, for the next two years. Commanded by these adventurers they ultimately trained the SAS [Special Air Service] who
- 16:00 behaved accordingly, who attacked German and Italian positions on the coast, it's a very interesting history. They became masters of the Sahara, inventors of the sun compass,
- 16:30 sufferers of hardship.

When you were returned to the Italians by the Bedouins were you treated roughly by the Italians?

No, we weren't even punished, we were taken back and questioned by the no lesser person than the prefect of Cyrenaica

- 17:00 the governor of the province. He wanted to know all sorts of things. There is no convention in warfare that you must tell the enemy the truth. We didn't treated his questions with some reserve you would say. They were a bit suspicious that we made
- 17:30 contact or hoped to have made contact with the Long Range Desert Group, but at that stage we didn't know of its existence. They were to roam the coastal regions and in some cases watching convoys of POWs go by, and unable to do anything about it.

- 18:00 **Were you interrogated by the Germans or the Italians at any stage?**

Indeed, interrogated by the Germans shortly after one was captured, and later on interrogated by the Italians. And in this instance interrogated by the prefect of Cyrenaica; it was common to be interrogated.

- 18:30 **What did these interrogations involve exactly?**

Fundamentally they were trying to seek information, trying to find out how many troops were in Tobruk, the state of our services, all the things that armies want to know about each other.

- 19:00 As I said, there is no convention in warfare that you must tell the enemy the truth, so I never told them the truth.

Were they brutal in there interrogations?

No. At no stage was I ever treated with brutality.

- 19:30 I was never beaten up, generally treated within the broad interpretation of the Geneva Convention as one would have expected, as we treated our prisoners, hopefully.

- 20:00 **How long did you actually stay in North Africa for after you were captured?**

Five months. They moved us across the Mediterranean in about September 1941

20:30 to Italy, Taranto, down in the bottom of the foot of Italy.

What was Taranto like?

If you know the history of Taranto,

21:00 it was an open port where the British Swordfish aircraft attacked the Italian navy, not so long before we arrived there, with torpedoes coming in from the land, and it did a considerable amount of damage to the Italian navy. On the

21:30 land part of it, there was a small entrance into an impoundment that Italians called the 'Mar Piccolo', a small sea which contained a lot of smaller vessels, corvettes and destroyers and things like that. I remember an Irish air gunner, when we went through into the Mar Piccolo

22:00 in a barge, in a mixture of poor Italian and Arabic he said, "Italian in porto?" All the Italian navy in port? And a little guard said, "No, its only half, the other half is up in Naples," he made the point.

22:30 From there we went to Capua, an ancient Roman town south of Naples, and we could see Vesuvius in the distance.

23:00 And that was a tented camp on the Volturno River where we remained for a couple of months. Then they transferred all the New Zealand and

23:30 Australian prisoners up to north east Italy to Gruppignano to Camp 57. Interesting things happened when we were at Tarhuna, we got two submarine crews in, one almost a complete crew of the submarine [USS] Cachalot, which had received

24:00 an intelligence message to intercept an Italian convoy down at Gulf of Sidra, which it did. At the appropriate time along came a German merchant and an escorting naval vessel and the skipper, these were the days when they were supplying Malta, bearing in mind this was the middle of 1941 when the supply to Malta

24:30 was very hazardous. The skipper decided to surface and engage with his four inch gun. By the time the submarine had reached the surface the escorting Italian vessel had laid a smoke screen half way around them, because they had picked them up on the Asdic obviously, they got away a few shots. The Italian vessel came half a stern and rammed them and sprayed them

25:00 with machine gun fire and did a tight turn and rammed them in the other side and the submarine went down with one man. The remainder all got out and became prisoners of war, a most astonishing state of affairs, usually when submarines are destroyed the crews goes with them. A month or so after that, in the dead of night they ushered, as it turned out a chief petty officer from a

25:30 submarine who was in a bad mental state, he was a bit demented. His story was he was in a submarine off the entrance of Tripoli harbour they spotting in their periscope, an Italian merchant marine approaching the harbour and they went full speed ahead to get within torpedo range

26:00 when there was a great explosion forage and they had obviously hit a mine and went down to the bottom. They slammed the for'aft doors closed and trapped the torpedo crew for'aft and they were bashing at the bulkhead door

26:30 until they drowned. The skipper and chief ERA [Engine Room Artificer] and the coxswain decided to attempt to come up through the conning tower, and I forget what depth of water they were in. Not knowing whether they would be able to open the conning tower when they had flooded that compartment.

27:00 It so happened that they were able to and they cascaded up to the surface with their Davis escape apparatus on. By the time they got to the surface the coxswain was dead and the other two survived. There was an Italian torpedo boat cruising around and seeing the explosion

27:30 gravitated to the scene and took them aboard and stayed there for twelve hours and no one else came up, so that crew perished in their submarine. The chief ERA was somewhat upset and he had

28:00 to come to grips with the death of his crew. There were two survivors from that submarine and the other one it was the total crew minus one man. Such are the fortunes of war, interesting enough that crew from the Cachalot and the other

28:30 two survivors were repatriated in early November 1941 with some peculiar deal between the Italian government and the British.

That is strange, I've never heard that.

No I bet you you haven't.

29:00 They had a short period of incarceration and went back to belligerence.

Can you describe to me what Gruppignano was like, the structure of the camp and your daily life?

It was a camp run by the military police of Italy, the body still conducts peace duties in Italy. It's a semi military

- 29:30 police organisation and it was under the command of a Colonel Calcatero from the military police, and it was confined to Australian and New Zealand troops at that stage of the game. We were under their control because we had a bad reputation with the Italians, their propaganda is a peculiar sort of propaganda.
- 30:00 They magnified their enemy, which was us, into blood suckers and drinkers of human blood, perpetrators of atrocities and all this sort of thing. The last way it would seem to me to infiltrate a nation into the nature of their enemy.
- 30:30 There we were the blood suckers, the drinks and torturers, murders all put under the military police control. This was at the beginning of winter of 1941 and 1942, which was the severest winter that Europe had suffered for some fifty years. We were all in desert kit, in barracks where the wind
- 31:00 just whistled through. We were reasonably uncomfortable you could say, the food was pretty good. The camp was especially established with a purpose, under the foothills of the Julian Alps to our north,
- 31:30 Yugoslavia to our east, Austria to our north, the Golden Isles and the Alps to our west and there we were. We occupied number two compound and number one compound had already been occupied by fellows captured in Greece, 6th Division mainly.
- 32:00 I think there were only two air force fellows, Tom Commons and myself, at that stage of the game, in the camp in our compound. The rest of them were 9th Division people captured in
- 32:30 Tobruk and a few people captured in Greece, a few New Zealanders captured in Greece. Ultimately we were joined by a few South Africans and a few more airmen.

Why is it that Australians were separated from the British?

- 33:00 Because they considered us more dangerous.

Could you elaborate that in a bit more detail?

Bearing in mind the campaign that had occurred, the Italians had got used to the British in years of tourism in their land,

- 33:30 and they held the Brits in a certain regard. It was the Australian 6th Division infantry that took Cyrenaica, took a hundred odd thousand prisoners, and the Italian propaganda system had to justify
- 34:00 that lost to their people by exaggerating the brutality of the Australian troops. So we fell into that category and we were shipped up to Camp 57 as a separate nationality. There weren't many British,
- 34:30 it was a rarity to have an Englishman in the camp.

While you were at Gruppignano were you aware of German attempts to recruit collaborators into their SS [German Security Squad] units?

No, that didn't happen until later in Germany, we will come to it in the process

- 35:00 of your interrogation.

I promise there is no brutality whatsoever.

We will come to it, that happened a couple of years later up in Poland, when I happened to find myself in Poland, and it must have been in the middle of 1944.

- 35:30 **How did you keep in touch with the outside world, what mechanisms did you have to inform yourself?**

Detaining par propaganda, tells you a lot,

- 36:00 one could divine the nonsense from actuality. I don't think we had a radio in Camp 57, I can't remember it.
- 36:30 Later on when we got to Germany we had radios in the camp. We were able to, every day when we were up in Poland we use to get BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] broadcast, the operators of the radio set would go around the camp reading the news bulletin.
- 37:00 Enemy papers, all describing the war their way, which one was able to interpret properly, sort out the truth from the nonsense, so we were kept well informed. We could tell from there
- 37:30 casualty list in the Italian papers that things weren't going too well for them at times. We became aware

of that in Yugoslavia, from their death lists in their papers and stuff like that. Often I remember in Germany

38:00 we would get air crew in that had only been shot down a fortnight or so before and they were giving us the latest and we were ahead of them, we knew more than they did.

Did you come across any Germans at Gruppignano who had come to the camp for any sort of military activity?

No, I don't think we ever saw a German

38:30 the time I was in Gruppignano. I got banished from the camp in November or December 1942 and when I got back I was only to be banished again. I was in the camp from November 1941 to November 1942,

39:00 when we dug a tunnel out of the place and I got banished from Gruppignano and sent on to a British camp.

When you were at Gruppignano did you get chances to leave the camp and do labour intensive tasks outside with the farmers or anything like that?

Didn't want to work for them, no, I never did.

You didn't want to?

Didn't want too.

39:30 **But it did take place with the POWs, none the less?**

It started to happen in the summer of 1942, a rarity but not often. After I was banished from the camp a year went by

40:00 until Italy packed in in September 1943. What happened in that period I'm a stranger to it, I was in another camp. I gathered there were quite a few people who went on to work camps, local farms and things.

40:30 **Can you tell us about the escape attempts from Gruppignano other than from other servicemen that you were aware of?**

The security in the camp was pretty

41:00 efficient, pretty diligent, they were good POW guards, whatever their other efficiencies were, they were good POW guards. The first attempt of escape was from a New Zealand private called Wright who attempted a wire crawl in the middle of winter, either shortly before or after

41:30 Christmas 1941, and was shot.

Tape 6

00:30 **Just continue on from where you were about the New Zealander and the wire?**

The bullet that ultimately killed him penetrated the base of the neck and there was no excess wound and we were suspicious that his death was caused by a dumb-dumb bullet and we let that be known to the colonel.

01:00 The colonel took us into the church, I remember, the hut that was used as the church, and demonstrated this shrapnel bullet which the Germans used, a seven point something service rifle. The bullet consisted of a brass tube, which contained nine

01:30 steel pellets and when it was fired the rifling of the barrel cut the brass tube into four slices. Then the four slices of brass and the nine pellets went on their roving way and at close range all these penetrated together. They then spread out into the lungs, and in this case Wright,

02:00 and there they stayed causing immense internal damage. A great improvement on the dumb-dumb I think you will agree, but to the Italians they considered that conformed to humanitarian principles. The colonel pointed out that in the First World War no prisoner ever escaped from Italy and no prisoner was going to escape from

02:30 his camp or any camp in Italy. Any attempt would meet with the same fate as private Wright. You have got to understand that prison of war camps are setup to stop escapes. They had machine gun posts around the outside, posts manned by riflemen, search-lights roving the wire

03:00 all night, so it's difficult to walk out of the place. You could so only with great peril. Anyone contemplating an escape has to take into account the fact that if he wants to escape he must escape

alive. You devise ways and means of achieving that end, to minimise your risk

- 03:30 and maximise your chances of departure. The confidence of the colonel stimulated ambition to prove him wrong. We sampled.... unless you can buy some
- 04:00 subterfuge and disguise yourself and move out of a camp in the normal traffic, which is very difficult to do. The only other way is to dig a tunnel or escape through a hole where the guard is not guarding it, as we did in Benghazi. In digging sewage pits you get the idea of
- 04:30 what the soil is like underneath, whether it was 'tunnelable' or not. After enduring the El Alamein battle, which began in July 1942, the Italian security diminished due to the pressure of incoming
- 05:00 prisoners and they opened up a new compound, number three compound, which had joined the compound that I was in. We discovered a bunch of huts in a row and the last of that row was up against the wire, or nearest to the wire so we attempted and they started to fill hut number one
- 05:30 furthest away from the wire, it couldn't have come as a greater turn. We started to dig a tunnel from the hut nearest the wire, the huts were raised on a concrete foundation, not very thoughtful of them because no one could see through, underneath the foundations and that concrete prohibited it, and it also left a space under the floorboards.
- 06:00 Our engineering member, I think it was Noel Ross, and the tribe started to dig and we found that ten feet under hut number whatever it was, near the wire, was capable of constructing a tunnel. We calculated that by making the tunnel as small as possible we would
- 06:30 be able to dispose of the soil under the floor boards of this hut to be unseen by anybody outside of it. We worked out a distance to a crop of millet, that we would need to go one hundred and forty-five feet to come up in the millet.
- 07:00 There was a machine gun post on the corner of the compound and the tunnel would have passed the guard box ten yards or so one side of the progress of the tunnel. So we made a tunnel
- 07:30 about twenty inches wide and thirty inches domed to about three feet, to give us head room which was just enough for a bloke like me to sit in, you try sitting in a twenty inch tunnel, by thirty-six inches high and there is not much room.
- 08:00 Fortuitously it use to be the habit of the authorities to search every hut once a week, pull up all the floor boards and make everyone take all the possessions out, dismantle the beds, and they didn't do it in this compound while it was being filled with
- 08:30 prisoners from El Alamein. It enabled us to keep digging unmolested.

Do you know why they did that?

They kept searching the inhabited compounds but they didn't conduct the searches on the compounds they were filling up because they probably thought that they were new prisoners

- 09:00 and they wouldn't be any trouble, fairly unimaginative of them but it helped us. If you know anything about mining and geology it was an alluvium of gravel,
- 09:30 stones and things like that, some of them quite big. Damp with moisture but not flooded, we'd be covered in mud, in a sandy sort of mud, but there was no water on the floor. So we
- 10:00 ultimately got to a stage where we struck a band of conglomerate that we couldn't dig through and we had to come to the surface before we got to the crop of millet. We ideally hoped to emerge in the crop of millet where we wouldn't be seen by the machine gun posts close by, not very far away.
- 10:30 We were stuck with it and we had no alternative because we had pretty well filled the under floor space with soil from the tunnel so we had to come up regardless. We ultimately finished and came up through the grass roots,
- 11:00 I forget now the distance but maybe a hundred odd feet. We were through the wire and underneath the wire and we were up to the grass roots. So at the end of October, I think it was nineteen of us escaped through the tunnel one night and
- 11:30 took off to the hills, so much for Calcatero [camp commander], 'no one will escape from his camp'. Fortuitously he was on leave and his relief got the blame despite the fact that the tunnel took us six weeks to dig, and he was still in command when we started it. He was just fortunate that he wasn't there when we all fizzled out of the hole at the end.

12:00 When you are organising an escape like that is there a chain of command?

I've often been asked this question.

- 12:30 There we were, all of like purpose, we didn't seem to need a chain of command, everyone played their part, took their turn at digging it, and we had to maintain pretty heavy security because we had recipients in the camp who were known informants.
- 13:00 We fortunately managed to complete the whole enterprise with reasonable security - word had got around a little bit but it was treated with proper secrecy anyway. The recipient of the knowledge knew what was at stake, they didn't run around the place shouting out, "There is a
- 13:30 tunnel being dug." I noticed at one stage, we would keep the area under observation, a fellow would come along and lay a blanket over where the tunnel was underneath and start playing cards, and one would knock off and put his ear to the ground, word had gotten around. We watched these stinkers and think to ourselves,
- 14:00 'you shut up you so and so or else', but they never divulged it.

Did people just know what to do did they, like in that instance they didn't have to be told, cover this up, they just instinctively knew what their role was to play in the escape?

- 14:30 It was done generally by the participants, most of whom intended to escape, not all, we had a few who didn't. Not very difficult, all you had to do was dig a hole, dig and get rid of the millet and put up with the
- 15:00 unoxygenated air. We had to develop an air pump to give us a bit of an air supply otherwise people started to get faint. A lamp wouldn't burn in it and even those that did gave off so much carbon that you breathed in carbon, and outside you ran black mucus down your bloody nose and so on.
- 15:30 I remember coming across the compound from a shift digging and I blew my nose and everything was black, I was dripping black mucus. and I went into the kitchen and old Charley Stewart was in charge and he looked at me suspiciously and he said. "What have you been up to?" And I said, "Charley you haven't seen anything, you shut up." He shut up while I washed myself and
- 16:00 blew my beastly nose and got rid of all that beastly carbon.

How were those shifts organised?

You could only do it during the day, we took our turn when the roster was written down,

- 16:30 just worked like that. I got put into the clink for ten days for being rude to an Italian interpreter in the middle of it all, and I was hopeful that they wouldn't finish the tunnel and fizzle off before I got out again, but they didn't. Fortuitously it just worked as we hoped it would work.
- 17:00 I remember Russ Jenkins, I was in charge of administration in this compound, and Russ Jenkins was the observer who let the petrol out of General Carton de Wiart's aircraft over the Gulf of Bomba, and Russ handled the mail or something and he was a New Zealander. The majority of the blokes who were in
- 17:30 the hut where we were digging this tunnel, were New Zealanders. I was over there one day, I wasn't even digging, I was over there for some administrative problem, and I was standing there talking to someone and who should burst through the door but old Russ Jenkins and he wants to talk to his countryman. He was approached by his hut commander, and he said, "Where are you going?"
- 18:00 And he said, "I want to talk to..." He said, "We don't welcome strangers into this hut." Russ looked at him in total disbelief, he had never heard anything like it in his life before. He queried this, and the bloke said, "Things have been going off," and that made it worse and Russ was accused of being a thief. He looked at him in horror and anger he said, "Fuck you George," and walked out.
- 18:30 I thought he was going to say, "What is that fellow doing here?" And he didn't even see me and I was only a few yards on the other side. I went back to the office and there was old Russ sitting there black with rage, and I said, "Christ you don't look too happy Russ." He said, "I have never been so insulted in the whole of my bloody life before." I said, "How come?"
- 19:00 And he said, "I went into the bloody hut over in the other compound and they accused me of being a bloody thief." So our security wasn't too bad because here was one of our work mates and he didn't know.

How did you know when someone was an informer?

Some of the recipients

- 19:30 in the camp had been taken in Greece and they had given away some of our troops who were being harbored by Greek civilians. I was in a temporary office one day talking to the Italian interpreter and the door opened and in came someone standing in the doorway,
- 20:00 and he was in tears and he pointed out to the interpreter that he was a good friend of the Italians in Greece, and the Tabutsi was trying to shut him up, and he wasn't able to see me because I was behind the door. He explained how he was a good friend and how he had helped the Italians and then he realised I was there and shut up like a clam. On another occasion fellows were walking around the

compound

20:30 in different directions, one Australian digger walked up to a recipient and punched him in the nose and he was the bloke that gave him away, so things get known.

It just leaks out does it?

If you happened to see the bloke who made you a prisoner a year later in a prisoner of war camp, you'd be tempted to punch him in the nose wouldn't you?

21:00 **How many informants would you say there were?**

Wouldn't have any idea but not many but recipients were a bad bet anyway, they weren't particularly loyal to the British crown, they were very enthusiastic about the war, they were more concerned with their own comfort than anything else. You wouldn't expect them to be the same calibre as an Australian volunteer

21:30 nor were they, so our security wasn't too bad.

Being in mining was one of your roles to know the rocks and so on, what was your role in the escape?

Just a participant like anyone else.

22:00 **But your knowledge of the rocks and the geology did that help?**

Made me more familiar with it than another but it didn't take them long to adapt. If someone wanted me to do that same sort of thing today I would be horrified, I wouldn't do it, but in those days one didn't have much sense. One had different

22:30 concepts of consequence.

So you are saying that you wouldn't build that tunnel today?

You couldn't get me to crawl in it today.

There is no need too today is there?

But I'm wiser.

23:00 **Were there other people in the camp that knew about the geology of the ground?**

Its not very difficult, all one struck was an alluvium of gravel. Sometimes quite big stones, I remember I came upon a large stone and it took me all my shift to move it, and when

23:30 we got it into the sledge it blocked the whole tunnel behind me. If the alarm had gone off I would have been in a very peculiar position, I would have been trapped there, and little things like that. There was an occasional fall of the roof of the tunnel,

24:00 but it never happen to me but it did happen to some other fellows.

What would happen in that case?

Cleared your way and just carried on. We didn't timber the tunnel, we didn't have too. It filled up pretty well with an occasional bit from the top.

Would the guy inside be all right from the collapse?

He'd vacate himself from the

24:30 fall if it happened all over him and carry on, but it did happen once or twice so I'm told, but it didn't happen to me.

Can you describe in further detail how you built the air pump, what it looked like?

I built it myself,

25:00 one of our electrician cobblers [friends] took the conjugant, the electrical conjugant from the ceiling and just left the bare wires and we used that as a pipe. We had to have a high-pressure apparatus, not a volumetric one. In the great escape in Germany

25:30 they used a volumetric forge, a blower taking a large volume of air at low pressure through like that big, made out of tins from Red Cross parcels. We didn't have the brains to do that.

26:00 All I could think of was a large bellows which delivered air at pressure which was needed for this narrow alluvium, so that gave us a minimum air supply at the working place. Without which we couldn't have done it because there wouldn't have been enough air to sustain a bloke doing hard work. Plus

26:30 a light made out of a wick in a tin of fat, sort of primitive candle. Even so, we were breathing carbon as

I told you before.

With the pumps, you say it was bellows, you were just pumping it, who operates it?

The bellows was operated by a bloke down

27:00 in the shaft back under the hut.

You made the bellows as well?

Yes, it was a big bellow about that big, I forget what we used for the top and bottom, a ground sheet for

27:30 the flexible sides, plus an inlet and outlet valve, worked minimal, it gave us enough air to operate by. In the great escape in Germany they used a blower and buried the pipe made out of tins, on the bottom of the tunnel,

28:00 but they were digging in sand and we were digging in alluvium.

Did it feel like you were in the mines again?

Yes, it did a bit.

Did that mining experience help at all?

I don't think it made any difference.

28:30 Put yourself in the same position and you could adapt yourself to digging a tunnel couldn't you, if you felt so inclined, and if you didn't feel so inclined you wouldn't be invited to. Just recently here,

29:00 I'm the dining president of the dining group that meets once a month in the Tasmanian club and we invited a guest of honour, some notable, to address us on some subject in which he has expertise and we have now been going for some twenty-eight years. I got a telephone call here at one stage of the game from an acquaintance I knew

29:30 and she said to me, "In your prisoner of war life did you ever know a bloke called John Dwyer?" I said, "Yes I did, we had a John Dwyer who helped dig a tunnel out of Camp 57 in the north east of Italy."

30:00 She said, "I've got his father here who is Professor Terry Dwyer, in the medical school here," who I knew. Never for a moment associated, and he wanted to know whether I knew his Dad and I remember him, he and a fellow called Costello and someone else. I've got the names on the charge sheet of our tunnel escapee.

30:30 They escaped and they were members of an artillery unit in Greece and they escape in a boat from Greece and rowed across the Mediterranean and landed on the shores of North Africa, and hearing traffic they rushed to the road to be ridden by the Africa Korps.

31:00 That must have been about late April 1941 they had done this monumental trip in a rowing boat across the Mediterranean only to be recaptured again and they were enthusiastic escapees, as you might image.

31:30 I was able to tell the father of Terry that I knew him because I had met him after they rowed ashore in east of Tobruk. Had they gone ashore another forty miles eastward they would have met up with our own forces,

32:00 so they spent the next four years as prisoners of war.

You said that they were enthusiastic escapers, when you were building your tunnel you said that people helped out building your tunnel but they didn't want to escape, why was that?

We never asked them,

32:30 probably thought that it was going to fail anyway, which it did, and didn't want to privy themselves to the trouble, that is the simplest explanation.

But they were willing to help?

Yes.

How did you move the soil around, how did you dispose of it?

We constructed sledges, and one bloke worked at the face

33:00 using a tin hat as a shovel and we had pinched a picket incidentally, we managed to pinch a picket and we wore that pick down to blades that long, by the time we finished that tunnel. We cut the shaft of it off and just used it with a handle about so long, and we used tin hats, of

33:30 which there were plenty, as a shovel. Quite an efficient shovel. Under those circumstances you don't need a handle on a shovel.

What did you do with the soil?

I told you.

But how would you move it, you said where you put it but how did you actually move it around the ground?

- 34:00 We constructed sledges and passed the soil from the face back to someone pulling the sledge, who put it into a sledge and then who pulled the sledge back to the shaft. It was then pulled up by other helpers and deposited under the floor boards of the hut. We were cooperated with magnificently by the occupants of the hut,
- 34:30 by these New Zealanders who comfort we upset considerably. When they moved into the hut we assembled them and told them that there was a tunnel going on under their feet and told them what was expected of them, so it unfolded. They were happy enough to cooperate,
- 35:00 bugger the enemy up, nothing they liked better, so it just worked well. I forget how long it took us, it was some months and during which time no search was conducted in the hut, they searched everywhere else but not in that compound. They started off with
- 35:30 one hut, I think there were six in a row and they filled the first hut first and didn't search it the first week. Then they filled the next one and searched the first one and while the second one was being filled, they didn't search it, and in the mean time we were digging this tunnel hoping that we would get it done before they got to that hut.

Was the pick the

- 36:00 **main tool that you used?**

The only one we had.

How did you steal that?

One of my escape parties Richard Head was in charge of works somehow, and somehow or another he managed to elude the Italians, that they had taken this pick out of the compound, and he argued until they gave in.

- 36:30 We had the pick and they couldn't remember taking it out but they thought that they must have. The bloke who was deceived was highly annoyed when he obviously found his pick worn down, in our possession.

Did this argument take place in Italian or English do you know?

- 37:00 It took place in Italian, somewhat imperfect Italian. We were all recaptured some four days or so later
- 37:30 and consigned to the prison.

Before you said you were an administrator in the camp?

The compound leader was Allan Beecroft from Launceston from the 2/12th Battalion and he asked me to be his OC [Officer Commanding] administration,

- 38:00 and we got a team around us. Richard Head the bloke who pinched the pick was one and Tom Commons, we three escaped together. Beecroft didn't, Russ Jenkins who had ditched Carton de Wiart into the Mediterranean didn't,
- 38:30 and we didn't even let him know. The less people that know about these things the better, the more people that know the less secure the security is, so that was the way that it worked out.

What was the plan once you got out, did you have disguises?

We weren't far from the Yugoslav border,

- 39:00 or the borders of Trieste in those days, nebulous state Trieste that interposed itself between Italy and Slovenia. Not in existence anymore, it was given to the Italians I think, I don't know, either the Italians or the Yugoslavs. We were only about twelve miles from the border
- 39:30 and then it was the province of Slovenia and the capital of which was Ljubljana some sixty or ninety kilometers away. Bearing in mind the times, the Axis armies had occupied Yugoslavia, the [Dragoliub] Mihailovic's forces [the Chetniks] were fighting Tito forces and both fighting the enemy, and
- 40:00 there was a concentration of troops in the northern part of Yugoslavia. While I was in the prison for being rude to the Italian they brought in an Australian lieutenant put into the cell next to mine and we communicated to each other. He had been taken prisoner
- 40:30 in April 1941 and here we are now in October 1942. He had spent over a year with the civilian

population in Yugoslavia and was ultimately given away and recaptured by the Italians. He had jumped a train

41:00 going into Germany in April 1941 and had spent the next year or more in Yugoslavia, and he was then taken prisoner again and he was put into the cell next to mine and he was convinced that he was going to be shot. I think he probably wasn't. If they were going to shoot him they would have shot him long before. It was the habit of shooting all the prisoners in Yugoslavia, both sides, they all shot prisoners.

Tape 7

00:30 **Can you please tell us more about Lombardy your prisoner camp you were transferred to?**

It was a camp, this was when I first got there I had been escorted from Gruppignano down through Belluno, Florence, Udine

01:00 and took another train from Carpi to Udine to where this camp was which was an English camp, and the morale was poor it was established in mud, there was six inches of snow everywhere. The warrant officers in charge of the camp were racketeers on the men's bread, and everything was wrong with it.

01:30 There I met Arthur Cotton who had been banished from number one compound in [Camp] 57, a year beforehand for a bit of a revolt that went on when the Italians decided to shave everyone's hair. Cotton was banished from the camp and he managed this, and I don't know how he did it, to be transferred back to 57.

02:00 I didn't last long before I got put into the clink again. When I was being escorted to the prison we passed the sick bay and the medical officer want to know what was going on and I got stuck into these Italian guards and they told me that Cotton was next.

02:30 The medicos summoned him and declared him sick and put him in bed, while I spent a fortnight in prison he lavished in luxury in the sick bay. When they let me out they sent us back to Camp 73.

That was what it was called Camp 73, what was the weather like at this stage?

03:00 Cold as charity and six inches of snow everywhere and floors of the huts were bricks laid on mud and the hygiene was terrible and the blokes spent most of their life in bed. Mud on the floors and when summer came

03:30 Red Cross parcels turned up and things improved a lot. I was put in a hut full of so called colonials, South Africans, New Zealanders and Australians all of whom had been wounded in African battles and had recovered from their wounds.

04:00 I was the only unwounded casualty there. I was the captain of the rugby team and we use to play rugby.

Rugby league or rugby union?

Union, union naturally, we had New Zealanders and South Africans God help us, it couldn't have been anything but.

04:30 I contacted a known New Zealander cobbler old Dick Mangan who sustained a dreadful wound at El Alamein. A lump of air burst shrapnel went straight through his face and I picked him up in a pool of blood and ultimately got him through to a hospital in Italy,

05:00 and sewed him up in a bad fashion. Dear old Dick loved the game of rugby union and played it until he was seventy back in New Zealand. They have got all sorts of grades in New Zealand, even the geriatrics and the aged and infirm play it, but he's now dead.

05:30 I just had a letter from his daughter the other day but I haven't answered it yet. He spent years having plastic surgery to reconstruct this badly damaged face. I've forgotten whether we won or not

06:00 but old Mangan told me that we only lost once, which I had forgotten.

At Camp 73 can you tell us how big this camp was how many prisoners roughly?

It consisted of two compounds with a common roadway in between, I forget how many huts there were,

06:30 at a rough guess about a thousand men in each compound, maybe maximum.

Can you tell us about the allied bombing raids around Italy did you see much of that?

There weren't any,

07:00 not in my vicinity. They spared Italy. I dare say Italy was minimal bombed up to her time of her capitulation and I don't doubt she did received a fair amount of bombing as the German army tended to

withdraw. That was

07:30 when all the prisoners had either escaped or went to Germany. I didn't see any bombing at all. I had to wait until we got to Germany where it was common. The bombing, was not at all uncommon to hear the rumbling of bombs going off all night.

08:00 **You were shifted from Lombardy to Germany can you tell us what took place and why you were shifted?**

I was put in Camp 73 at the beginning of December 1942 and

08:30 apart from the intermediate, Cotton and I managed to get back to 57 and was transported back to 73, and I was there until Italy capitulated in September 1943. That meant that one spent the tail end of winter in Camp 70 at Carpi, and the summer.

09:00 Italy capitulated and the Germans tactically attacked the camp without failing and imprisoned the Italians and took over the guarding of the camp. Where they got on the vino [wine] and fired shots all over the place and generally let off a bit of steam and then

09:30 moved us through the Brenner Pass into Germany through Austria into Bavaria. We finished up in Bavaria at Camp 7A Moosburg, forty kilometers northeast of Munich, a staging camp full of Russian prisoners

10:00 and various others. We were there for only a couple of months and then we moved to central Germany into Camp

10:30 11A at Altengrabow in the winter of 1943. When the battle of Berlin was going on and the air force Bomber Command was attacking Berlin, and we were on the southern end and sometimes the bomber stream flew over us

11:00 in terrible weather. You'd hear the rumble of bombs that went on for hours. I suppose Berlin must have been eighty miles to our east.

When you were at Bavaria?

No when we were at Altengrabow in Bavaria, we were northeast of Munich

11:30 and I don't think one heard any bombing at all, I can't remember any bombing in the vicinity of Munich for the time we were there which was only a couple of months. When we got into central Germany it was common to have a bomber stream going over us every second night.

12:00 **When you first came into Germany did you see evidence of this massive strategic bombing campaign?**

No, we came into Germany through Austria and we were in camp 7A in Moosburg which was near Munich and

12:30 there didn't appear to be any air activity going on in the period when we were at Munich.

The next place after Munich?

The next place after Munich was Altengrabow between Magdeburg and Berlin, closer to Magdeburg than Berlin. Magdeburg is on the Elbe. Magdeburg was attacked

13:00 and Berlin was attacked and one could hear all this going on.

When you were at Munich would they allow you outside the camp?

No.

With any sort of labouring activities?

We went outside the camp once to attend the funeral of a British soldier who had died, they gave

13:30 him a military funeral, with a German firing squad with all the traps of a military funeral. As I stood there there was a mass of Russian graves, and you knew that because Russian graves didn't have a cross on them and western society graves had a cross on them. I think there were about a dozen

14:00 western, either French or British and I counted six hundred and forty Russians. I remember the figure because it's the number of acres in a square mile, and they treated Russian prisoners abominably. The Russians have suffering stamped into their genes. The Germans

14:30 saw full well that it was perpetuated in their prisoners.

You saw evidence of this?

Minimal.

At Munich?

At Moosburg.

How did they treat the Russians, can you tell us about this incident, or incidents that you saw?

- 15:00 For instance one night in the hut of which I was in, there was a commotion and in the dark when everyone had woken and had discovered what the cause of the commotion was. It was a
- 15:30 bloke woke up and found a body creeping around inside the hut and taking the boots and depositing [them] outside a window, and he grabbed this bloke and it turned out to be a Russian. The Russian wriggled out of his coat and darted out the window and took off.
- 16:00 When we investigated there was a pile of boots on the other side of the window, the Russian had obviously been let out of his compound by the German guards who were probably subjected to some sort of bribery, into our compound and he was preceding to pinch our boots, they didn't have any. He was apprehended and managed to get back to his compound without his coat.
- 16:30 The next day when the Germans were acquainted with this and pointed out to us that they didn't mind if we killed the Russians, they said, "If they try again kill them." We were concerned about treating them any too gently.
- 17:00 Hardly the sort of conduct we had contemplated to perform upon our allies. The Germans didn't hold Russian life in any regard at all. I wasn't witness to any atrocities but others by anecdote in other parts of Germany had seen some terrible things.
- 17:30 I never talk about anything that is not proven in my experience, there is no point in recounting other people's episodes.

That's good. What were the conditions like at these camps, you went to in Moosburg firstly?

Pretty primitive

- 18:00 we weren't getting five star hotel treatment anywhere along the line, it was getting worse as the war wore on. You could imagine with a vast number of prisoners in Germany and foreign slave workers all over the beastly place. Food supplied at a minimum and at very poor quality, not only for us but for the German population itself.
- 18:30 They were suffering that during the total war, which is not a very pleasant situation to find yourself in. Where shortages of food and hardships were the order of the day.

Can you tell us about the

- 19:00 **German guards at the POW camps, what sort of guards were these were they young men, can you tell us more about them?**

They were generally third rate soldiers some of who were medically compromised, wounded, elderly.

- 19:30 Germany couldn't afford to put its best soldiers guarding prison war camps, they were fighting on the fronts all over the place. None of them were very happy with their lot.

What do you mean by that?

They could be subjected to bribery,

- 20:00 happier to be there than to be on the Russian front, which none were terribly enthusiastic about.

The Russian front?

Where the fighting was of a particularly brutal nature, really primitive stuff on the Russian front.

- 20:30 When one was use to warfare in Africa and in Rommel's world it was war without hate, but on the Russian front it was war with hatred, unmitigated undiminished.

When you first saw those graveyards of Russian soldiers about six hundred and forty roughly, you assumed they had been murdered by the Germans?

No,

- 21:00 there was no point in assuming anything but it was probably about that proportion that prisoners of war died due to malnutrition and bad treatment. One heard dreadful stories of prisoner of war rail transports coming from the eastern front where they would open the doors and half
- 21:30 of them would be dead in the cattle truck. These are all anecdotal things, I didn't see any of that.

Did you throughout your stay at the three POW camps, Moosburg, Magdeburg, what was the other one?

Altengrabow.

Or was that after that?

No we headed up past Altengrabow.

22:00 **That's near Magdeburg isn't it?**

Yes.

In Moosburg and Altengrabow were you on friendly terms with the German guards?

No, these people were our

22:30 enemies and there was no point in being friendly with them. There was an aloofness between prisoners and German guards, no one wanted to be friendly with them.

23:00 **Were there any escape attempts from Moosburg?**

No, not to my knowledge.

You didn't entertain such plans?

No. We were half starved and when you are half starved your ambitions to do other than just exist severely diminished.

23:30 You have got to be overfed to hold ambitions to escape and carry on.

Why did they choose to move you from Moosburg to Altengrabow?

You must ask them, I have no idea.

Why would you think they did? Unfortunately they are not alive now.

Moosburg was a

24:00 staging camp more or less, it wasn't a camp where people stayed in it for long durations, people came into it and moved out of it. Germany had a lot of industry and a lot of farm labour was supplied by slave labour, prisoners of war, and prisoners of some description whether from the east.

24:30 Everyone had to do some work that was suppose to work, within the limits of the Geneva Convention. Sergeants and above weren't compelled to work, they could volunteer occasionally. Corporals and below were compelled to work if the detaining power wanted you too.

25:00 People who elected to work on farms generally were treated well and fed well. You lived a much better life than someone in the compound but I didn't want to work for them. I didn't join up to do other than

25:30 play a part in destroying there economy rather than kicking it along, so I never worked in Germany, I never worked anywhere.

The mood of the people, did you ever encounter German civilians while you were there?

You'd see them in the distance

26:00 through the barbed wire, I can't remember. It wasn't until the tail end of the war that I was ever talking to a German civilian.

Can you tell us what the differences were between the Altengrabow and Moosburg in terms of the conditions and the camp itself?

26:30 They were both very primitive camps and bearing in mind this was the winter and when you get subjected to a winter in Germany in primitive conditions, its an unpleasant existence. There's snow all over the place and its cold as charity,

27:00 and inadequate food, it's a very miserable life. One lived in sufferable misery I suppose it would best be described as, until the sun became apparent again and warmed the place up.

27:30 By that stage we had moved into Poland and you might ask why they moved us there but you'd have to ask them again because I have got the faintest idea.

You went from Altengrabow and your next destination after that was?

On the Vistula [River] between Gdansk and Warsaw in Poland.

You were on the Vistula?

Yes. Where

28:00 there was no bombing no shooting, no firing going on. For the time we were there it was the only time I

- was in Germany where one didn't hear a shot, or bombs going off or aircraft flying about,
- 28:30 apart from the fact that we didn't get any bombing down in Litchburg. But in central Germany it was a common occurrence and in Poland it didn't happen. If anything, this period that one spent in Poland between April 1944
- 29:00 and September or October 1944 was probably the less unpleasant part of ones POWs life. The enemy left us along, fed us on rotten potatoes but Red Cross parcels arrived and we played sport, we had a volley ball team.
- 29:30 I lived in an air force hut full of air force prisoners all of whom had been shot down from somewhere or other. A wide variety of airmen kept falling out of the air in those days.
- 30:00 We all got along well with each other, they were all nice people. The characteristics of aircrew is that they are all facetious fellows, they were part of an organisation in Bomber Command and suffered a sixty percent casualty rate,
- 30:30 forty-eight percent death rate, so there was no point other than being happy to just be alive.
- With the approach of the Russians coming from the east, could you hear the sound of battle getting closer?**
- No. They moved us when the big Russian push began
- 31:00 during the autumn of 1944, bearing in mind the Allies had landed on the shores of France, June of that year. There was an attempt on Hitler's life on June 22nd, dynamic events were happening all around the place.
- History was being enacted.
- 31:30 The Russian front extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea, a thousand odd miles. The Allies had landed in France and were battling their way through the Rhine.
- How long did they actually keep you in Poland for?**
- 32:00 From April until September.
- And after that they moved you to where?**
- Back to northwest Germany to Fallingbostal in the Hanover, Hamburg, Bremen Triangle to Camp 357, our camp in Poland was 357 and we took the camp number with us to Fallingbostal.
- 32:30 **I presume the conditions were quite bad now at this stage when you got relocated from Poland?**
- When Western Germany was being bombed relentlessly, if you can visualise that triangle, Hanover, Hamburg, Bremen all of which were bombing targets.
- 33:00 Berlin to our east and Magdeburg to our southeast, Schwerin to our north, all these cities were bombing targets. The flash of rumbling bombs went on day after day
- 33:30 it just became a normal part of the environment.
- You could see the thousand plane bombing raids going over the German cities?**
- Bearing in mind the RAF bombed at night so one never saw them other than where a plane might be caught in a search light.
- 34:00 At the commencement of spring, and I forget the date of this, we got two clear days when we were at Altengrabow and the US [United States] Air Force came over in great strength. We were at the southern extremities
- 34:30 of the main bomber stream while fighters were active. There were great attacks and firing going on in the air as these Flying Fortresses in great numbers, flew on to bomb Berlin.
- 35:00 I remember one Fortress that had started in the light, and pouring black smoke and a (UNCLEAR) [Messerschmitt or Junkers] couldn't resist the temptation to get on the stern of this crippled aircraft and must of got a bullet fair between the eyes from the rear gunner, and went into the earth full bore.
- 35:30 It taught him to be a bit more circumspect to attack a B17 [Bomber] from the stern, where he had two fifty calibre machine guns looking at him over open sights. So he didn't get an opportunity to fire before he was dead.
- 36:00 I often wonder what happened to that crippled aircraft that still had about five hundred miles to go to get to the French coast, and he probably never made it.

At Camp 357 how long did you actually stay there for?

For the winter of 1944 to 1945 we went there probably in late

36:30 September of 1944 and they started to march us out eastwards away from the Anglo American forces who had crossed the Rhine in the middle of April 1945, only a fortnight or three weeks before Germany capitulated.

37:00 Hitler in his mania had decided that the air force had destroyed their country so they would stay there and build it up, rebuild it. He failed to realise that he wasn't going to be there at the end of the war.

37:30 The nation was beaten to its knees and Adolf was dead.

You said you were marched off eastwards away from the Elbe River?

We were over on the western side of the Elbe and we had to march eastwards to even see the Elbe.

38:00 Three of us fizzled off from the marching column, we had escaped from it and the column was stretched out and we were being guarded by the Vulcan fellows, poor old Germans ruthless and toothless, old enough to be one's father, not very enthusiastic about the role they found themselves in.

38:30 We took the opportunity when the column was extended to dive into crops of trees where we waited for some hours until the column had passed. We then decided that we were too close to the road and got out onto the track again and then made for a crop of trees in the distance only to find two of the column guards

39:00 had also absconded. The British were closely pursuing us and they were determined to give themselves up only to find that they weren't as close as they thought. In seeing us they halted us and we came to an agreement that they would escort us.

39:30 If we were apprehended by German forces, they would say that they were detailed to look after us as we had fallen out sick. If the Anglo Americans caught us we would protect them, so that suited us. We were proceeding then towards the Elbe and letting the column getting further away from us.

40:00 We came to a village and they would go to the bergermeister [mayor] and get a billet and we would be billeted. I remember we were billeted in the inn house of a village of a single street and two Typhoons [dive bomber] were flying around above us armed with rockets under their wing.

40:30 We prevailed upon the crowd of the house to boil a copper full of water so we could wash in a tub. As one bloke was about to step into this warm bath the Typhoon's attacked the village. One our members was up on a crop of trees performing a call of nature

41:00 and over him these things lined up on the village firing twenty millimeter cannons and rockets. Cannon shells came cascading around this defecating prisoner who thought he was being attacked. He came rushing down, holding up his pants, in high consternation but they blew the centre of the village apart and then departed.

Tape 8

00:00 **Let's continue from the Typhoons attacking the village.**

The populous came to us in great distress, they knew we were there of course, but there were columns of smoke going up all over the horizon where

01:00 the tactical air force was teaching Germany who was winning the war, by shooting up all small villages about the place. Bearing in mind that these aircraft are piloted by eighteen year olds and war was coming to an end so they had to exercise their fire power, which is a very exciting procedure when

01:30 you are in command of an aircraft like a Typhoon loaded up with rockets and privy to a cannon, it makes a lot of noise and does a lot of damage. They were instilling in the German memory that the Allies were winning the war.

02:00 The following morning the guards became a bit apprehensive, they pointed out that if the Gestapo [German internal security police] came to investigate this aerial damage and found us there they would shoot the lot of us. So they decided to move us out at dawn the next morning. At midday we hit the Elbe, we traveled over the Elbe

02:30 in a punt. Only to discover our marching column were only a few miles ahead of us, they had pulled up for a rest for a few days. So we rejoined the column there where we had escaped from. The guards,

03:00 which seemed to take it all in a matter of course, our guards said, "We will do it again when you are a prisoner some other time." They then marched us north towards Schwerin and then we got to a little

village called Kiplitz where we established ourselves.

- 03:30 I remember a barn caught alight on the other side of a small lake and the prisoners manned the fire brigade pump and gave the barn plenty of opportunity to catch alight before they got the pump in action. Then up the road came an armoured car
- 04:00 which turned out to be from the British 2nd Army. So our prisoner of war life ended right there, we ceased to be prisoners from that moment onwards. That armoured car took possession of the town,
- 04:30 great hilarity. The news of Hitler's death came to us when we were there so it must have been the end of April or the beginning of May.
- 05:00 So the nation was in the process of collapsing. The armoured car instructed us to stay there, that this was in the area
- 05:30 of the British 2nd Army and a rescue force will be along and collect us and take us back to our own forces. We had been through this in Italy and we were determined to become self-determining we went into a nearby village
- 06:00 where there were Americans that were gathering up the German soldiers into a barbed wire encampment. We pinched a German vehicle and came back and collected our gear.
- 06:30 Met a poor German girl who came rushing out in great distress, on our way back, that Russian prisoners were attacking her father so we stopped and rescued the poor old fellow from the Russian prisoners. They pointed out that Stalin wanted all these characters to send them to Siberia
- 07:00 and they were trying to escape. Little did they know they were going to become the victims - the victims of Stalin's paranoia and all the prisoners finished up in Katulka and if they were an officer they got shot. We shot the Russians off down the
- 07:30 road and rescued the poor German and his daughter and went back and collected our gear. Then drove to Magdeburg where there was a POW reception centre and surrendered our car to a British soldiers who guided us through the
- 08:00 city to the POW reception centre. We put ourselves in the hands of our rescuing authorities who fed us and ultimately put us in transport and went across to northwest of Germany,
- 08:30 where we were encamped on VE [Victory in Europe] Day when the war officially ended. From there Bomber Command was flying prisoners of war out to England, which was a masterpiece of organisation.
- 09:00 I flew out in a day or two in a 617 Dam Buster Squadron Lancaster, the bomb bay cut away to take the ten ton bomb. We landed somewhere down in the south of England and I don't have the faintest idea where, and then we were
- 09:30 trucked to Brighton where our POWs section people had setup a reception camp for air force prisoners. There were a thousand or so air force prisoners in Germany, RAAF prisoners in Germany. The army had setup a
- 10:00 POW reception centre in Eastbourne twenty odd miles to our east down on the coast of Sussex. All Australian prisoners were looked after by these POW reception centres. My younger brother was there with the army and he had been in the first campaign
- 10:30 in North Africa over to Greece and Crete and he had escaped from Crete, and back to Australia and up to the Pacific and he got himself on the POW reception centre in 1945 in England. I last saw him in Benghazi on the first attack in Libya and there he was in England, he always got somewhere before I did.
- 11:00 **When you ran off into the woods with the guards and you made a deal was it difficult to reach that deal, what were the circumstances?**
- You have only got to realise that Germany was in a state of collapse
- 11:30 and to be a citizen of a nation in collapse, it's a most unenviable position. All they ever stood for was collapsing around their ears, there fate was uncertain.
- 12:00 We knew we were going to better things, they didn't have a clue what they were going to face. They were fortunate they were on the western sector. Had they been on the eastern sector they would have been less secure because the Russians had a different idea on how to treat interred people. When the Russians inter someone they grind them into the ground.
- 12:30 When the Brits inter something, and the words of Churchill, "In war - resolution, in defeat - defiance, in victory - magnanimity," and that's what happened.

You could see all that in their demeanor?

They were victims of an adverse circumstance, and one felt sorry for them,

- 13:00 I didn't want to kill them anymore, I felt sorry for them. We had been through that ourselves for years beforehand. Contrary to the predictions of the Africa Korps people that I have spoken about we were winning the war and they were losing it. To lose a war
- 13:30 meant the total disillusion of everything they stood for. Germans love saying 'orders are orders', you are banned regardless. We are a bit more circumspect about this order business, we questioned them, we disobey them if we think
- 14:00 they are no good, but not the Germans, they obeyed the lot. That is their national characteristic that is drummed into them over centuries.

Did they know at the time to run to the British and away from the Russians?

Yes, there was a constant movement on the roads of Germany, of

- 14:30 refugees moving westwards with fear, fear from the east, it was reasonable with good reason.
- 15:00 The Russians I didn't come in contact with them and all my knowledge anecdotal and it is undoubtedly quite factual told to me by people who were there. One bloke was captured by the Russians and had a Tommy gun or its equivalent, thrusting at his hand
- 15:30 and put on a tank and proceeded westwards. They crossed the railway line coming out of Danzig at the same time a trainload of refugees were coming down it. The lead tank put a shell into the engine, and the tanks like a bunch of Indians formed a circle on that side and poured machine gun fire into those
- 16:00 refugees which was pretty barbarous conduct. The sort of thing that wouldn't happen
- 16:30 in the west, not even in the days of General Patton's wild movement into Germany, where he shot up everything but they were a bit circumspect about machine gunning a bunch of women and children. Not so the Russians, they had great delight. That's anecdotal and I didn't see that,
- 17:00 but quite believable it was that sort of conduct that was expected by the populous of Eastern Germany. They were very anxious to get over the Elbe. They didn't know at that stage the game that was going to be the Russians that would be influencing the British and the Americans which happened to be the Elbe.
- 17:30 That was worked out but they hadn't told the Germans then. Hence the troubles that occurred there after the Berlin air lift, remember, all those things, the Cold War that began at that stage.
- 18:00 Its common these days to be anti American and it is said, "What did they do?" They were instrumental in winning the war. They won the Cold War, they re-established
- 18:30 German economics with the Marshall Plan. They made a few mistakes along the way, like Vietnam and so on, because they were new to global power, but what did they do, these are episodes of immense magnitude that affected the history of the world. Americans,
- 19:00 hating America, don't seem to recognise the magnitude of this, of the American effort of our time.

Personally at the end of the war and this was all happening what was your physical and mental condition like after being in a POW camp?

- 19:30 I did a university course at the end of it.

At that time when you were in the bushes were you malnourished?

I suppose it could be said that one was a mental vegetable, one had devoted one's thoughts not to cultural pursuits. POW life did

- 20:00 very little to one's social advancement as you could imagine, it was primitive in the extreme. One conversed in unbiblical language and one had to be extremely careful when one got to civilisation, you had to relearn social conduct, we were not nice people I suppose.

- 20:30 **Did people tell you that when you returned?**

No.

You are not the first to say that, we have had others that have said the same thing.

- 21:00 One hadn't spoken to a white woman for five years just about, one had lived in the presence of men. One had used barrack language in the course of events until it became ingrained in oneself, and here we found oneself back in a civilised society.
- 21:30 A cobbler who was a Wellington pilot from New Zealand who was in it for two years compared to my four, couldn't bring himself to use a telephone, believe it or not, paralyzed at the thought of using a

telephone. To be entertained by an English family would bring beads

22:00 of sweat to our brow, because of the considerable difference in the transition from the society in which we had lived for years

22:30 to the one we have found ourselves in. All these things took a while to get use to. I suppose the populous we came in contact with realised our problem or rather

23:00 probably realised the changes that one had to become adapted to again, they were probably very kind. So I spent three months in England.

23:30 **When you got recaptured after escaping through the tunnel you got placed in solitary confinement, how would you describe that time?**

Somehow or other I got singled out for special treatment, I was ultimately banished from the camp, essentially for having organised the escape.

24:00 I didn't organise the organisation any more than any other than the escaping nineteen did, we all played our part. No one more so than anyone else, the organisation seemed to work. Everyone by common consent did what was expected of him. I got banished from the camp

24:30 on a charge of having organised the escape. There is a book written in Italian which seems to be under that impression as well, strangely enough. I've got a copy of it somewhere.

25:00 I was threatened when I got to Camp 73 that I would be shot out of hand if I took over, and all this sort of bull dust. My New Zealander cobbler reminded me a few years ago that

25:30 at this camp they use to take our walking parties for exercise and I joined one of these parties once and they doubled the guards, I had forgotten it but my old New Zealander cobbler reminded me of this.

26:00 I considered myself to be a meek sort of a fellow not meriting all this military attention, but you can get a false reputation, undeserved. When I was being banished from the camp the guards had a great time. Every time you pulled

26:30 up at a station or changed trains they would tell everyone how I was a 'leader of an escape' and what have you, so one became the centre of attention and they dined out on the story. So you can get a false reputation that spreads throughout the land.

27:00 **Was it flattering at all?**

No.

The actual time in solitary, how do you deal with the days?

Not only in solitary but stripped of one's clothes except one's pants, and in irons

27:30 and cold as charity in November in northern Italy, which is the commencement of winter. One was so exhausted that one had to sleep and it was too cold to sleep so one would collapse in exhaustion and sleep and wake up frozen and re-establish circulation. It was a fairly miserable period I can tell you.

28:00 Hardships are meant to be endured and what else can you do, so you endure them. One spent a few uncomfortable days.

28:30 **How many days was it?**

The Italian had a peculiar system, they had two systems of punishment.

29:00 'Rigorous punishment' and 'simple punishment' and that varied depending on your rank. If you were a private you copped the lot, if you were a sergeant you were a little bit better off, and if you were a warrant officer you were better off still. For the same offence a warrant gets a lesser treatment. There weren't any officers amongst us. Warrant officers were treated more leniently

29:30 and sergeants were treated just a little bit harsher, but more leniently than corporals and privates. Warrant officers and sergeants did twenty-five days mixed up with rigorous and simple punishment. The rigorous punishment was greater for sergeants than it was for

30:00 warrant officers. The rigorous punishment for corporals and privates was greater than it was for sergeants. In other words, warrant officers got no period in irons, sergeants got two hours of irons per day for the first ten days, or something like that.

30:30 Corporals and privates got five extra days, they got a month instead of twenty-five days, and they had four hours in irons per day for the first ten days, all for the same offence. I asked one of my Italian patients years later, forty years later, how this was and he being an old Italian naval bloke he said, "They punished the privates for being silly enough to follow the sergeants."

31:00 Whether he was being facetious...

Firstly did it make you very disrespectful, and secondly was it a big part of your life that time in confinement?

I think that I told you that hardship was there to be endured and once you have

31:30 endured it you forget about it. These days one would probably be counseled; if anyone wished to counsel me today I would be offended, would utter two words and one would be, "Off." I would be offended.

You could say it if you want, we won't mind.

32:00 Surely it is a sign of a demolition of the virility of our nation to put up with counseling every time you get a sore toe.

32:30 I would shudder to think what my confederates of those days would say to someone that wanted to counsel, they would be highly offended.

33:00 No, it didn't have any effect and it didn't wipe my life, it didn't turn me into a psychiatric wreck, minus counseling. but people would expect it to happen today and

33:30 why should it?

Do you think that people have lost the ability to endure the hardship and move on?

No. It becomes a shock I think to the modern generation because they have lived a fairly pampered life. Each generation has had it easier than the

34:00 one before it. These days of instant gratification if you want something you have it straight away and you don't even have to work for it, you can buy it on time payment, you are encouraged to go into debt, all that sort of thing. All calculated to upset that

34:30 what was a common trend in the Depression years of people putting up with duress.

How proud are you to be part of that generation through Depression and World War II?

Never thought of it in those terms, one was born into it.

35:00 My experience was shared by many. I wouldn't regard it as particularly unique, plus or minus it was an experience tolerated by thousands of others.

35:30 And bearing in mind one came out of it alive where many didn't. Some might argue that that was a lamentable state of affairs, to the living it was quite a privilege.

36:00 I was three months in England where I enjoy a fair bit of leave before embarking on the [SS] Orion and came back through the Panama.

36:30 **What was it like to return to Australia?**

When we were in the Caribbean the first atom bomb dropped, and bearing in mind that was the first time in history that we were introduced to nuclear warfare.

37:00 From then on every one realised that anything can happen and before we cleared the Panama the second one had dropped, and a week after that Japan had capitulated.

37:30 One had experienced the disillusion of the nation in Germany only a little while beforehand while we were there. We saw its effect and we were on the high seas when the atom bombs dropped

38:00 and the world of war for six odd years was over.

Is there anything that you would like to say or something that we haven't already covered to the Australian public or to whoever views this?

38:30 One lives through a period of dynamic changes in the history of the world,

39:00 millions have died, it's the luck of the draw that one was a survivor. I suppose one could be grateful for small mercies, that

39:30 was sixty-five years ago now, roughly speaking, so sixty-five years of the past.

40:00 At the time it was my total adult life. I spent the first six years of my adult life at war as did many others.

40:30 It was just one of the afflictions of the times, one went into it voluntarily and one came out of it gratefully.

Thanks very much for the day and it's been a great day.

41:00 Well here we are.

INTERVIEW ENDS