

Australians at War Film Archive

Walter Robinson (Robbie) - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1742>

Tape 1

00:33 **Thanks for participating in the Archive project, Mr Robinson. If I can ask you to start by giving us a brief summary of your life.**

I'm 85 years - it won't be so brief, but I was born in Gosford in

01:00 1919, my parents ran a citrus orchard in Somersby just outside Gosford. I lived there in the country for the first six or seven years of my life I suppose then we moved down to Gosford. In those days Somersby was a long way from Gosford

01:30 only seven miles. Dad used to send his oranges down to Gosford by a small steamer, out the heads of the Hawkesbury and up to Darling Harbour. It was a very primitive sort of a system. The method of communication then was

02:00 by carrier pigeon. Each time we sent down a load of oranges, he sent some pigeons. If the market needed more oranges, they'd sent a pigeon off home. They would get more oranges on the track. That lasted probably, I was six, seven, about eight years old, something like that.

02:30 We moved to Gosford and lived there so the family could go to school and I did my Intermediate Certificate, it was then. After passing anyway, my parents moved down to Sydney. I went to, I started off working in Perpetual Trustees

03:00 and at that time I got interested in the navy and joined up with the Naval Reserve in Rushcutters Bay in Sydney. I learnt to sail and to shoot and all the things that a naval person is expected to do. I was 19,

03:30 I suppose I was just on 19 years or 20 years of age at that stage and I became quite a good rifle shot and could handle a boat very well. So in August 1939 the

04:00 navy sent me down to Flinders to do a gunnery course there. Which carried on to the start of the war. The navy called me up because I was sort of partially trained. The first ship I joined was the [HMAS] Kanimbla. I can show you a photograph if you want it, but we had our ship. But I went from

04:30 in December '39 the Kanimbla went up to join the British Eastern Fleet in Hong Kong. War at this time had started so we were sent up north to Japan to do contraband control patrol,

05:00 and we intercepted ships that were bringing copper and that sort of thing from South America up round the to Japan to Vladivostok then by rail to Germany. We then, in-between, we were doing

05:30 patrols up and down the China coast and we picked up some 14 or 15 ships in our initial patrols up there. Put on prize cruise and sent them back down to Hong Kong. That lasted for about 12 months I think,

06:00 we didn't have too much trouble with the ships we were taking charge of.

Can you just tell me Mr Robinson, what ships you worked on just briefly and where you went to?

The first ship was the Kanimbla as you know, it was a 10000-passenger liner that used to

06:30 run from Brisbane to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. As a sort of passenger service. The first one was, from there I was sent back to Flinders Naval Depot to sit for a commission, and three months later they gave me the first stripe and I was then sent to Manoora which

07:00 is an armed merchant cruiser. It, in it we patrolled mostly through Darwin, Ocean Island, Nauru and throughout the Pacific. I was only there for about nine or 12 months I think. And then I was moved over to the corvette, which was about 1000 tons or so,

- 07:30 a 10th the size of the other ones. So we were then doing convoy work up and down New South Wales coast, well from Brisbane down to Melbourne; and then across to Noumea when the Americans at this stage were just joining, coming into the war.
- 08:00 We had to remove the mines from Noumea so they could get safely into the port. From there I was drafted to another corvette which was identical to the first one, but she was allocated to the Eastern Fleet which was then operating from Colombo,
- 08:30 Bombay, Karachi, Persian Gulf, the Aden. We were escorting quite big convoys. Pretty dull, and we lost a few ships because the German submarines were coming in around the Cape of Good Hope up to the Persian Gulf.
- 09:00 I think we only lost four or five ships on those runs.

We can come back and talk in detail about...

The next ship I went to was another corvette the Ararat and she was operating around about New Guinea and the Philippines and thereabouts.

- 09:30 That's, I think the war finished some time after that and we ended up with the 20th Minefield Flotilla. We swept, did clearing sweeps for mines from Hobart, South Australia, up the coast and up to Bougainville.
- 10:00 In October '46 I was discharged, went back to work with Perpetual Trustees, qualified as an accountant and stayed in the finance world for the rest of my working life.

- 10:30 **That's wonderful, that's good, that's great.**

Not very interesting or exciting, is it?.

It's not supposed to be, it's just a summary and then we go back and get the exciting parts.

If we can just go back and talk about your childhood. Had your parents had a farming background?

- 11:00 My father started the citrus industry in Somersby, well his father actually. We had quite a large citrus orchard up there. But I didn't, I had no feeling for growing things so that's why I
- 11:30 sent, came down to work in Sydney and how I got involved with the navy, for I seemed to have a facility for doing things nautical.

What work were you required to do on the orchard?

I was only seven/eight years old, so

- 12:00 not a great deal, we used to do odd jobs around the farm but nothing very substantial. We went to school up there. In actual fact we started off doing a correspondence course. My mother and some of the other ladies
- 12:30 in the district got together and ran this basic school. Until they built the first primary school in the district, then that took over of course.

How did they organise the school did they have?

Correspondence? The lessons came to them by correspondence course

- 13:00 and I suppose they just supervised. When my sister, who was a couple of years older than me, had to go to high school, that was the reason we moved down to Gosford itself.

You were talking about the correspondence school, can you tell me

- 13:30 **how that worked, how you would do your homework and who supervised you?**

About three families had children so the ladies used to take it in turns to give them their lessons, and as far as I recall they got the basic instruction from

- 14:00 the central school in Sydney and whether they actually sent in our work to be assessed I don't know. I suspect not. I think the ladies quite enjoyed educating the kids. Again, I was too young to appreciate what was going on. The kids used to come round, we'd sit round the kitchen
- 14:30 table and do our lessons and off we'd go. My father had an old T-model Ford, which we used to go down to Gosford occasionally and we had the usual ponies and so forth. I was never very keen on riding.
- 15:00 Cows, milked the cows, wasn't much good milking cows either, so you can see I wasn't cut out to be on the land.

How common was it for people in the area to have cars?

Since about

15:30 1925-7, fairly common. They didn't use them nearly as much as we do now. They were basic cars, in fact the first cars they had up here were convertible, and when the fruit season was on

16:00 we unbolted the seats of the car and put on a tray and laid the cases onto that. It was a very basic car, it had an almost chain drive to the rear wheels, it was very basic at that stage.

You touched on it earlier, but can you explain

16:30 **how your father sold the oranges, where they would be distributed?**

They built a farmer and his brother built a packinghouse which had a grader in it. The men used to go out pick oranges and they had a great big canvas container, which they slung over their shoulders, filled that with oranges

17:00 poured that into the back of the truck, it was then driven round to the packinghouse and the oranges were poured into a shoot and as they went down, the rollers determined which bin they went into so they had an even consistency.

17:30 Later on they used to wax them, but not in my time. So from there, as I said they were packed according to a system, in cases, the cases were loaded onto a lorry again sent down to Gosford put on the small steamer, called the Waratah and Erina I think, and down they went out the heads.

18:00 Up the harbour in Sydney and on to the market. Which I think was at Flemmies [Flemington markets] in those days.

What sort of help did they have a fruit picking time?

They had quite a lot of permanent men, who had regular work on the orchard. They were mainly Australian and Flemish people for some reason.

18:30 A lot of them had great trouble with the language, but the packing was simple enough, so they were able to do that. How they got them again I don't know, they just arrived.

What impressions did you have of them as a boy, given that they were from a foreign culture?

I think we were mostly amused by their mistakes in

19:00 English. I can't think of any at the moment, but it took them a while to pick up the language.

Did you know where they lived or how they got to be fruit picking in that area?

No, I had no idea how they got there. I know they were fairly steady, I wouldn't say steady

19:30 flow, but a lot of them stayed quite a number of years. After that; they often if they saved a bit of money they used to start off orchids of their own. Generally passionfruit. It was a starting point cause that was a good cash crop. Likewise the,

20:00 my aunts who lived across the other side of the road had a bit of house help too, and they were also mostly foreigners. But don't know where they came from.

You mentioned that your aunts lived across the road, did the family history go back a long way in the area?

They must have started about

20:30 1890 I suppose, something about there. My father, my grandfather rather was a parliamentary historian, he decided he wanted to go live in the country so he bought this land. Planted citrus

21:00 trees, which took about six years to fruit, so it was a fairly long-term project.

How prosperous a business was it for the family?

Not very, it was a fairly had life for my parents. It wasn't a...Then the Depression came along after that, the next thing that influenced our lives, but

21:30 I think the Depression didn't affect us quite so much because we had our own cows, sheep, vegetables, fruit and that sort of thing. So we had the basic things of life, which didn't need money. Except for fertiliser for the trees, which was fairly expensive in those days, cause the fertiliser came

22:00 down from Ocean Island and Nauru, where they got phosphate from there.

How was the fertilizer distributed?

I think we had a tractor, towed a machine, which spread the fertiliser. I couldn't give you any more details on that.

22:30 **You were saying that the Depression didn't impact your family as badly as say others because you were fairly self-sufficient, in what way was it evident how the Depression was affecting other people?**

It was a fairly isolated community related really and

23:00 all the other growers were in the same situation as we were. The prices were getting dropped, were very low, and then of course you had to buy fertilizer you needed money, and so it goes on.

Do you have any memories of men looking for work in the country?

23:30 After we moved down to Gosford we used to see quite a lot of people looking for work, and also people going around selling small trinkets. Sometimes actually asking for donations of food. That would have, the Depression

24:00 carried through until 1932/33, thereabouts I think.

You mentioned that you were a fairly isolated community, what did you do for fun as kids?

We had a, my uncle's property just across the road had a tennis court, there were quite a number of people with tennis courts in the area so that was

24:30 one type of activity, otherwise, we had to go down to Gosford which took quite a while, even though it was only seven miles. It had the usual picture theatres; the first ones were without sound, what they call them...

25:00 The word escapes me.

Silent pictures?

Silent pictures, movies. There'd be organisations used to put on plays and that sort of thing and the usual unprofessional, but that was early in the piece; later on of course, it all developed and we had the

25:30 same sort of avenues of entertainment as people living in the city.

So how would you travel to Gosford to go to the pictures?

In the Ford, but there was a bus going down but the person I think he used to,

26:00 you know, turn around two or three times a week.

What did the picture theatre look like in Gosford?

I couldn't describe it, it was very basic, that's all I could say about the thing.

Would you go with your parents or with other children?

With my parents.

26:30 We're getting our times mixed up a bit, because as you get beyond the 1930s the whole situation changed and it became more civilized.

What became more civilized?

Life in the Gosford area.

What was the reason for your family moving to Gosford?

Only so my

27:00 sister could start off high school. It was quite good high school in Gosford.

How did they maintain the farm from Gosford?

Dad used to go, well, in the later stages Dad used to drive up several times a week, and I think he used to, he batched for a few days, and then he used to come down to Gosford for the weekends

27:30 and that sort of thing.

Can you describe what the house was like on the orchard that you lived in?

Don't know. One house was a big house with numerous bedrooms. The house we lived in was not quite so elaborate, and it had

28:00 three bedrooms I suppose and a thing they call a 'sleep out'. It was a veranda that was covered in with mosquito resistant material. I can't think of much more about it; it was a fibro dwelling, slate roof and I think it's still standing as far as I know.

28:30 **When you moved to Gosford as a boy, how did you feel about moving to this as you called it**

more civilized life?

We just adapted to it, it was a bit strange at first. Going to school which had, say, 20 pupils you were in a much bigger school and you just adapt to it. And as we

29:00 progressed to the high school the education was very well done there.

What subjects did you enjoy at school?

I don't know, I wasn't a particularly good student, so I don't...Maths, geography, bit of history, just the usual things.

29:30 **Why do you say you weren't a particularly good student?**

I did my Intermediate, and I didn't distinguish there to any great extent. That's why my parents decided it was time to go and start work down the city. When I went down the

30:00 city, I lived at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] during the week, and then I used to hop on the train and go home on the weekends.

Before we talk about your life when you moved to Sydney, I just wanted to know what was Gosford like then?

Gosford at the stage was a town of about 5000 people at the time I would think, it was quite a small place compared

30:30 with what it is now. The citrus industry was the main industry at that time, since then the government have been importing fruit juice from South America and it's killed the industry completely, you'll hardly find an orange tree in the district. Whereas it was nothing else but

31:00 oranges, lemons, mandarins, passionfruit all that sort of...

Did you spend any time at the beach or...?

Yes, we used to go pre-war, we used to hop on bicycles and go out to Terrigal. Most weekends, I think we

31:30 had a car at that stage, which was fairly reliable. My parents would go in the car, or for the fun of it we'd ride out on our bicycles.

What would you do once you got there?

Surfing, there's a good surfing beach at Terrigal. And the usual family picnics I guess.

What sort of surfing equipment did you have?

32:00 I didn't have any at all, body surfing. We did have, not a surfboard, surf skis, which were quite popular at that stage. It was seven miles I think from Gosford out to Terrigal, mostly we went to Terrigal, sometimes to

32:30 Avoca. But the surf was better at Terrigal than at Avoca so we preferred that.

How busy were those beaches as seaside playgrounds?

A bit like Collaroy or Dee Why I suppose, quite a lot of people used to go to there.

How did you learn to swim?

We had on the orchards,

33:00 we had two irrigation dams and they were quite big dams actually, so we learnt to swim there. We had a canoe which we kept there. Dad used to do quite a lot of fishing, and he put a lot of perch in the dam at one stage hoping they would breed, but they didn't breed,

33:30 but he kept a record of all the fish he caught. They grew to be very big fish, but unfortunately they didn't multiply so ultimately, when they finally had to empty the dam they counted them all back and counted the notches on the wall and they were all there and accounted for. The dam was

34:00 about 15 foot deep, it was a good. And that's where we learnt to swim. Actually there were three dams, they were operating by gravity and open the sluice gate, and they had cement channels leading from the top down to the orchard,

34:30 as the water came down you just ran a furrow and the water followed.

Who actually taught you to swim?

I suppose my father did I guess, I don't know. He must have yes, before we went down to Gosford we could swim quite well. So going surfing was no problem at all

35:00 **What sort of an experience did your family have during World War I?**

My uncle went to, he was a dentist and he went to France and I think my father and he tossed up to see who would go to the war and my Daddy and his brother lost whichever way you look at it.

35:30 He during the war, he had to look after both properties with very limited labour. The usual shortages during the war guess, but I wasn't born at that stage.

Did your uncle return from the war?

Yes, he was lucky.

36:00 But when he came back he gave up dentistry and ran the property up in Somersby.

How much did he talk about his wartime experiences?

Interesting, he didn't talk about it at all, I have no idea what he did, except he came back.

36:30 I've never pursued that, but the War Memorial could turn up his record and indicate where he served, but I haven't bothered.

You mentioned that your father had to run both properties while your uncle was away. What did he tell you what life was like

37:00 **in Australia during World War I?**

Nothing, I can't recall anything at all.

Did he talk about the difficulties in managing both properties and how he coped?

No, I think. During the war period we mainly had draft horses, Clydesdales.

37:30 We kept them on, so we grew up with Clydesdales, which were a great horse. No, it was just part of life as far as he was concerned.

What was your horse-riding prowess like?

Poor. I've fallen off more horses than. When we were really young we used

38:00 to ride on the Clydesdales, that wasn't horse riding, they're so placid. My sister was keen on riding. All girls are. We had some quite nice ponies there.

Can you tell me about your siblings?

My sister is a couple of years older than I am.

38:30 She's living in Alstonville now. My brother was in the, he joined the army which was a silly thing to do.

Why do you say that?

Cause he went up to Darwin first of all, and Darwin was bombed, they sent him back down here to go to New Guinea, and he applied for a transfer to the navy but it didn't come through,

39:00 so he was in the 2/12th I think; it's a first aid equipment, first aid unit and he was put on the Centaur, and the Centaur sank. It was torpedoed by Japanese submarines just off Caloundra, he didn't get out of that. So

39:30 I don't think very much of the Japanese. The ship was, the hospital ships were fully illuminated, they have red crosses on them, they should in theory be given a free passage. The Japanese sunk this one with a tremendous loss of life. Mack was in it.

40:00 And that's all, just the there of us. He was at sea for about half a day; and I was at sea for six, seven years with no problems at all, so just the luck of the game.

Where were you posted when you received that news?

I was up in the Persian Gulf, I think.

40:30 Hard, it's best forgotten. I don't know if I can tell you about that, my parents were of course a bit shattered.

41:00 Anyway, let's move on.

Tape 2

00:35 **Mr Robinson I would like to ask you about your schooling, and what you remember about**

going to school?

I first went to school in a small

01:00 school they built in Somersby that they built, it was only one room I think from memory and we must have had perhaps 20 kids and this is primary school of course. And from there, when we moved down to Gosford they had just built a new high school there which was well staffed and a great place. It's a,

01:30 I can still remember most of the teachers there; they are probably long since gone. We played the usual sports; we played a bit a football, a bit of tennis, a bit of swimming and all the usual things.

02:00 I suppose I must have been there for three years. About five years I suppose and the school was in Gosford. I was 18 when I moved down to Sydney. I started my accountancy studies.

02:30 Again not with any great enthusiasm. But at the same time I got involved with the Naval Reserve out at Rushcutters Bay. I learned a lot out there, which stood me in good stead later on. I used to go out to Malabar rifle shooting. Fortunately I was a reasonably

03:00 good shot. Even though the navy allowed us to use their sailing boats, I used to sail around Sydney Harbour in these 27-foot whalers, which was quite good fun, you needed about five people to sail which was the only problem.

03:30 But beyond that the navy, I really learnt a lot from the navy. They broadened my education and taught me what sailors need to know and I absorbed their instruction quite well I think.

The school you went to had 20 students in it, how many teachers were there?

One.

04:00 One teacher took the whole thing. He used to drive up from Gosford each day at that stage. He went to the First World War. Captain Prentice was his name. Somehow or other his name slipped back. But that's,

04:30 nothing very special about the school except it was a school and it gave the kids somewhere to go and overcame this correspondence school.

Do you remember what kind of building the school was?

Timber, tin roof a row of wash basins out the

05:00 back, otherwise nothing very particular about the school. Basic country school that's all.

Were interested in details like that because it paints a picture of what life was like in the country. When you went to school do you remember how you would go to school?

Walk. With the dog, we had a cattle dog

05:30 called Banjo. We used to trudge along only about three miles I suppose; bare feet, we thought nothing of it. Occasionally the headmaster used to pick us up, but we felt embarrassed if the teacher picked us up and brought us to school. We thought that was

06:00 selective, I suppose that's the word you'd use.

How hot would it get in that school if it had a tin roof?

Not bad, nothing special. It had quite good ceiling heights If I recall, the heat didn't seem to worry us.

What would you do on a hot day?

06:30 Just carry on as normal. No one thought anything of it.

When you went to high school at Gosford, did you have an idea then of what you'd like to do?

No, not really, I think I recognised I wasn't cut out to be an orchardist. I didn't have the green fingers.

07:00 Still haven't got them.

What were most boys at school aiming to do at that time?

They'd probably accepted the fact that they'd probably go work on their father's farm or orchard. I don't think

07:30 we knew what our ultimate profession was going to be when we were kids.

Could you tell me about the first job you had when you left school?

I went to Perpetual Trustees in Sydney, the company's still running in Sydney.

- 08:00 I went into the postage department delivering letters and licking stamps. Then after I'd been there for 12 months I was moved up into other departments. Within, I suppose I'd only been there about three years when the war started,
- 08:30 I was called up in August '39, which was just before the war started. Went down to Flinders, did a gunnery course down there. I qualified with that without any problem. Then they sent me back to join Kanimbla a 10000 ton ship. It's interesting actually when you think of it,
- 09:00 the Kanimbla was taken off the coastal run. When she was bought in Belfast, they put down the mountings for seven six-inch guns; they were built into the ship when she was constructed. When the war started they just pulled the guns out of mothballs and put them back on the ship. But what they - the other thing that intrigues is that at times,
- 09:30 they ripped most of the cabins out of it but that didn't hurt, but they filled her up with 20000 four gallon drums to give us extra buoyancy, all battened in with great baulks of timber to keep them in place, put in a lot of blue metal
- 10:00 to stabilise it. The result was a ship with seven 16 inch guns, two four inch and a tremendous cruising range, course she was a diesel powered ship. What they didn't realise was that the Germans were letting loose things they called pocket battle ships and also
- 10:30 just normal raiders which had much more powerful guns than we did. So our chances of surviving the argument were pretty low, but we didn't realise it at the time so. The Manoora, the next ship I went to was treated the same way, and
- 11:00 after that I went into corvettes.

We'll talk about those ships a bit later, but when you were talking about joining the navy cadets, can you tell me why you decided to do that?

Don't know. I really wanted to join the navy

- 11:30 on a permanent basis, but they took boys in as 13-year-old entries then. I didn't get the urge till I was 14 so I was automatically cut out from the permanent service, a year too old, and somehow I heard about the Naval Reserve down in Rushcutters
- 12:00 Bay and went down there to see what I could do. They initially said to me, well you're in a clerical job, you may as well continue in a clerical job in the navy, and I said, "I'm only coming into the navy cause I want to get out of being a clerk," so they said, "in that case you'd better be a seaman," so it suited me fine.

12:30 **And where would you go for your training?**

Training was at Rushcutters Bay, then each year we'd go to sea with the navy for a fortnight and just learn to live with the sailors.

What was that like at that age?

I suppose a bit of a shock to the system, you slept in hammocks

- 13:00 and you got mixed up with the rough and tough, perhaps at that stage more than you did in civilian life. The Naval Reserve had a lot of very keen people down there and they had good instructors.
- 13:30 I used to get pretty good reports each time we went to sea. It stood me in good stead. They sent me back from Singapore to sit for a commission, which I passed without any trouble.

When you're doing the cadets, how did the sailors treat the

14:00 **boys on the ships**

Oh very well. They accepted us without any problems at all. We just merged into the ships company and that's all there was to it. No distinction.

What jobs were you given to do on those ships?

I suppose normal watch keeping.

- 14:30 We used to chip and clean the paintwork and paint the ship. Leaned to splice ropes and all the things a sailor has to do. There was certainly no distinction between us, and the permanent people.

You mentioned that you were exposed more to the rough and tumble more than you would in civilian life. What do you mean by that, what kind of men were

15:00 **part of the navy at that time?**

Hard to say, I think a lot of them had joined the navy because of the depression - that encouraged them to go in. When I say rough and tumble, generally speaking our relationship with the permanent sailors

was very good. They accepted

15:30 us just as members of the crew. Expected us to do the same as they could. Some of the trips ashore were a bit hair-raising. I think the type of ladies they selected were probably not the sort of thing that we were expecting. But, that's sailors.

16:00 **What kind of impact did that have on you seeing that world for the first time?**

I just accepted it, I thought that's what life is all about. I certainly didn't have any problem. I wasn't seasick. Probably a good thing. I, just the same sort of work

16:30 as sailors, didn't steer the ship, you polished the brass work, you painted the ship, you learnt to man the guns. Life in a naval ship is pretty busy. Whatever branch you're in.

What was it about the navy that appealed to you?

17:00 I just don't know whether I just liked going out to sea with them when we went to sea, with the navy we might be go down to Melbourne for the Cup [Melbourne Cup horse races] or something else, a short cruise. But to this time

17:30 I have absolutely no knowledge why I have a liking for the sea.

When you were doing the training on Sydney Harbour, could you explain how much activity there was on the harbour at that time?

A lot.

18:00 I think at this stage we were probably living at Hunters Hill. Go to work on the ferry, which came round Lane Cove. We had a group of fellow, and we all sat in the same section and fraternised on the trip to work,

18:30 which took 25 minutes to half an hour. But we made good friendships there. With the Harbour itself it was much busier than it is now with all the commerce down at the wharfs at Darling Harbour, Walsh Bay, they were full of interstate ships and we got to know

19:00 all these ships, where they went and that sort of thing. Again, that stood me in good stead later on because I could recognise ships, cause I knew them by sight. All the Burns Sult, Blue Panel Lines all those. It's just something you absorb.

19:30 As far as pleasure boats are concerned, there aren't near so many as there are today, but only a fraction of the number. They had some good sailing boats. Many were big 18 footers. We used to sail in all the usual anniversary regattas.

20:00 Either in the whaler, which is a 27-foot boat, or a cutter, which is 32 feet long, much bigger and heavier, but they were they were good basic training for sailing.

When you were doing that training, did you get seasick?

No. You never know why you get seasick, but no.

20:30 **Did other boys get seasick?**

Sometimes. I'll tell you about one of them later on. In the big ships you'd have less seasickness than in the small ships. But the ships we were going to sea in were quite stable, no problem.

21:00 **You had moved from Gosford to Sydney, how difficult was it for you to make the adjustment to living in the big city?**

I don't think it was a problem at all. You just move from one stage of being at school, in a largish country school to moving down to Sydney at a technical college.

21:30 Doing fairly elementary sort of work. Going down for training at Rushcutters Bay. Just a normal kind of existence as far as we were concerned.

Where you living with your family still at this point?

Yes, my parents moved down to first of all Greenwich, then Hunters Hill.

22:00 Dad used to drive down each weekend, my mother got a job in the Public Service at one stage. The family all moved on, they were still living at home, but only there to sleep really. I think she found time was hanging on her hands a bit and she probably liked the extra money,

22:30 so she got a job in the Public Service.

What did you learn at technical college?

Accountancy. Accountancy covers all sorts of things, you do accounting then

23:00 income tax, business principles, pretty dull. Really dull in fact. Anyway, the war came before I finished my course, so that was shelved for the time being.

What understanding did you have at that

23:30 **time about what was happening in Europe before the war broke out?**

For about, 1936 onwards we expected war to come before long. We were young boys at that stage and weren't that fussed about it.

24:00 Probably the cricket ashes were more important than what was happening in Europe. People didn't travel anywhere near the same as what they do now. You went 'home' to England and that's about all. My parents, I had some relatives over in England, Singapore and England.

24:30 **Did your family talk about what was going on very much amongst themselves?**

I suppose they did, but I'm not conscious of it. I think probably, probably knew more about what was happening over in Germany.

25:00 I knew more about the types of ships the Germans were building; the submarines, what the Japanese were doing, I had an interest in that sort of thing.

How did you know about that, how did you learn about that, about the German ships and the Japanese?

They actually,

25:30 some years before the war, most of the Japanese and German ships came out to Sydney, we crawled all over them, had a look at them, had our own thoughts about them. We knew that the Germans were building much bigger ships than those and were entitled under the Washington Treaty, which regulated the size of the ships you could

26:00 have. We'd read books about them. If you're interested in something you absorb the details without any problem.

When those ships came to Sydney before the war, what were your impressions of them?

The Italians,

26:30 we didn't think much of the Italians, the Italians were fast ships, we didn't feel they, apart from the speed we didn't think they were much chop. The Germans were good. Japanese, they had peculiar ships, odd to our eyes.

Why was that?

Different - they were different structure, different appearance to the normal British ships.

27:00 And our ships were based on the British ships.

In what way was their appearance different?

Superstructure, fire control equipment - couldn't say, couldn't answer that question. They looked different

27:30 and we looked at the kind of guns they carried and the range they could do and all that sort of thing.

When the war broke out do you remember the day the announcement was made?

Yes. The 3rd of September 1939 and I was down at Flinders Naval Depot when it happened,

28:00 just finishing my gunnery course. I was a bit apprehensive about it I suppose that's the word. I really had no desire to go off to war. We had to accept that that's what would happen.

What was the mood like at Flinders?

A bit of

28:30 bravado was there, I suppose. Best way to express it. It had been coming for so long it was hardly a surprise.

How were you told about it, do you remember?

The radio I think. I'm sure that's how.

29:00 The navy gave us some official advice about it, but initially we would have heard it on the radio.

So how did you make the leap from being in the Naval Cadets to going down to Flinders, how did that come about?

It was no trouble, I'd been to Flinders before, I'd slept in.

29:30 hammocks. See, I had a very gradual introduction into the navy because I was in the reserves. It was just like you going from one room to another.

At what point in your reserve training did you decide to join the navy proper, could you explain the process?

Well I didn't ever join the navy

30:00 'proper' to use your expression, because I was in the Naval Reserve, and the navy just said, "Well first of all you're going to Flinders to do a gunnery course, and secondly you're going to this ship." I think I was shifted sideways, they scheduled a draft note and off I went.

So you didn't have to enlist in a different process if you were in the Naval Reserves?

No. It was just a normal progression.

30:30 **So when you join the reserves, is it an understanding that you'll then go on to serve on a ship?**

I suppose it must have been.

At what point does that become a full-time career?

If you enlist, you had to enlist for 12 years I think was the time.

31:00 There was definitely no...and as far as being a reserve I was in the reserve right throughout the war. I served for seven years so there was never any question of, after those seven years, I could have joined up. We all said we would, at one stage. Definite transfer from the reserve to.

31:30 You just soldiered on, carried on.

So when you arrived at Flinders, can you describe what the living conditions were like?

Flinders, they called it HMAS Cerberus, the official name of the depot, and I can't think very much.

32:00 It was a very much a barracks, we were allocated to three accommodation blocks and we stepped into the mess.

32:30 Was there a mess, yes, we had a mess there too. No, we couldn't have, they must have had a separate mess. They fed you very well. You slept in your hammock. You were woken up in the morning at six o'clock or something like that. You had to lash up your hammock, seven hitches,

33:00 and stow it in the hammock bin and off you went to your training. Everything was done at the double, just a typical barracks. After you were formed into divisions, you were detailed

33:30 off with your instructions for that day. They encouraged you to play sports; we used to go on cross-country runs that kind of thing. Every Friday we had company parades,

34:00 where the whole depot got together and was handed over to all these young navy people for instructions, so they had some way of handling big bodies of men. Just a very busy, like a school. Except you

34:30 doubled everywhere you went, no walking, particularly in the gunnery school. The staff, permanent people, permanent instructors who were very good. The navy has the ability to churn out wonderful instructors.

35:00 We benefited from that. I think there was a fairly big intake of the reserve people coming in. They handled that without a problem. There was a swimming pool down there; we had to swim fully clad,

35:30 and do our pack drill; I'm just repeating what I've said before. It was a really top run depot. I wouldn't criticise it at all.

What would happen if you were discovered walking around the barracks, what were the discipline procedures like?

36:00 You'd get a blast from the, if the gunners saw you walking instead of doubling, you'd get a blast from the permanent head if the instructors were near enough to move you. Discipline was strict; the navy couldn't have done with it.

What kinds of offences were there that you could be disciplined for?

36:30 I don't know, I wasn't ever disciplined. I might have been given a blast for being too slow, but nothing of any consequence. I think that the level of. I just can't remember any of them being

37:00 disciplined. If you were on the ship and you did something wrong, you'd be given extra work, or they'd stop your pay, stop your leave, that sort of thing. Didn't matter, you were so far away because Flinders

is out, I've forgotten the town, the station.

37:30 Never mind, let's go on.

When you were at Flinders did you have some leave time?

Yes, you'd have weekend leave, there was a train service from there to Melbourne, you could hop on there and go to Melbourne. I had lots of relatives in Melbourne so I had no trouble finding somewhere.

38:00 **What else would you do on your weekends, to entertain yourself in Melbourne?**

Dances, tennis, swimming. I can't remember any other than that. Staying with relatives occasionally. Some because they wanted to, others because they had to.

38:30 **What were the dances like?**

Just old-time dancing as now.

Where would you go, can you describe a dance hall or a scene?

I just can't think of it at the moment. I can't think of where we used to go.

39:00 **Did you enjoy dancing?**

Oh yes, I was quite keen. I suppose it was a way of fraternising with the other sex, which we'd never, there were no ladies down in Flinders.

39:30 Over to you again.

How long were you in training at Flinders for?

How long in training? About, the first time I was there for about a month I think. Then I came back later on for four months, that's the only time I spent ashore.

40:00 The usual.

So at the first month at Flinders, where did you go from there?

Back to Sydney to the Kanimbla, the Kanimbla was a bit of a shambles at the time. They'd just fitted all the guns to it and done all the other work they felt was necessary to make it an efficient seagoing ship.

40:30 **So how long were you in Sydney on the Kanimbla before you set sail?**

October, November. Two months. Then the Kaknimbla did the usual gun trials, machinery trials and that sort of thing. Sailing in Port Phillip.

41:00 Then they headed up north, we called in all sorts of odd places. In the First World War there was a German raider used to wander around New Guinea and cause trouble. We went looking; we felt there was another raider, so we went to all these out of the way places to see if we could track them down.

41:30 which we unfortunately didn't. Did that on the way up to Hong Kong. We relieved two ships from the Hong Kong station who headed to England and promptly got sank. Then we started our patrols north of Japan. Freezing cold.

42:00 Every...

Tape 3

00:32 **Before we go on and talk about the operations of the Kanimbla, can we ask you to describe exactly what you did in the Gunners Core, just for the benefit of someone who doesn't...?**

What did we do? Taking

01:00 our sections guns which we put in the Kanimbla, there were seven members of the crew. There was the layer, the trainer, side setter, loader, two loaders, that's five, seven and then there's several other fellows in the chain bringing up

01:30 ammunition. So when you open the oven door, it's called, it swings back and you put in the projectile first, a thing about that long, it weighs a hundred pounds, then someone rams it with a rammer

02:00 because the projectile has a copper banding drive on it and you have to push it in hard to seal the hole. And then you put your cordite in afterwards then you shut the door. Then before you fire it, the chap on the radiophone has got to say well this is 10000 yards away, he'd wind your sights up to 10000

- 02:30 yards, the chap on the trailer, which was me most of the time, follows pointers which aim the thing and the gun layer is on the other side of the gun and he's got a handle as well, and winds it to get the cross-wires on the gun sight, on the target.
- 03:00 He's also responsible for firing the gun on this type of weapon. It's a fairly complicated process which had to be done quickly. And those were the six-inch guns. The three-inch guns had a thing like a big bullet for a normal
- 03:30 rifle, which you've probably seen. Its all in one piece, you just shove it in and you can get a pretty high rate of fire. Again, it's that type of thing you do that we call barrage firing. If an aircraft was coming in you'd put a barrage of shots, hopefully in front of him which with a bit of luck might injure him,
- 04:00 causing some damage. But then you have your origans; they came a little bit later, but never mind the same think. You have great big drums, which have got something over a hundred bullets in it. You slam it onto the thing and you've got a cartwheel sight. If you can imagine a cartwheel that's got spikes on it.
- 04:30 You line it up so that the aircraft, which is coming in, comes down one of those spikes, or stakes on the wheel, then when he gets within range you pull the trigger and hopefully you might hit him. Machine guns well they were just ordinary things.
- 05:00 And Lewis guns and heavy machinery. There was no end to the damned things. You have to learn how to strip these down and service them as part of the training, and secondly to have them pointing in the right direction. That's about it I think. It makes a racket while you're doing it.
- 05:30 Partly from sitting on this six-inch gun I'm a bit deaf. The noise was quite tremendous when the thing goes off. I've got tinnitus, like a lotus in my ears. You can't do anything about it so...
- 06:00 With the six-inch gun you've got a range, I think it was about 12000 yards if you can work that into metric, that's 6 miles, so in kilometres it would be say 15 miles, 15 kilometres is the thing you're shooting at.
- 06:30 **So what sort of targets were the six-inch guns designed to be trained on?**
- Raiders, German raiders wandering around the Pacific. Also you used them if you wanted to stop a ship that didn't want to be stopped. You just land a projectile in front of him as a warning. We did that often enough up and down
- 07:00 the China coast. That's all, but if you were in a serious fight, well you just load and fire as fast as you can.
- What sort of damage would one shot do to an enemy ship?**
- With a six-inch gun? It would make a big hole in, haven't really thought about it.
- 07:30 Depends where it hits sometimes, some parts of the ship are more vulnerable than others. Not only does it punch a hole as it goes in, but they have a delayed mechanism so that after they go through the initial steel plate, it then explodes inside, so it makes a nasty mess.
- 08:00 **What, the times you opened the, was it the 'barn door' you called it?**
- The oven door.
- From the time of opening the oven door to firing, what was the timeframe?**
- I think we did about six or eight a minute. Fairly rapid, not nearly as rapid
- 08:30 as they are now, but in those days it was. You've got to have more ammunition and more projectiles coming up to replace those you've sent off.
- And while you were working in that team, would you need to signal each other or is it a set?**
- The gun man has got earphones and
- 09:00 I've got a clock thing I'm following and that is hooked up to the director tower, so the director trains onto the target, and because all the seven guns were linked up, they were all going round the same way.
- So you don't need**
- 09:30 **to have it's all done from the tower?**
- The director and range finder are high up on the ship, and they will tell you when to fire. In fact in some stations they can also fire. So the guns have a special gun ready lamp.
- 10:00 With the lamps the chap in the director tower can fire the seven guns if he wants to. In actual fact, he can't in the Kanimbla, because there's only one, two, three, four guns can be brought to bear. Because there's two on the fauxal, two blind bat, two in the aft and one right in the stern. Only four guns

10:30 can fire on one side.

The Kanimbla had been a privately owned merchant ship, so when these modifications were made to it, what were the main functions of the Kanimbla going to be in the first stages of the war?

Even in this stage of the war the Germans had heavily armed ships

11:00 wandering around the ocean. For instance, when we were at Ocean Island, the German raiders had been there before us, they'd blown up all the oil tanks, generally created havoc. There were quite a lot of these armed merchant ships. One of them finally sank the

11:30 Sydney, that was a disaster. Remember the Sydney was sunk off Perth and they lost 650 men or something like that. The entire compliment of ship's men because she blew up, so those were the sorts of ships we were looking for. But the ocean's a big place; there was a lot of looking to be done.

Was it designed or

12:00 **was it intended that the Kanimbla would work in a convoy?**

Not really, because the convoys, they did use them occasionally, convoys, just in case a raider happened to pick them up, but mostly their function was just intervening cruising. Anyway, we'll talk about convoys later.

I just wanted to ask

12:30 **what were your first impressions of the Kanimbla when you first saw her when you came back to Sydney?**

I thought she was a great ship. She wasn't fast; she was very attractive. I can show you a photograph of it.

We'll have a look at the photo, but if you could just for the sake of the camera describe what your first impressions were. What it looked to you how impressed you were?

13:00 It was a modern ship; it was built in 1936 in Belfast in Ireland, and it was just a well-designed ship. It looked good. I mean some ships look dreadful, but this ship everything was right.

What makes a ship, for the benefit of someone who doesn't isn't familiar with ships, what makes this ship look good?

13:30 Just the lines of her I think, like a motorcar you think, that's great. But here you look at a ship which is 10000 this one is 10000 tons more or less and all the proportions were right, the funnel was in the right place everything looked efficient.

Can you walk me through the layout of the Kanimbla from when you step on board?

14:00 You walk up the gangway, which is a ladder, which is lowered down over the side of the ship, you come alongside in the pinnace, whatever boat you're in, you come up the ladder, which goes up onto the quarter deck and when you come over the quarter deck you salute the quarter deck, as a matter of courtesy and then

14:30 how do you describe it - if you start from the top, there's a boat deck is the top, the bridge is in the front end of it and then there's another deck below that which would have mainly ships officers perhaps, I don't know.

15:00 The next deck down had all the accommodation. And the accommodation was basically; the normal accommodation of the ship had been torn out to make room for all these oil drums etc which we put in it. You have to have somewhere for the ships officers. You've got to have another down low, you've got to have the

15:30 magazine, which has all the ammunition in it. Then a bit further aft you've got fuel tanks, which enabled the ships to stay at sea for a long time because you diesel engine. And in the centre you've got your diesel engine, one or two diesel, only one in this case. That's about it.

16:00 Until you get down, the gun decks, the gunners are on the fauxal, the waist what you call it, just behind the fauxal two down in the after waist and one on the poop on the stern. And two three inches were sitting up on the boat deck. And of course the boat deck has all the lifeboats and that sort of thing as well.

16:30 You had enormous storerooms of food, everything you want, plus all the pain shops and God knows what. Just a busy little city. I can show you, do you want to look now?

No, that's all right, we'll have a look at it later. You mentioned that the regular accommodation had been stripped out.

17:00 **What were the living quarters like?**

I was down in one of the after messes, and it's just open, nothing there at all. It's all gone, all the cabins that used to be there were no use to us because they'd just clutter the whole thing up.

17:30 You were allocated, each mess would have about 12 men per mess, and they all carried their hammocks, so their hammocks were over in a hammock bin over there, there was a naval mess deck there with just a trestle table with seats alongside it. That was all.

18:00 **And where they all gunners who...?**

No, most of our mess seg [segment] were the gunners yes, but then you had the stockers who run the engines, and the supply people and the emergency supply and so it goes on, there's jobs for everyone.

What sort of division was there

18:30 **between people who did different jobs on the ship?**

As a matter of convenience, all the stokers would mess together, maybe in two separate messes, separated star side and portside. The seamen likewise are together, but they are divided just in case one is knocked out then there is the other one is ready to take

19:00 its place. You can do that in the big ships, but when you come to the corvettes you can't. Not enough room.

Were you in training prepared for backup roles in case?

Oh yes, even though I was a gunner, I had to do all the other seamanship duties. For instance we had a Para grain

19:30 we take, if you were in an area, which say has mines in it you streamed what you call the Para grains. The Para grains are wires that go out from the boat, out like that, and out this end they have a float and a cutter, and if you pick up a mine, the Para grain wire slides right down to the bottom and the cutter just nips it off and gets it, and then it floats away without doing any harm.

20:00 But you, someone has to know how to stream this because it's fairly complicated. Someone else needs to know how to drive the powerboats and that sort of thing. Other people have to clean the mess areas and keep it spick and span. I joined the navy before I knew this happened.

20:30 **So how much of those cleaning and keeping things spick and span [clean] duties did you have to do as a gunner?**

Actually, I was a gunner for what we call 'action stations', for cruising stations I'd have to take a turn on the wheel steering the ship. And then some of us have got to be a lookout; we had lookouts up on the top of the mast

21:00 and out on limbs of the bridge and aft, so when you start doing that sort of thing, your numbers get eaten up very quickly. My secondary duty was in the motor cutter, which is a 30-foot boat with an engine in it. I was one of the crew; it had a crew of five

21:30 in the motor cutter.

Can you explain what the motor cutter was?

Sorry, a motor cutter was an open boat with an engine in the middle which seats across like that, and is steered by one man, with two people helping. If you have to go alongside,

22:00 someone has to hold the boat there for people getting on and off. It's either a lifeboat or a liberty boat, whichever the occasion demands. And will carry stores.

What sort of training was there for evacuation procedures?

You had your abandon ship station.

22:30 If, I forget, if there's an 'A' on the foghorn. And if that sounded you all dash off to your abandon ship station. Which mean you had to lift all these boats off their chocks, or off their davits, so the people could get into it. Then you'd have the fire station. If there's a fire somewhere,

23:00 you know where you've got to go to get a hose and get an extinguisher. All contingencies were covered in the ships quarter bill, they call it.

So what sort of procedure were there for if a particular part of the ship was hit?

Well then you've got the

23:30 engine room people, the damage control people they call them. The damage control people would get down there with baulks of timber, metal plates, hammocks, anything to fill up the hole. Again, it's all

24:00 on what you call your watch and quarter bill. So whatever happens, I know where I've got to go. That's all there is to it. If there's a fire I know I've got to pick up the fire extinguisher and the hose as I go. It's

all a matter of training and design of the original program.

24:30 **Could everyone swim?**

Officially yes, unofficially we had a few who couldn't. Basically when they were down at Flinders, there's a swimming pool down there and you've got to swim the length of the pool fully clad. Boots and all. So yes, everyone could swim, to more or less a

25:00 degree.

Was there any sort of contingency for men that weren't good swimmers in the event you ended up in the water?

There were life jackets all over the place. Then some of those round circular things, but the life jackets were better. Each man, in addition is issued with his own life jacket. Which is a thing that inflates, blow up and Mae West [life jacket].

25:30 That sort of thing.

Where did you keep your Mae West?

I kept it in my hammock, when I'm there, and around my waist if we were in a difficult situation.

So would you have your Mae West with you if it was action stations?

Yes. And my gas mask, of all things, gas - it was ridiculous, but no, you'd have your,

26:00 if you were at action stations you had your Mae West with you.

The gas mask, could you explain the theory behind that provision?

Well, the theory, you've seen a gas mask, the same as a scuba diver wears, same theory. You breathe through a canister, which has some sort of cleansing agent in it.

I guess it's something you'd associate more with

26:30 **the army or the air force?**

The chance, if you go into a compartment that's full of smoke it may have been a help.

Were there procedures for shutting off parts of the ship in the event of...?

Yes. As soon as you sound the action stations the ship is

27:00 cut up into separate compartments, so if that one gets a hole in it, the rest of the ship is watertight.

So what does that mean for the fortunes of the person or people?

Are in there? They have to be quick and get out or they get locked in. Some of the Arian ships

27:30 did, had to shut down. If you were in the magazine or the magazine handling room and there's a fire in the ship, in an emergency, the doors automatically shut. Not automatically, physically they are shut.

So is there time to get out before the doors are shut?

You'd hope so.

28:00 Didn't ever happen so.

We were talking on the last tape about discipline and someone the other day said the navy was the most disciplined of all the armed forces, why is discipline so important to the navy?

Because, let's say you've got this watch and quarter bill, you've got to know exactly where to go, and everyone else

28:30 must rely on you going from where you are to where you should be and get there in quick time. So that if your, oh what's an example, if your position at action stations was steering the wheel, while the ships cruising along before action stations,

29:00 the helmsman, the chap who's on the wheel they have a position on my gun, so someone's got to get up there, relieve him and get onto my gun. It's a matter of knowing where you are supposed to be and getting there without any harm, quickly.

When the warfare started, there were a lot of

29:30 **young boys, 17 year olds who joined the navy, what impressions did you form of those boys and how they adapted to discipline and the navy life?**

We didn't have any trouble at all. When they were at Flinders, everything is done at the double; it's just drummed into you. That's what you've got to do. There's nothing to think about.

30:00 **Were you able to take any personal items with you on board the Kanimbla?**

Yes, the only personal items you had were a writing pad and writing equipment, wouldn't have any other personals because you were issued with all your gear. You might have underwear or something like that, but basically you were issued with all your gear, it was marked with your name on it

30:30 so when it gets washed, there's no argument about it. You wouldn't want any other, you could have a camera, yes, no problem, or if you wanted a book to carry with you. Your locker is perhaps the size of the television set, less than that, and that's for your personal possessions. Handkerchiefs, singlets,

31:00 boots, spare shoes and all that sort of thing.

Did you correspond much with your family while you were in training at Flinders?

I wasn't there long enough. I used to correspond when I was in the ships, yes.

How frequently could you get mail from home?

It was always a source of wonder that we ever got any mail because whenever we came into port, there was always mail there

31:30 waiting for us. We were never quite sure how it got there. And likewise, when we came into port, we'd sent mail off to shore. The postman was the first man ashore.

How far ahead would you know where you were going and what you'd be doing generally?

A lot of the time we didn't know at all, particularly in Kanimbla we didn't know where we were going. We'd look at the compass and say we're doing north

32:00 0-5-0 and 15 knots, you'd say if this keeps on this is where we'll finish up. The captain would normally, once we'd clear the harbour, say this is where we're going to, and this is what we're looking for cause once you're out there, out at sea,

32:30 it doesn't matter who knows.

Where there many rumours on the ship about what you were

Oh yes, people started them for fun I think. But the only one you could take any notice of was the one from the captain, as soon as you go to sea.

So what did you know of the captain of the Kanimbla?

33:00 He was a permanent service officer, he was one of those 13-year-old entries, been in the navy all his life and that's about all.

So what happened once you were all on the Kanimbla, what did you do and where did you go?

33:30 **Can you explain Mr Robinson what you would do each day with your hammock?**

When they piped, "Wakey wakey," you all got out and rolled your hammock up. To

34:00 roll your hammock up you just turn it in and make a long sausage of it and you've got a hammock lashing, which has got an eye in it and you lash it up in a special way. Then you unhook it from where it's been hanging on the deck head and put it over in the hammock bin.

34:30 **And what would happen to it once it was in the hammock bin?**

It stays there except when they pipe, "Air bedding," and when they say air bedding in whatever part of the ship it is they may say, "Night watch air bedding." Which means a third of the ship would then undo their hammock and put it over the guard rails to let a little bit of fresh air through it, otherwise it gets too.

35:00 musty.

So what was the actual purpose of putting the hammocks in the bin?

To make room so you could move around. When the hammocks are hanging all around, you're walking around stooped to get underneath them. So night time it's acceptable, but daytime all hammocks must be in the bin. That simple.

How would you

35:30 **wash?**

You've got showers and wash basins which are in groups so that your starboard watches have that one, and your port side watches have that one. You are allowed to have so many minutes shower. In the corvettes, the main reason you had to be quick was otherwise

36:00 you ran out of water. And it had to be pumped up by hand. But in the Kanimbla there was plenty of

water.

Would that water be stored on the boat?

Yes, it converts fresh water into salt water. Takes the salt out of it.

Would you eat in the same room you slept in?

Yes, same place – that’s why your hammock’s got to be out of the way.

36:30 And you play cards, the same thing, on the same table. It’s all logical and sensible and it just happens. We were told down at Flinders, this is what you do.

So once you were all on board on the Kanimbla in Sydney, what happened, where did the ship go?

37:00 First of all it went down to Melbourne, where we had gunnery trials there. Then we went to an ammunition ship, and drew all our provisions in, as much fresh as we could carry. Then we went up north.

When you were doing the gunnery trials could you explain what those activities were and

37:30 **what you would train the guns on?**

The target was towed by a tug, and it was like one of these sheets you’ve got, it’s, the targets on a sort of sled, which is pulled by the tug, you’ve got these big sheets hanging up so that you can see it. And you shoot at that.

38:00 You don’t shoot, you had what they call a throw off shoot, so that instead of me shooting you, I’d have a water bag at say 15 degree throw off, so that my guns not pointing at you, they point over there. If the range is right, the range is the same, so my range is right and also

38:30 easy.

Why did you have to go to Melbourne for the gunnery trials?

I don’t know. Port Phillip Bay’s a big open area. I don’t know why we went...

Where there, how many new people joined the Kanimbla and how many

39:00 **were already part, existing members of the crew?**

All the old crew, when she was a merchant ship, mostly left the ship, there were a couple who volunteered to stay on, they were very useful because they knew about running the ship. She carried 350 or something like that, people. Sailors of all descriptions.

39:30 We were away for a year, when I was on it, and there was virtually no change in the crew at all. You don’t want to change crew if you can possibly help it. While they are good and healthy, and they know their way around the ship, they know were to go for collision stations the whole thing.

40:00 **How was a posting to the Kanimbla regarded by the men?**

I don’t think they even thought about it. They said, “Goodo,” it’s a comfortable ship, it’s a big one, but when you went to the corvettes it’s a different matter.

Where there any accidents or training mishaps during gunnery trials?

Don’t think so,

40:30 just the occasional fellow getting his hand caught in the bridge when we shut the doors, that sort of thing. Or he might fall down a hatch when she’s driving, he might fall down a hatch and damage himself. There wasn’t very much at all.

Were you required to wear any sort of protective clothing or hearing,

41:00 **anything to protect your ears during gunnery training?**

Protective clothing we wore what the call ‘anti-flash gear’. A thick, closely woven garment, which fits over your head and your sleeves, just if the gun backfires and you get a flash, a quick flash of flame, well if you’ve got this heavy clothing on

41:30 you’d probably survive all right. But that’s all.

What was it made of?

It would be wool, I imagine. Bit like that. Closely woven fabric. Not too dressy, but...

Did you wear anything over your ears?

Tape 4

00:38 **Vanessa [interviewer] was asking what if anything you wore on your ears, to protect...?**

No we didn't. At one stage they tried only with the four-inch guns because they made a nasty crack. But it wasn't very satisfactory

01:00 because they have all got to be able to hear what's going on. And if you block the ears out too much and you can't hear, you're defeating the objective. Also, they used to say to us keep your mouth open, if you do that it will equalise the pressure in your ears and outside. Well that's a furphy [rumour] according to the audio people these days. They say that it doesn't make any difference.

01:30 So, deaf ears. But no, they were available the general consensus was that you had to be able to hear what was going on. They didn't think they did much good anyway. No ears.

You mentioned earlier that the first thing the Kanimbla did after the gun trials was it went up to Hong Kong. Could you explain

02:00 **what its task was during that time?**

Hong Kong was the place for the British Eastern Fleet, or the China Fleet they usually called it. We went up to the China Fleet to relieve two big ships, who were going over to the Atlantic, they were both sunk,

02:30 but that was the reason we went up there, to release them so they had more powerful ships over the Atlantic. They left us to deal with the dregs, which basically we did. We went up, when we arrived in Hong Kong, that was our first exercise with

03:00 a big fleet, they had submarines, torpedo boats, cruisers and quite a big fleet up there, so we just joined in with that. There were three armed merchant cruisers such as the Kanimbla one was the Moreton Bay and the other was the Ararat. They were, a mate of mine was at Bayline, he used to run passenger ships before the war.

03:30 They were coal bearers, whereas Kanimbla is a diesel ship. So she was faster and she could stay at sea much longer. So, from Hong Kong we were sent up North of Japan because the Germans were getting copper from South America up around the top of Japan down to Vladivostok and across the rail to Germany.

04:00 They wanted to stop, obviously wanted to stop the copper getting to Germany. So we went up there and grabbed a ship called the Mayacovski, I think, a Russian ship. The Russians were our allies at that time remember initially. No, the Russians

04:30 were German allies at that time because the Russians and Hitler had made a bit of a pact. The Russians were helping to get this copper to Germany. Germany needed this copper for guns you need it for everything. We had trouble getting it, and when she refused to steam, we tried to tow her.

05:00 Went to great trouble getting, towing. Then we put a prize crew on board and then we gave her some fuel so that she was taken back down to Hong Kong. About 20 of our people on board plus the Russians, Germans -

05:30 just checking, I'm getting mixed up. The copper was handed over to the French who came up from Saigon. The crew, we took the crew, and we took them up to Japan to Yokohama and dumped them there.

06:00 When we questioned, "Well, why did you do that?" The people we gave back to them through Japan were all deadheads, they were no cause at all, they kept all the brainy fellows down in concentration camps. But the ironic thing is the, when the Russians started

06:30 to fight the Germans, the Germans then took part of France and this copper we took over, instead of going to the allies got into the Germans hands anyway. By virtue it changed the alienation of the people. Which is a bit ironic. But ah well.

07:00 Bit embarrassed at the time, all we knew we had this ship and had no trouble getting it home to Hong Kong, then we did several more trips up the north of Japan, because there was a battalion and German ships in High Covey and Yokohama, so we patrolled outside these places and waited for them to come out. And when they came out,

07:30 which they did after a while, we grabbed them, put on a prize crew, and take them back to Hong Kong. Then they'd be handed over to the Brits and they used them as, in the convoys. They were fun exercise, but the main thing was to get the ships intact before they sank them. They scuttled them. So we nicked across, put the crew on board and take control of them.

08:30 **When you grab a ship how would you take control of it?**

We just, first of all you put the flag hoist up, "Stop The Engines." Then you send your prize crew over to

have a look at it. If they don't stop, which some of them didn't, then you fired a couple of rounds out of the three inch guns, which makes a nasty crack, but that, generally you'd find that you had to put one six-inch projectile in front of them. When a six-inch projectile hits the water it makes a big noise. They invariably felt it was a good idea to stop.

Did you get any resistance from any of the crews?

No not really,

09:00 they were a bit reluctant to do what they were told but, so if you dropped a six-inch projectile in front of them they'd saw reason.

What would happen to them, what would happen to the crew?

Concentration camp I suppose somewhere, we just took them back to the authorities and said, "Here you are." There's the ship, there's the crew. Then we'd go and get another one.

09:30 I think we got 14 ships on that run, one at a time. We got to a stage where we had so many prize crews out that our own ship was running short of men.

How large would a prize crew be?

About 10 I think, a prize crew.

10:00 They went over there strapped with revolvers and machine guns, that sort of thing, to make it look the part.

Did you ever go aboard any of these ships?

Me? I took the boarding parties over in the motor cutter, pulled it alongside and they just climbed the ladders and up they went. There was a matter of throwing over of

10:30 a hook with a ladder attached and coming up, if they wouldn't do it for you. But most of them saw the sense of it and came quietly. That took us about nine months doing that run I think. They got very hostile because we stayed at sea much longer periods

11:00 than other ships because we had diesel engines. After that...

I might just ask you about the weather conditions while you were doing that work, what were the seas like?

Well, there's one picture there, which I showed you where the water's coming right over the fo'c'sle of the ship and up north of Japan everything froze. Water on the decks was

11:30 frozen. Water in the gun tubs was frozen. You got quite cold; course salt water takes quite a while to freeze.

How did you cope with the cold, what kind of...?

We could double coats, but you get used to it, that's the strange thing. The captain of this Russian ship that we grabbed was walking around the bridge in a Bonds singlet,

12:00 at that stage we had duffle coats and god knows what on. You become accustomed to the cold very quickly, and don't think so much of it.

You mentioned that you'd been at sea nine months longer than the other ships, what kind of reaction did that get from the men on board the Kanimbla?

It's just a fact of life, no,

12:30 no objection from our people. They'd say, there's the hope of going back home again. And we realised it would only be a couple of weeks and we'd be back off again too. There was no great trouble as far as the crew were concerned. Was just a fact of life, and while your food held out,

13:00 that was the main thing; food and oil.

What was the food like on board ship?

Good, on the Kanimbla particularly, it was very good. We used to run out of fresh fruit and fresh vegetables, that was the only problem.

What kind of meals would you have, could you explain what the typical meal might be?

Just like at a restaurant really,

13:30 except we had no choice. The food got in the Kanimbla was particularly good, as I say she was designed and built as a merchant ship for carrying passengers, and they still had the same galley, so they were quite capable of cooking anything to eat.

After that work around Hong Kong where did the Kanimbla go from there?

14:00 We went from there down to Singapore, and we were chasing a raider out in the Andaman Sea up near, forgotten the name of the place. Halfway up past Malacca that we went all around that area the Andaman Islands. There was a German raider got loose in there.

14:30 We were looking for them and unfortunately didn't find them.

How would a ship like the Kanimbla be searching for a German raider, what would be done on board?

You just steer, set your course for where you think he might be. There are a lot of island in the Andaman Islands, I think it was, and they could be hiding anywhere

15:00 there. There was one ship up in Sumatra, which, stayed there and wouldn't come out. Nothing we could do about it, it was in neutral territory.

What kind of knowledge did you know about what was going on elsewhere in the war at this stage?

They used to give us a sort of bulletin,

15:30 generally if you went to revisions on a Sunday, the captain, apart from the church service, the captain would generally say, "This is what we're doing, this is what we're looking for." Apart from the buzzes [rumours] that floated round the mess tent.

And what was happening, so what was happening on land, did you have information about that?

16:00 Yes, they used to publish the Weekly Intelligence Report; they came out and covered all aspects of the war, so we were kept pretty well posted as far as that was concerned.

What year was it that you were on the Kanimbla?

16:30 1940, yes it must be till the end of 1940. Then I disembarked in Singapore, and was sent down to Australia to do this commission course, an officers' commission. So they just went ashore to a place they called HMAS

17:00 Sultan, the Singapore Base, then they put us on the Blue Funnel Line and sent us down through Sumatra past Darwin down to Fremantle and by train across to the Cerberus.

What was it like being home?

17:30 Oh, I don't know. We were pleased to get off have a couple of weeks leave. Actually we didn't get much leave at all, because by the time we got down past Sumatra, we had to change into civilian clothes to go through Surabaya,

18:00 then picked up the ship again. Took us a couple of weeks to get to the Cerberus from there. We did three months in the Cerberus, and came back to Sydney after that. Gazetted as a young sub-lieutenant and had to go to school again virtually.

You mentioned

18:30 **that on the Kanimbla you were up doing work up around the Japanese coastline, was there much talk at that time, I know it was 1940, but was there much talk at that time about Japan and its aggressive...?**

We didn't trust it because they sent out aircraft every day to see what we do and kept a pretty close eye on us.

19:00 But I don't think anyone really trusted them. They thought that sooner or later they would come into war.

And where you able to go ashore at any...?

No. Not in China either, we could only go ashore in Hong Kong. We went up the Shanghai River, the Yangtze Kiang. But we didn't go ashore.

19:30 **What was Hong Kong like at that time?**

It's only a fraction of the size. It's a very attractive place actually. We enjoyed our time, the bit of leave we had in Singapore, in Shanghai in Hong Kong. But it was only small outpost of the empire at that stage

20:00 **What would you do on leave in Hong Kong?**

They had dance halls in the Fleet Club, mainly do just a bit of sight seeing and a bit of shopping. We were just curious to see it much as anything else. The China Fleet Club was very good actually.

- 20:30 You could stay overnight there, with clean sheets, clean pillowcases and clean bed linen for one and sixpence a night. A bargain. We didn't really spend much time ashore in any case. They were short of ships, and they wanted the ships they did have out at sea doing something.
- 21:00 **Now when you returned to training, what was it that you were learning at this stage?**
- Navigation, seamanship, signals, torpedoes all that sort of thing. Interesting, It was all crammed into a period of three months.
- 21:30 We had to work pretty hard to keep it under control.
- Did you notice how Australia perceived the war, like how the general public was thinking about the war at this stage?**
- I don't think so. It didn't worry us; we were outside busy with our own activities. I don't think we even thought about it.
- 22:00 It was just too much to learn in a short time.
- And once that training had finished, where did you go from there?**
- I went to, after Sydney, then I did about a fortnight instructing in Sydney, then we were drafted to the Manoora, which is much the same as the Kanimbla. An armed merchant cruiser.
- 22:30 We headed up north to Nauru, Ocean Island, Darwin all across Port Moresby, all through that area because a German raider got loose there and did a lot of damage over in Nauru.
- What kind of damage had it done?**
- Blew up all the oil tanks,
- 23:00 and also Ocean Island and Nauru are tropical islands and are built a bit like mushrooms. Normally you have a shore which goes out evenly, this just came straight down and curved under, just like a mushroom so you couldn't anchor. So the ships had to just sit in the water and drift back and forwards in the tide
- 23:30 At any time, there would be half a dozen ships just sitting there. The German raider thought this was a great idea, and got in first and played havoc there. Then got away again, before we got there. Ocean Island and Nauru were quite interesting places. Phosphates
- 24:00 had been dug out of every nook and cranny, so there's only jagged rocks now.
- At that time, what was the scenery like that you were seeing?**
- Half the island was dug out and half was covered in normal vegetation. But we tried sitting in amongst those ships
- 24:30 for a couple of weeks, in the hope that the raider might come back and have another go, but he didn't so we gave up and went somewhere else.
- How different was it for you to be aboard a different ship?**
- No trouble at all except your training is such that you can switch from one ship to another without any problem. They have the same procedures
- 25:00 same charts, same food. You can just slot in without any trouble at all. Different people that's all.
- What kind of emotion do you have on leaving a ship like the Kanimbla that you served on?**
- The Kanimbla I was sorry to leave it. She was a very happy ship; we felt we were doing a good job.
- 25:30 We hadn't run into too much trouble so. You never know what the next ships going to be like, as far as personal are concerned. But generally it's no trouble.
- Does it take a while to adjust to a new crew?**
- Oh yes, you've got to try and remember a lot of names. Because they like to be
- 26:00 called by their Christian names. As I say all the routines are exactly the same so you just slot in as if nothing had happened. You might think the old skipper was better than the new one, but it's only a passing thing.
- How did your role change**
- 26:30 **when you moved from the Kanimbla to the Manoora?**
- It's interesting in a way, I was a sailor, I became an officer, oddly enough when I went to one of these other ships, one of the people I used to mess with on the Kanimbla was in the same ship; in the fact that I had one stripe and he was an able seaman, it didn't seem to make any difference.

27:00 We both knew each other and we just slotted in without any trouble.

How did you like being an officer?

I suppose it's, it has its plusses and it has its minuses too. Basically the work is more interesting and you've got more control of what's happening.

27:30 It was worthwhile doing. Probably the people you are mixing with are better educated than some of the seamen were. As opposed to that; some of our seamen turned out to be judges, all sorts of things in civilian life, so they weren't dull.

What were the minuses of being an officer?

28:00 You had to work harder, you had to accept responsibility, and you had to keep on studying, cause there's always new things to pick up.

So on a daily basis as an officer on the Manoora, what did you have to do?

In the Manoora, it was partly

28:30 a training ship, so part of the day was spent on gunnery, navigation and all the usual things, but you had to keep watch; on your four hours on and eight hours off, in which time you attended your classes and

29:00 did all your personal washing and that sort of thing, and keep yourself smart.

Did your accommodation change?

The accommodation was much better, I had a bunk, in the Manoora I had a bunk. So I didn't have the problem of lashing up hammocks.

Where were the bunks situated?

They were part

29:30 of the ship that hadn't been gutted. They had a series of cabins, which were mainly two to a cabin. They were quite comfortable. It took us a while to get used to handling a big ship. We made a few mistakes and that, but you live and learn.

30:00 What do you mean, what kind of mistakes?

The captain came up while I was on watch one day and he said to me, while we were off Ocean Island or Nauru, "Robinson, Lad," I forgot the expression, "Just turn the ship and stop it so she'll drift back with all these other ships and just sit in the middle of the bunch and not be visible

30:30 from away." I made a mistake, I put the gold wheel wrong, so instead of lying where she should she went somewhere else. Which was a bit embarrassing. But that's all part of your training I suppose.

How difficult is it to manoeuvre a ship that size?

Once you know what you're doing it's not really that difficult.

31:00 We, when we came into harbour we generally had a pilot. Most of the time the ships officers did all the piloting. Course we had a lot of permanent sailors who'd been in ships all their lives and they were much more competent.

31:30 But we had a amphibious duck with us, that involved picking the duck up, which is more a super marine walrus sorry; picking a bike lane float, it floats, and we had, one

32:00 day we had to land the thing in the dark. The captain just sort of caught hold of it, she turned and made a big slither in the water, which ran smoothly, and the duck was to come down, get the port holes in line and flop about in the water. That wasn't very careful handling by either the pilot or the captain of the ship. But

32:30 you do these things so after a while you perform them automatic. No problem.

Did you ever feel exposed being out on the open ocean?

Don't think so - don't think it worried us. When we were getting close to one of the raiders we were probably a bit apprehensive. We didn't

33:00 get that much trouble.

Could you notice a mood change on board as you got close to the raider?

No. Sailors just take things as they come. No great apprehension or worry. Not in those situations we got ourselves in.

33:30 **When you were around Nauru and Ocean Island, were you able to go on shore at all?**

Yes, we went to shore in both Ocean Island and Nauru because we used our own lifeboats. Interesting.

What were those places like?

The places were, I think the parts we used to go

34:00 where the phosphate diggings, that's all we really. The natives were quite friendly, they used to sing all day long and half the night.

What were your impressions of the natives?

They were friendly enough, they didn't like work,

34:30 didn't do any work that we could see. They just had a few operators there to run the equipment. We didn't have much to do with them at all.

Did you visit any of the villages on the island?

No. I don't think they would have welcomed us. They kept to themselves, wouldn't want sailors

35:00 sticking our noses in.

Who was running the mine?

No, the locals weren't running it; it was internationals I suppose were running it.

How long was the Manoora in that region for doing that work?

35:30 I was there for about 12 months, I suppose, after that she came back to Australia and she was converted into a landing ship. Both Manoora and Kanimbla were converted into landing ships and they took the army ashore up in New Guinea. They had special landing craft, to take the soldiers ashore.

36:00 **On the Manoora, once you'd left Ocean Island and Nauru Island, did you go elsewhere or...?**

After that I joined the Mildura, which is a corvette, 186 feet long, 30 feet wide, just under 1000 tons displacement, so it was quite a small ship. I joined her in Melbourne

36:30 and we ran convoys up and down the east coast of Australia for a while. Then we went over to Noumea, and did a bit of minesweeping cause the Yanks were coming in and they wanted the mine trips fixed up before they arrived. So we did that and then I joined another ship, Tamworth.

Can I just ask

37:00 **you about the Manoora, when it left Nauru and Ocean Islands, did it go elsewhere? You were at sea for 12 months on that ship, I'm just trying to get an idea of where you were for those 12 months.**

Ocean Island and Nauru, Port Moresby, Darwin, that's about all I think.

What were you doing up in Port Moresby?

I think we probably just called in for stores. Just

37:30 had to replenish stores and oil somewhere, so that's where we used to go for it.

So your role on that ship for 12 months, was that patrolling the oceans, too?

Yes, It seemed a lot of time spent doing nothing.

Did it feel like that to you?

Oh no, we were busy,

38:00 it was part of our education. The navy obviously had a definite plan what was to happen to us, so were just smartening our knowledge up. But as far as the ship, Manoora, itself, it just wandered around the Pacific, hopefully finding a raider.

38:30 The corvette was a bit of a shock to the system. You understand what a corvette is, I don't think you do?

Do you want to explain the corvette?

I'll show you a picture of it, you hold the cord.

You said the Manoora went to Darwin,

39:00 **what were you doing in Darwin at that time?**

I don't know, I really don't know. I think we just went there for fuel. Mainly when Manoora or Kanimbla at that stage, stopped there they were looking for food and fuel and ready to go off to sea again. We

- didn't get leave of any
- 39:30 consequence in any of these places until we came back to Sydney.
- How difficult was it being aboard a ship for that length of time?**
- No trouble – just a normal existence you eat, sleep, do your watches. I can't say, there was no problem. Socially or...?
- Well, anything.**
- 40:00 **Did you get frustrated about being away from home for that time?**
- No. I think we had too much on our hands, too much to do, to get worried about that. I think we might have had perhaps a day ashore in Moresby or Darwin or something like that.
- 40:30 We occasionally escorted some troop ships across from the islands to Darwin, something like that. But that was just a fill in really; our principle purpose was just to hunt for raiders. The oceans are that big, it's very hard to find one ship.
- What kind of information would you get**
- 41:00 **if there was a raider in the area?**
- In Nauru, for instance, if a raider started shooting you, they jumped in and told everyone. But there were no ships close enough so the raider was safe, and we couldn't do anything about it.
- 41:30 **How would the information be conveyed to you?**
- By wireless. The ships, when the ships are at sea, they receive messages but they don't send them, unless they are in contact with an enemy ship of some description, they...

Tape 5

- 00:31 **Mr Robinson, given that you were away for very long periods of time and living in intimate conditions, what was the relationship like amongst the men?**
- It depends, it differed from the larger ships to the smaller ships, in a larger ship you got room to get away if you wanted to and sit down somewhere else
- 01:00 and think your own thoughts; but basically you were working at least three watches, that's red, white and blue watches, so you were on for four and off for eight. In that eight you're off, you've got to do your ships clerical work,
- 01:30 do all, look after all your guns and weapons and that sort of thing, and you really don't have a great deal of time to spare. So while you might say be away for six months, maybe it must be our turn to go for a burder swing or bottomless scrape, it doesn't,
- 02:00 people talk about it saying when are we going home, but it's not a major thing. The most important thing is to keep your ship going.
- You mentioned the importance of people knowing their duties and routine, in terms of how a ship runs,**
- 02:30 **how, what can you describe what the navy family is like then, in terms of relying upon other people to do the right thing?**
- We've heard more about the navy family since we've left the navy, than when we were in the navy because if
- 03:00 I want anything done, which is in the power of the navy now, I can go along and ask someone, "How about helping me out," and they will do so. But generally speaking, people, or navy will look on you as being one big family. We've got to look after each other. That's what happens now. When we were in the ships, the same thing applied.
- 03:30 If someone got into trouble, you'd do the best you could to sort it out for them. If they had to get home on compassionate leave, you'd try and organise it. Generally speaking, all of the ships I was in we had no problem with crew at all. In fact, we seldom
- 04:00 punished them for any misdemeanours. You talk to them as people, not as underlings. We had no trouble whatsoever with the personal relationships. We had people in the corvettes who got horribly sick and we had to get rid of them, but
- 04:30 that was a medical thing. If a man is chronically seasick you just have to send him somewhere. We had a

few of that, but not that many. Mostly, after a bit of time in a corvette, most of the fellows could cope with it very well.

Once you were an officer,

05:00 were you required to take more of a mentor's role?

Yes, probably were not trained to do properly, when you're looking after the mental well-being.

05:30 I can't recall any serious problems in that way. You often found you were talking to men by their Christian names and that, instead of saying, "Jackson do this," you might use his Christian name, and if it's done properly,

06:00 it makes the feeling between the people. We had some trouble with racists and that sort of thing in the Persian

06:30 Gulf and occasionally had to land someone for perhaps a trip, while they got rid of them cause the heat in the Persian Gulf is incredible, everything is hot; you can almost cook your eggs on the plates, on the steel plate. Let's see, I'm trying to think of where we did have trouble. We had trouble once, fellows trading with the Arabs. The Arabs were short of

07:00 sugar and we had more sugar than we wanted and we found a fellow who was trading sugar for other things with the Arabs had. So we had to put a stop to that. All I'd say of all these ships I've been with we had no crew problems whatsoever, no mutinies like The Caine Mutiny or anything of that nature.

07:30 How did they train you to be an officer?

Take you down there and give you three months hard work, that's all. No special training. You had to learn a lot more, you were expected to know more about the running of the ship.

08:00 and people themselves. If you were mine sweeping you were expected to be expert who does things properly. So it's a bit of a burden on you to that extent, you can't just say, "You go and do it, Jack," you got to be able to take over and do it yourself.

What makes someone officer material, do you think?

08:30 I don't know, enthusiasm, keenness, a sense of responsibility, who knows. Our chaps did very well as, I can't think of any officers who needed disciplining in any way. Their duties to do whatever's necessary, and that's the

09:00 end of it. This chap I was in the same mess with when I went to Tamworth, he was a seaman in Tamworth, it didn't make any difference to our relationship. He was a seasoned sailor, and I was a raw young officer, he'd give me advice and I'd take it because he knew what he was talking about.

09:30 Its, occasionally, once we had a captain that was a bit difficult to get on with, but in the long run you just tolerated it.

Is officer training you lobby for, or were you just selected?

Selected. Every time I went to a ship to do my training they'd give me a

10:00 reference, and that goes on your Service Certificate, and if you've got VG [Very Good] superior, a string of them, someone notices it and they say, "Well, time Robinson was sent off to a training course to see what he can do."

What does VG superior mean?

Very Good superior.

10:30 What does it mean for your career?

If there was a job going or an opportunity for a commission, they'll look at a chaps record and say, "He's a good consciences fellow, we'll give him a try."

Did you have aspirations at that time of a long career in the navy?

11:00 No, only once I nearly signed on, but I decided against it .No I didn't ever have. By the time, I was at sea for about seven years, and I think by the end of that I'd had enough of sea, enough of study, and just everything else as well.

So can you tell me

11:30 about getting posted to, was the [HMAS] Mildura the first corvette you were posted to?

The Mildura was a bit of a shock when I was posted to it, I was used to 10000 ton ships. Then I was put in runs of about 1000 tons which roll all over the ocean, I had a bit of trouble orientating myself to that.

And generally, what is the roll

12:00 **of a corvette in the navy fleet?**

These ships were, firstly they were anti submarine ships, they were, if there was a convoy going from Brisbane to Sydney, they bunched all the merchant ships together and they tried to put them in speed levels. So we had fast convoys and slow

12:30 convoys, and then when you have a group of ships ready to go to sea, you then get hold of your escorts and send them off to as well, you line the ships in the convoy up into columns, and if we had, we used to have up to about 35 ships in the convoy. You allocate them positions and the

13:00 you have the longest, you have a broad band of ships, rather than a long tail of ships, because the longer the tail gets, the longer it gets, and the longer it gets. Until you lose control of them, but if you put the ships in a broad front, say or three or four or five deep, then the captain, the commander or the commodore

13:30 of the convoy can signal to all the ships. If he wants to do an emergency turn to escape perhaps a submarine or something, he can get the ships to turn together and off they go. But the merchant fleet are not used to doing this sort of thing; the navy they get close together as one. But the merchant people are generally by themselves and they go out in the ocean, where there are

14:00 no ships in sight and they get very nervous when they are made to sail close together. Which is fair enough, because they don't have the control of the ships that we have in the navy. We would sail in corvettes at 200 yards apart

14:30 one after the other and felt comfortable. It needs a bit of care and attention to stay in position. But the merchant ships aren't used to that and they keep edging away, so that you've got to keep them close together, because if you're passing a submarine you've got to have all your ships going past together.

15:00 Otherwise they'll sit there, and as they come by one after the other, they'll just pick them off as they go by. So the lesson took a lot of learning as far as Americans were concerned. They refused to accept that convoys were the way to go. Even though the Brits had been doing it for a couple of years, and the Americans lost a lot of ships off Florida, I think it was.

15:30 Firstly the towns didn't turn their lights off. Everything here was blacked out. The Americans didn't black out and they didn't, and they carried on with navigation lights and refused to go in convoys. As a result, the Germans had an absolute hay day with them. But, anyway, the convoys run here,

16:00 we would get, a broad front, say three or four deep at the most in the middle, and the wings would have three ships I'd say, so that even though it covered a big area, they were controllable if a submarine was there, they all went past quickly. As one, and had less chance of being sunk.

16:30 **Then how would the submarine be taken out, how would the submarine be destroyed, what with?**

On these ships you've got depth charges, an anti-submarine set, which is an acoustic, an echo, when it is a submarine and comes bouncing

17:00 back. Depending whether it's a high tone or a low tone, which tells you whether the submarine is going away from you or coming towards you, when you get a ping, as they call it, then you, the AS [Anti-Submarine] set homes in on it and as they come in they

17:30 cut off either side of the target, and they can say whether it's a submarine or a whale or what it is, and if it's a submarine they attack. When you do an attack you have a series of depth charges, all over the stern, fire into the air and down and the shock of that, hopefully, will sink the submarine. It's very difficult to do though.

18:00 **Why is it so difficult to do?**

Because when you are going up towards a submarine, when it gets to about 600 yards, you get no echoes, in that 600 yards the submarine has the opportunity to turn. He's only got to turn, say, 45 degrees and he's out of your pattern. The pattern we dropped

18:30 in Ararat, we had a 10-charge pattern, and you set it at...there is a high pattern and a low pattern, so you send 10 charges off together, hopefully you catch the submarine in between them. But it doesn't work. So that's how it happens, but as they do

19:00 the convoys to keep the ships together, where you want them so you can do emergency turns and get them past the threat quickly.

We were talking before lunch about the convoys, what other ships might be in that convoy apart from corvettes?

19:30 If your lucky you would have one or two frigates or destroyers, the corvettes the smallest type of escort we had. In coastal convoys we might have had a few Ace Daniels or small motorboats. But basically in

- an ocean going convoy you had the corvettes,
- 20:00 frigates destroyers and that's it. We were always short of escorts.
- Those merchant ships that were travelling up the coast, that you were escorting, what were they transporting?**
- Coal and iron ore and foodstuffs, there was a big variety.
- 20:30 But, some were iron ore, of course if they get torpedoed with cargo on them, they just go straight down like. So the convoys on the east coast of Australia are generally small in numbers, probably five to 10. It depends, see they
- 21:00 the merchant ships in the harbour, say Sydney Harbour or up in the Brisbane River, anywhere, they have a conference before the convoy leaves so the captains of all the merchant ships know where they can go, what their position they are in the screen and of any alterations to course they might normally have. Emergency
- 21:30 alterations of course, are then done by signal.
- How accustomed were the merchant ship and their crew to the navy system of convoys?**
- Initially they hadn't encountered it at all, as the war progressed, we, naval control, shipping people, endeavoured to get all ships into convoys, except the very fast ones like the
- 22:00 Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, and they were fast enough to go safely by themselves.
- What might the distance or the span be, between how wide one ship was from another?**
- You have,
- 22:30 normally you'd have five cables between the columns and four cables between the ships. So if you had five miles across the front of a big convoy, down to a couple of miles the distances are vast,
- 23:00 and by keeping all the ships in a group like that, there's less chance of being picked up by a submarine. If a submarine does sink a ship, there is normally one ship who's nominated as the rescue ship, and he can drop back and pick up any survivors in the ship that's been sunk.
- Is the target likely to be a**
- 23:30 **corvette, given that they are on a side?**
- Could be, yes. But a corvette is a much harder target to hit than a big merchant ship and probably less valuable, I suppose.
- And so what is the theory behind the destroyer being at the front?**
- The destroyer is much faster and better equipment.
- 24:00 There is a better chance of locating a submarine, and if it locates it, of sinking it. But, in the early stages of the war when we were short of escorts, you'd make one attack on a submarine, just to get him and give the convoy a chance to get away,
- 24:30 and then you could resume your protection around the convoy, but later on when we had lots of escorts, they would attack a submarine until they sank it.
- So what particular destroyers were you usually involved with as escorts?**
- We rarely had any destroyers - that was a luxury.
- 25:00 We only had one destroyer over in the Persian Gulf working with us. The rest were corvettes, that's how it went.
- You mentioned, before lunch that the Americans were reluctant to use the convoy system, what were the reasons for that?**
- 25:30 They believed that a group of ships together were a bigger target and submarines had more chances of seeing them, but that was quite wrong and they lost a lot of ships because they did not fall in with the acknowledged procedure.
- What presence was there during these convoys up and down the coast, what presence was there of Japanese submarines?**
- 26:00 The had a thing they called an I-Class submarine, quite a big submarine. For a while they were creating a lot of havoc, I think they sunk something like forty ships on the east coast of Australia, near enough to that. But, they were mainly Japanese submarines; the German submarines

26:30 were in the Indian Ocean towards the Persian Gulf, and they came all the way out from Germany, round the Cape of Good Hope and up, so they had a tremendous range.

Can you recall any particular incidents when you encountered enemy submarines during those patrols, escorts?

Between Aden and the

27:00 Persian Gulf we lost several ships. I can show you an illustration of it, they mainly had ore coming out of the Persian Gulf, and when they were hit, they burst into flames.

27:30 The German submarines were very good, the long-range ones. They achieved much more than the Japanese ones, they had more efficient submariners.

Were you were involved in these escorts up and down the coast, when the midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour?

I was over in Noumea, when the submarines came in here. I think they were a big class of submarine - they could carry one aircraft.

28:00 Anyway, they didn't do any severe damage, they sank a ferry which was being used as a demo [demonstration] ship off Garden Island, that's about all the damage they did.

When you received that news, what was your initial response?

28:30 It had to happen sooner or later. We just didn't have enough escorts out here in this part of the world.

In what way was that incident a reflection of how vulnerable the coast was?

29:00 I don't know, we knew there were Japanese submarines out there, I don't think we realised at the time that they had any aircraft on them, in fact the aircraft even flew over Sydney Harbour, and it wasn't detected either, so that was about it. The

29:30 Germans were far more efficient; they had longer-range submarines. A submarine travels fairly slowly when it's underwater. They could do about 14 or 15 knots under water but they would do 20 knots on the surface.

30:00 So our escorts had to try and keep the submarines down.

We might talk about the work in the Gulf in a minute, just wanted to ask you a couple more questions about that work on the east coast, what sort of armaments did the Mildura have?

It had one four-inch gun

30:30 and two or three Oerlikon 23 millimetre gun and machine guns, plus about 40 depth charges. Against a submarine your main weapon is depth charges.

And so what sort of crew was required for a depth charger?

A normal crew, call it, at that time would have been 85 to 90 men,

31:00 which in a very small space.

And how many people operating the depth charges?

The operator on the bridge, two people there - about six to eight people.

31:30 It's a slow business reloading them because the depth charges are very heavy.

So how frequently, if a submarine was in sight, how frequently would you be able to...?

Attack it? In the Mildura, we use a five charge cannon, so we only carry 40 depth charges, so if you had eight goes you'd

32:00 run out of depth charges.

Can you explain how the five-charge pattern works?

You drop one behind the ship then you throw two out either side by throws and then one or two over the stern again

32:30 When I was in the Ararat, which was a later corvette it had rails, that used the 10 charge pattern, the 10 charge pattern was more efficient because you set them for a different level when they explode, a 10 charge pattern, you could put five charges down low and five charges up high, so you had more chance of catching them.

33:00 **What was typically required to destroy a submarine?**

A lot of luck I think. A lot of luck. You had to get very close to a submarine because their hulls were very strong. Withstood tremendous hammering.

Given that and given that the distance

33:30 **could be up to 10 kilometres between each corvette, how quickly could it manoeuvre?**

I hope it wouldn't be 10 kilometres between. That would be the entire wing, hopefully you'd have one at least on either wing and one ahead and one astern. That's the sort of minimum you really want for protection.

34:00 **What was your position and rank by the time you were on the Mildura?**

I, in the Mildura, I was sub lieutenant, additional sub lieutenant and I was a navigator and as far as my action station I was down aft with the depth charges, supervising the loading and discharge of them.

34:30 **Can you explain what an 'additional sub lieutenant' means?**

It just means you've got two. One would possibly under training, and the other would be just normal, part of the normal crew. Training people was the main need.

Training people on the depth charges?

On corvettes, generally, yes.

35:00 **So you were working the dept charges when you were on action stations, and navigating when...?**

Or running the plot, we're getting more terms. We also tried to run a plot so that we could keep track of where the submarine was. Once you had the submarine on your plot, you endeavoured. You kept track of your own ship and where he was

35:30 and hopefully that enabled you to make an attack.

Just trying to get an idea exactly, a picture in my head of how you track the submarine from spotting it.

Initially I showed you, the anti submarine sent out a beam

36:00 from one side of the other in a fan, it did what we call an 80-80 sweep, from 80 degrees on one side to 80 degrees on the other side. Then if you got an echo from a submarine the ping as they call it, you would then concentrate on that echo and check its movements

36:30 and the size of the vessel, which you can do by cutting off either end.

How would you know then, when to attack it?

As soon as you got a sound echo, a good echo, which was classified as a submarine echo, then you attacked straight away.

37:00 **So what would you, when you were escorting the ships, what would be the point of origin, where would you leave from in Australia?**

Every port, every major port. They endeavour to have all ships covered by a convoy screens.

Did you get to spend much time on land in the ports?

37:30 No. We generally. Earlier in the war we just came in virtually to buy things, refuel and get foodstuffs and that sort of thing, and replace any depth charges that were used.

How far north would these escorts travel?

38:00 As far as the merchant ships were going. Because the further north you got the more dangerous it became.

So were you travelling to Papua New Guinea or...?

Up to Port Moresby, Rabaul, in that area. There was a big base in the Seeadler Harbour. Another in Manus and

38:30 another in Luzon. Firstly as the war progressed the naval forces kept on moving up till they got up into the Philippines.

What sort of defences did you have, or what sort of anti-aircraft

39:00 **equipment did you have in the case of ?**

As far as the corvettes were concerned, very little - we had machine guns, Oerlikons and perhaps some boaters. A corvette is a very hard vessel to hit.

So when you were in the vicinity of Port Moresby, what sort of

39:30 **aerial presence was there by the enemy?**

Initially there was quite a lot of Japanese aircraft, but their numbers decreased very rapidly.

So what sort of contact did you have with them, and what were those aircraft doing?

Reverting back to the Indian Ocean, which I perhaps know more about.

40:00 There were airbases in the desert, around the Persian Gulf, they used to send out aircraft to us and they would circle round and round. The Catalina's used to stay for 24 hours, just circling the convoy and watching out for submarines. The also had Wellingtons and Hudsons,

40:30 but they weren't nearly, they couldn't stay with us as long.

So what was the reason that you left the Mildura and were posted to the [HMAS] Tamworth?

I suppose the Tamworth was short of an officer I think. That's the only reason. I was initially sent to the Mildura for

41:00 training, I think I'd probably had enough, I'd been fairly well trained by then. So they then decided I could go on to the Tamworth. I became what they call the first lieutenant. Which is the second in command of the ship. So I stayed in that position for two years, in the Tamworth.

How old were you when you achieved that rank?

41:30 About 22 I suppose, something like that. A youngster. Yes 22 or 23, I forget now. Ancient dates.

Tape 6

00:34 **Mr Robinson, we were talking about the Tamworth and I was wondering if you could tell me what the role of that corvette was during the war, while you were on it?**

We build 16 corvettes in Australia during the war and four were for the Indian navy

01:00 and about 16 were for the British navy. The Tamworth was one allocated to the British navy, so as soon as she had done the working up trials and was functioning properly, she was sent across first of all to the Diego Garcia, but basically to operate from Bombay and Colombo, Persia Gulf and Aden

01:30 sort of run.

So how did you join the Tamworth, where did you go to join up with her?

I picked her up in Melbourne, she was built in Maryborough near the trials there, so I picked her up as soon as she was finished that in Port Phillip Bay.

And what did you do on the Tamworth, what was the role of...?

02:00 Initially I didn't think I was going to stay, but then they decided I would, and I became the second in charge of the ship. The captain and myself. So it was my responsibility to look after that ship for the next two years. We did a bit of

02:30 mine sweeping. We were fairly well equipped for mine sweeping because we had what they call a orapiza sweep, a double-layer sweep, which means towing wires behind the ship, they come out on the quarter, that's one method, the other was to formedic mines,

03:00 we had an electric sweep and it passed an electric current, which set off magnetic mines. Also an acoustic sweep, which was like a big hammer banging on the side of the ship, and again it, picked up a different type of mine. But fortunately we had very few mines over in the Indian Ocean. Mainly escort duties.

Which type of ships would you be escorting through the Indian Ocean?

Big tankers and bulk carriers,

03:30 the Allies wanted the oil out of the Persian Gulf. There's not much else. Going in they'd have assorted cargo going into the Gulf, a bit later in the war they decided that the Murmansk convoys

04:00 which were, probably used to go around the top of Norway and Murmansk, they were too expensive, they lost too many ships. So both merchant ships and escorts, so they had the idea of sending all this gear up through the Persian Gulf putting it on the rail and sending it up to Russia by rail. Much safer,

04:30 it increased the traffic going through the Gulf tremendously.

So the oil tankers that you were escorting, where would they start from and finish?

They started in the Gulf. Goodness knows where they went to, we'd take some to Aden, and they would carry on up through the Suez and up to the Mediterranean. All around the world, virtually.

05:00 They did try to use the overland route, because it was so much safer.

So which countries were these tankers from?

I don't know. Any country I think. Any country that was moving raw materials around. I couldn't say which country had most of them.

05:30 **Where there times that the tankers were fired on or lost at sea?**

The Germans submarines sank a number of them. When they sank the tankers, they went up in a great blaze of smoke and fire.

06:00 Fortunately, the Germans didn't get too many submarines over here, or we would have had much more trouble.

What would be the sign that there was a submarine in the area, or did this come as a total shock when the?

It didn't actually because you might have heard of a thing, the Germans called the Enigma, it's a coding machine

06:30 and the Brits broke the code and so they were reading some of the German signals straight off. Then the Admiralty would promulgate that over the airwaves and we would pick up, "There's a submarine at so and so and so and so." The Germans used to talk too much on their radios, and

07:00 when you hear a person talking on the radio by Morse Code, not verbal, with a direction finder, you can get a bearing on where it is. And if you've got one bearing from here and one bearing from over there, it crosses where the submarine is or was. Having the benefit

07:30 of the decoding which was done by the Brits in England it helped out no end.

What would happen aboard your ship when a tanker within the convoy was hit by a submarine?

First of all, we'd attempt to keep the submarine down under water, and give the convoy a chance to move away, and secondly,

08:00 we'd try to attack it and sink it. Finally the last thing you would do was pick up any survivors from the ship which was sunk.

How would you attempt to keep the submarine under water, what would be the way of doing that?

Drop depth charges in his vicinity, so it was a morale-boosting thing as much as anything else I suppose.

08:30 Let off a few and hopefully close enough to give him a scare. The other thing I hadn't mentioned was we seemed to have quite a few ammunition ships and one of them blew up in Bondi Harbour, that left an awful mess,

09:00 the Tamworth helped clean it up. Another one blew up the Ararat in Seadler, one of the islands over the other side of the, we went alongside it and the thing just blew up, when we looked around where it had been there was no ship, nothing, absolutely nothing at all,

09:30 so the whole thing disappeared. I think we had three losses, three ships blow up, however, no one knew how or why, just left without a ship.

When the tankers were hit by submarines, what was involved in the rescue operation?

10:00 When we were satisfied that the submarine had moved on or was out of the way, we would just steam over, lower boats, pick them up and drop scrolling nets over the side of the ship which are rope nets, which the able bodied people could climb up, otherwise we had to give them a hand up.

10:30 Generally they were covered in oil, we'd do our best to clean them up which unfortunately, they often swallow a lot of oil, which made them pretty sick, but again it didn't happen very often.

What would happen if someone had swallowed a lot of oil?

It seems to burn them inside if they can't vomit it up.

11:00 You just get them ashore and into a hospital as soon as you can. "Cause we didn't have much in the way of medical facilities at all, just we had one sick bay attendant and another to administer medicines."

In that situation, in that emergency situation was it possible to retrieve the bodies

11:30 **as well?**

No. Next question. What else were we thinking of? Seasickness, we had one AS [Able Seaman] officer who was notoriously seasick. He used to go up on watch on the bridge and take a bucket with him.

12:00 But he got used to it eventually. It was a hard learning curve for him.

You mentioned that you didn't have much medical on board, what did you have on board?

Medical? I think probably disprins and not much else. The chap, the sick bay attendant they called him,

12:30 had real limited training, so any problems we had we tried to hand over to a bigger ship or to a shore base.

How many days would that take to happen usually?

Not that long I suppose. Our range, our time at sea without refuelling would be about 14 days.

13:00 After that we'd have to re-fuel. Sometimes we refuelled from the ships without going into port, it was a fairly difficult operation. Failing that we'd just keep the chap until the next port.

So what kind of illnesses

13:30 **would people have on board?**

Mainly up in the training up in the Persian Gulf, heat rash and that type of thing, suffer very severely from the heat. Suppose after visiting a place like Bombay or Hong Kong when you went out you were probably, if they hadn't been too choosy with the ladies company

14:00 you might have had a bit of trouble in that direction.

How many days would it be before they could get to a doctor if they were at sea?

I'd say probably about a fortnight at the outside. Maybe if any of the ships in the convoy carried a doctor, we could switch the chap over that way, but it didn't often happen.

What kind of

14:30 **communication between the ships when they were moving in convoy?**

Mainly flag signalling, mainly to indicate if you had to do an emergency turn. If you wanted to pass a message, you did it by Morse Code lamp, they called it an Aldus lamp. You could tap out a message very quickly that way, or failing that they used the old semaphore,

15:00 but you had to be very close for that. The Aldus lamp was the best because it's not directional, sorry, it is directional so the message you sent is in private between the two of you.

Where would the lamp be situated?

On the bridge. We had three actually,

15:30 a four-inch Aldus, a six-inch and an 18-inch searchlight, we mainly used that. When you're out at sea in the early days, you'd close up to action stations before dawn, and then as dawn broke, you could see around to a clear

16:00 horizon, we did actually surprise the British Eastern Fleet at one time in the Tamworth, because we saw their mast before they spotted us. When you see a ship you've got a signal code, which you flash to them, if they give the correct reply, then you can exchange identities.

16:30 This time, they gave us a proper reply but as the sun came up, and visibility became better, these ships virtually rose up out of the ocean. It turned out the entire British Fleet was there, so. Just close to us, which was very handy. Comforting shall we say.

17:00 **What was that feeling when you saw other ships unexpectedly at sea?**

I don't know. You flashed the recognition signal, waited for the reply to come back and if it came back fine it was one of yours, so, in that case a whole lot of them.

17:30 **Did you have interaction with people on board other ships at all, is that possible or...?**

Very seldom. Occasionally in the Persian Gulf, when you were waiting for the next convoy to assemble, you might go across and have lunch with one of the other ships but not often. It's mainly - you get up and go

18:00 Anyway, it's all long ago and it's all changed now. The navy's a vastly different place.

How do you think it's changed?

The technology's improved out of sight. The anti-submarine weapons are far better than they used to be and

18:30 let's see. The ships are faster, they stay at sea for longer. There's only the weapons cover such an enormous distance whereas we might be able to hit something at 1500 yards, the navy's talking 15 miles or more.

19:00 **What would you do for entertainment on board the ship?**

I suppose you should say sleep. We did have a wireless on one of the ships, but it wasn't too reliable. We could pick up short wave occasionally, pick up a bit of news, that sort of thing.

19:30 Sometimes the fellows played cards - I can't remember what games we played really. Not much more than that.

Was there any music on board?

No, very little. We didn't have a system, which could be carried throughout the ship.

20:00 Mainly it just came from the wireless and what we could pick up on short wave. Had a few gramophones occasionally, but they weren't much help - you get used to the same tune.

Were there particular songs that people would sing or...?

I suppose there were. Some of them were fairly bawdy songs.

20:30 Which I wouldn't repeat. I suppose there were. Let's see, forget the name of it. But there was one lady who was very popular and they made her a dame some time after the war. You should know the names of all these songs better than I do.

21:00 **What kind of singer was she? That might be the thing to do?**

The Blue Birds over the White Cliffs of Dover, what else, can't think of anything else. The name will come to me shortly, but it takes a while

21:30 to filter through these days.

Was there much time to have that down time on a ship?

No, you were constantly doing something, there wasn't that much leisure time. People would sit down and write letters home, or write to their girl friends, whatever.

22:00 But beyond that I don't think you had a great deal of spare time.

You were second in charge on the Tamworth, what kind of responsibility did you feel towards the men?

I think we were very conscious of their

22:30 welfare. Certainly that was foremost, and we tried to give them the best food we could, but the food we got there was mainly dehydrated: dehydrated vegetables, powdered milk, tinned stuff. Fresh meat we could carry for a short time,

23:00 vegetables we could carry for a short time, but we couldn't always. See, when we went to the Persian Gulf you could stock up on these things because there was a depot ship there whose sole purpose was to feed the convoys as they passed through. They also carried surplus depth charges and

23:30 ammunition. So it was a very highly organised piece of equipment.

Were you able to go ashore at the Gulf?

Yes you did, but the water was so hot that no one bothered swimming in it, and also they had nasty bitey things that weren't nice. So they didn't go in the ocean. They seldom went ashore

24:00 in Bombay, of course, it was a completely different matter but the Persian Gulf and Aden were just about as bad.

So what would be the scene in Bombay, would people spend some time in Bombay?

When we, if we did a boiler clean which happened about once a month, we'd do it in Bombay

24:30 and there's plenty of entertainment there. Dancing, pictures, the usual things. A friend, ladies.

What are your memories of Bombay as a place?

Dreadful place, Colombo wasn't bad but Bombay wasn't not at all. It was a grimy

25:00 dirty place, from my recollection of it. But down in Colombo you used to go down to a place called Gaul

Place, Gaul Place beach was good for swimming. There were plenty of dances and other activities you could join in. Again, a boiler clean only took a few days, so you weren't

25:30 there for that long.

How would the locals respond to a ship being ashore?

I think they benefited from it. Made as much profit out of a sailor as they could. If he was silly enough to spend his money, anyhow.

26:00 We had very little contact with the average Indian. I think we were sort of self-contained. We had two Indian corvettes, which used to sail with us occasionally, but they were completely unreliable and we'd rather not have them, because after the first hour out at sea

26:30 and one would break down. So the benefit of having them was lost.

What warnings would you give the men if they were going ashore on leave, did you talk to them about anything in particular?

We sat them down, we didn't stand up and give them a

27:00 talk about their morals. Contraceptives were available on the ship so they had plenty of those, whether they used them or not, I don't know.

Were, I know that we've spoken to other army and navy people, during training lectures were given on venereal disease and so

27:30 **forth. Did that happen also where you were working on your ship?**

I don't think so. They would have been given lectures on service, and before they went to the ships, when they went to the ships they were expected to know and a medical sick room attendant would make sure they knew

28:00 they were available. Didn't have much trouble though, surprising now I think about it. We could well have.

Where there any particular punishment or processes for men who contracted VD [Venereal Disease]?

Basically,

28:30 they'd have to be landed into a shore depot and I think there may have been a stoppage of pay to some extent, if they weren't fit to carry out their duties, but I don't recall that.

What other discipline would there be on board ship?

Extra work, mostly.

29:00 Stoppage of leave. Stoppage of grog [alcohol], didn't get much grog, we used to get every so often they used to get an issue of a bottle of beer if the depot ships happened to have any. But most punishments took the form of additional work.

29:30 Firstly, if you had a good sailor, you wouldn't want to lose him. You might get one back who's not nearly so good. It was in your own interest to keep you on board.

What would be some examples of punishable offences?

Being cheeky, giving cheek, disobeying orders. That sort of thing.

30:00 That's about all I think. Failure to carry out their own duties properly. By and large, we had very little trouble on any of the ships. I think it was to their benefit to come into port with a clean bill of health.

30:30 Record.

Were there particular tasks that sailors loathed, were there?

There was one task, when you were heaving in the anchor you had to keep, wash all the mud off, which was a pretty dirty task. Cleaning the boilers was

31:00 a bit, although we got most of ENUs to do that one. No, I can't think of anything they especially objected to.

How long were you on the Tamworth for?

Just about two years I think. It would have been

31:30 18 months anyway. Then I came back and went to the Ararat, which was then up in the Admiralty Islands, north of New Guinea, took on the same job there that I had before so it wasn't any great strokes.

Which job was that?

First lieutenant,

32:00 second in command. I think people, the navy agents looked at, saying, "This chaps to young to be doing the job," so left it at that.

Did you feel young at that time?

No, I didn't. In fact,

32:30 I think I'd had such a good training, I felt reasonably confident about what I was doing. By that time I'd been in the navy for five years I suppose. Anyway I was only on the Tamworth for maybe six months before the war finished. And then she

33:00 was allocated to the 20th Mine Sweeping Tour and we went sweeping mines in Hobart, South Australia up to Port Moresby and Bougainville. That was an interesting exercise.

I might just go back and ask you about the Pacific War, do you remember when you heard that the Japanese

33:30 **had bombed Pearl Harbour, do you remember where you were?**

Can't remember offhand. I think it might have been while I was doing my training down in Flinders.

34:00 But I've forgotten that now.

What kind of impression did you have about how different it was working in the Pacific than working in the Gulf?

The convoy runs were shorter, the convoys themselves were smaller,

34:30 but we did a lot of other odd jobs. Every now and then we would be sent off looking for an airplane that had ditched in the Pacific somewhere. We picked up...we occasionally picked up a lot of natives that had been adrift for months, virtually starving. We then took soldiers to these places where they wanted to go.

35:00 Generally made a living with all sorts. I think the shortness of the trips was the most interesting thing of the whole lot. Perhaps not as interesting, in a way it was different. Over in the Indian Ocean, we

35:30 used to spend a long time at sea without seeing anything mostly, and up north you can't go more than a few hundred miles before you strike another island.

What were you looking out for in terms of the Japanese at this time?

Mostly submarines.

36:00 Their air force had been largely disposed of, so our main concern was mines and perhaps other ships. The Americans had built so many ships they had trouble manning them with qualified people.

36:30 Occasionally we would get a request from someone out in the middle of the ocean to ask, "Which way is Port Moresby?" or, "Which way...?" as if we were traffic cops. But by and large, they certainly built a tremendous number of ships.

Was that noticeable, the lack of expertise amongst the Americans?

Oh yes, of course.

37:00 Some of the Americans were excellent, but when it got down to delivery ships, they had people who were running grocery stores down at the corner and had very little sea going experience. Navigation was easier up in the islands

37:30 because you were taking fixes on things which showed up in your chart instead of just stellar navigation.

What kind of navigational instruments were on board these corvettes?

Way back in Captain Cook's day you had your normal charts, you had a sextant,

38:00 a chronometer and that was it, so long as you kept your chronometer wound up, which was most important, and take sights it was no great hassle.

You mentioned that you picked up natives who'd been adrift for days, what do you mean by that?

I don't know, we generally found quite often, I don't know why,

38:30 some of the natives thought they'd move from one island to another, a storm would blow up and they'd get blown right off their course. If we were told about it we'd be sent out to pick them up. Sometimes we picked up. The Americans used to have bad luck with some of their landing craft. We did pick up a few of those.

39:00 It's hard to think back now.

What kind of boats would the natives be in?

Dugout canoes, mainly. Anyway, I just can't think of what else I should tell you. As I said, it was pretty dull

39:30 sort of war as far as I was concerned.

Not at all, what were your impressions of the islands, like the landscape and the...?

We were interested...we used to get ashore on the island occasionally. One time we climbed up the top of a volcano to see what it was like. They were interesting.

40:00 A great sameness about it though, all islands look very much the same, palm trees, sand and that's it, bananas perhaps. Over in Bougainville the natives were very self-sufficient. I think they still are.

40:30 As far as our minesweepers were concerned, they were quite helpful, they'd tell us where the mines were and we'd go off and blow the things up.

How did they know where the mines were?

Some of the mines were washed up on the shore, and if they were washed up on the shore the natives would see them, and they would know enough to keep away from them, when we turned up they'd tell us where they were, and we just go and blow the things up. Again,

41:00 there's a lot of foot work and not much fun.

How was it coping in the heat up there?

The heat wasn't bad at all compared to the Gulf, it was just normal. We didn't have any problem with it; we had less problem there with heat rashes than we

41:30 had over in the Gulf.

Tape 7

00:22 See, what you've got to appreciate is that, particularly in these long

00:30 ocean convoys you spent, travelling over the ocean, generally looking after ships. Are you on the air now? In the earlier convoys I did off the coast of New South Wales and Queensland we didn't have any radar,

01:00 and radar as you know gave you a clear picture of what's happening in the world around you. But this time, this was before we got radar, and we had an unusually large convoy to take up the coast of New South Wales, and it was raining, rough weather, everything was miserable. We were trying to do a zigzag in front of the convoy and they steamed

01:30 into a cloud of rain and we'd be out there, not being able to see them, not knowing where they were, you couldn't flash them up, because you'd give your own position away, and my greatest worry was not to lose the damned convoy. We go out zigzag legs and come

02:00 back in again. You'd time yourself out and then time yourself on the way back and hope you didn't bump into anything in the mean time. When radar came it made watch keeping much better, easier. Because if you keep a good station, you could see where all the ships were and no problem at all.

02:30 These days of course it's even better, their radar is better than ours ever was.

You mentioned that on these convoys you could go long periods without seeing a thing?

When I say long periods, I mean a week.

What's the sense of isolation like?

The sense of isolation? It wasn't really a worry. We were constantly

03:00 plotting our position on the charts so we knew, thought we knew exactly where we were. Wasn't really a sense of isolation. You had reports coming in through the WT [Wireless Transmission] office. Reporting positions of submarines in the territory. No feeling of isolation. Too busy.

03:30 **Did you enjoy that?**

Used to curse the movement of the boat, I suppose you get, even if you don't get seasick, when the boat's tossing around incessantly, you get a bit fed up with it. The matter of hanging on to those lifelines.

04:00 You've got lifelines rigged and you've got the tails to grab as you go along so you don't skid. I think I've lost track of what I was talking about now.

What is it like when you see land after a week?

You sincerely hope it's land you can identify. You've got the right place.

04:30 It was ok in the convoys because the convoy commodore used to instruct all ships to hoist their positions at midday. So if you were a bit doubtful about your own position, you had all the ships hoisting their position and there was a certain amount of rivalry to get your position up there first. If you were last they

05:00 probably thought, "Oh yeah, he doesn't know where he is."

You mentioned that when you were in Colombo and Bombay you mixed with some friendly young ladies,

Oh they were friendly I suppose. You know the young ladies we mixed with were mainly the naval ladies. The English WRANS [Women's Royal Australian Naval Service]

05:30 ladies out in Aden, Colombo and Bombay, we used to fraternise with them. That was easier than trying to fraternise with the local ladies.

Why was it was easier than trying to fraternise with the locals?

Well, you just, when you came on, say to the single sailors, "There's a party on tonight,

06:00 we'd like to have so many ladies join us," and sometimes we drew upon their resources at the local hospital, because they generally had English nurses there who came out with the Queen Victoria, wasn't it? Yes, Queen Victoria nursing establishments in Bombay and Colombo.

06:30 But you generally mixed with the naval ladies when you were getting your stores and all that sort of thing. Stores and mail, so they were the obvious people to have a night out with, if you felt that way.

And where would the parties or the socialising take place?

Often in the ships.

07:00 Sometimes you went down to the hotels or club. In Gaul there's a nice hotel down there. The naval establishment was close by so they used to run dances every so often.

Did you have a girlfriend while you were in the navy?

Not really. I was 20,

07:30 I had a few acquaintances but I didn't get married till well after the war.

Lots of men did get married and get engaged before they went off to serve, what was the reason you didn't have a serious relationship?

08:00 Perhaps I was a bit too slow. A lot of chaps were married, they found it a bit hard actually because they were obviously young married people, sometimes with a small child, sometimes not. But they found the going much tougher than the single people.

08:30 **So what was it like living in such close quarters with only men for certain periods of time?**

My son Tony asked me the same question. I took him to see the [HMAS] Castlemaine, which is a corvette, which is down at Williamstown down in Victoria, and he said, "Dad, was there any homosexuality in these corvettes?" and I said, "No Tony, just wait till you see one, you'll

09:00 realise that this is no possibility." Doesn't matter what you feel, when you're jammed in with people, like in that photograph I showed you, there was no room for any nonsense there. And apart from that, I think we were much more opposed to homosexuality than perhaps people are now.

09:30 So no, sometimes maybe ribald comments about the possibility of someone...but in the corvette, it's just too small. If you want to have sex, you have to go ashore somewhere and find it. And yet the Hong Kong ladies were very persistent,

10:00 but they were a bit dangerous too, so...

Can you describe for me in what way they were persistent?

As soon as you stepped ashore, they gathered around you like bees to a honey pot. Otherwise, they were selling their wares, often very cheaply, if you wanted to take the risk.

What did they look like?

Chinese girls?

10:30 Attractive actually, some of them were very attractive. More so than up north in New Guinea, you wouldn't look twice at them. Oh perhaps I shouldn't say that. Anyway, the Asian ladies often looked very attractive.

11:00 Particularly the Eurasian ladies.

And why was contact with them considered dangerous?

Dangerous from the disease you might pick up from them. Not dangerous in the other sense. They were quite friendly, very friendly.

Were you still on the Tamworth

11:30 **at this stage?**

The Tamworth was only over in the Persian Gulf, India, Bombay.

Were you on the Tamworth when you heard about your brother?

Yes, my father wrote to me. That wasn't very nice.

12:00 Marion's brother was shot down in the bomber command in England, she's very sensitive about that. I suppose if something's said to you, you expect that sooner or later someone you knew would have to be knocked off.

How did it change your feelings

12:30 **about the war, or about the enemy?**

Mack was hit by a submarine off Caloundra, him and the...I thought I had another book there, yes, I did.

13:00 **We were talking about how that news, you mentioned that you almost expected that someone you knew and like would be killed. How did it change your feelings about the enemy?**

13:30 I dislike the Japanese, probably shouldn't say it, but I hate them, that's all. In a normal

14:00 scrap, you expect the people to, but you would think that a hospital ship would be the safest place to be.

14:30 I think it's the silliest thing, we don't forget. Shouldn't get worked up like this.

It's all right to get worked up.

But you see a ship like that

15:00 is lit up, it should have been the safest place on earth. It was a shame - the captain of the submarine went over to the Indian Ocean too and he sank a ship

15:30 of machine gun survivors, every one. Some people I suppose can be like that.

Do you want to talk about something else?

Yep,

16:00 so I don't like them. Germans I can tolerate, but not Japanese.

Is it still like that?

Yes. What else can we think about?

I'll give you a moment and I'll just look at my notes.

16:30 **I'd like to ask you about how the ship became involved in the landing on Tarakan?**

We took a convoy over there and we stayed, just immediately after the landing and one of the army people said, "Would you like to come ashore?"

17:00 So we came ashore and they said, "Take your white hats off, you're just a mark for the Japanese if you're wearing your white hat with the peaked cap." So we wore a slouch hat and we just joined the army with all their machine gun posts and mountain gun they had there. Different for us.

17:30 One of my friends was operating the 18-pounder gun up there, so it was relaxing joining in the army. It was a nasty business though, because in the Tarakan the Japanese, there were a lot of tall trees, they

were big trees and the Japanese had buried underneath

18:00 the roots of the trees, so you couldn't get at them apart from dropping a hand-grenade down or some Napalm, which is a beastly business, but it had to be done, it was the only way to get them out.

Did you see the Napalm being dispensed?

18:30 I saw it being dropped from the aircraft, yes. The Lightning, which is an American twin fighter, was dropping it on them while they were there, nasty sheet of flame.

What does it look like, can you describe exactly what it looks like when it's dropped from a plane and then when it makes impact with something or someone?

Am I on tape? They came in very low and then there was

19:00 just a sheet of flame dropped out from the aircraft onto the ground. It's a very nasty weapon. I guess that was part of the, only way to get them out.

19:30 The war was not a very pleasant thing at the best of times. There was, the shipping that moved over to Tarakan, oh, there must have been 500 ships at first, they moved out from Seeadler Harbour, it's got another name.

20:00 Good enough, all the ships moved out from there. That's where a lot of the transition ships blew up beside us. Sitting down in the boardroom, there was a great thump alongside us and we rushed up on deck just to see bits of the ship falling down around us. No one knows why, some of them might have

20:30 had a nail in their shoe and trod on a steel plate, made a spark and away she went. It was a tremendous bang though.

Was there anything left of it?

Nothing left, there wasn't a thing. It just disappeared.

Was it an Australian ammunition ship?

No, an American. I don't know

21:00 why we were so close to it, but we were lucky we weren't a bit closer. The thing that blew up in Bombay was much the same except it was carrying a cargo of cotton, for some ridiculous reason they put the cotton on top of the explosives and when the thing blew up, all the cotton ignited.

21:30 Just about burnt out all around the dockyard, and the ship itself was blown up on the docks. We had to send a crew across to help tidy up the mess. The fact that it had cotton packed on top of it was the critical thing I suppose.

22:00 What were your overall impressions about the skills, and the ability and the resources of the American navy?

Are you part American? American's are a strange race, put it that way, put it that way, not being too disparaging.

22:30 The people at the top of the tree are generally excellent, they are good seamen, but when you get a bit lower down the tree their ability is very limited and they seem to have...they have a certain thing called a Telephone Talker,

23:00 and where our people would just talk out to speak on the telephone, anyone can do it, but they had chaps who were specialising in very small jobs, which really, you would have thought was not necessary. The top people, excellent, but lower echelon not so good.

23:30 I think we were talking about Americans, and can you explain what the Telephone Talker was?

Just someone who relays messages, I'm being a bit disparaging there but, just a very simple operation.

24:00 But as I was saying the top people are excellent. The ships they build are good, I wouldn't knock them apart from saying there is this gap between the top and the bottom which is hard to understand. The average person in Australia mightn't be a brainstorm, and the chap on the top might be extremely

24:30 intelligent, but the difference below that is, to my way of thinking, more accentuated in the American navy than elsewhere.

How was that reflected in their day to day operations and how they seemed to perform their tasks during World War II?

25:00 They built a ship they called a Town Class Destroyer, four funnels, long, narrow and absolute bitch of a thing at sea, and they transferred 50 or maybe 100 across the Royal Navy and the navy tried to use them out in the

- 25:30 Atlantic, but they rolled so much it was just impossible, they were very poor seagoing ships. We see the difference in seagoing ships out here occasionally. One time, there was an American destroyer and an English Frigate out here, a fellow got washed, left outside when the submarine submerged,
- 26:00 which is not very nice, and they had ships out here for a couple of days in very rough weather trying to find this poor fellow. The British ship was handling the heavy weather wonderfully, but the modern American ship was rolling all over the place, just surprised in the difference in seagoing quality.
- 26:30 As far as the navy's concerned, that's the most important thing, you've got to be able to stay at sea in heavy weather and be a mobile gun platform. But maybe it was just the two ships, but anyway. We've always felt that the Australian or British ships were better than the Americans. But that's just a personal thing.

27:00 Am I still talking to that machine?

How do you think the Australian navy evolved as a result of its role in World War II?

It came out very well, they had an excellent reputation. We provided a big percentage of the anti-submarine people who went over to serve in the Atlantic, and they did it very well. A friend of mine,

27:30 he sunk about three submarines and he had a DSO [Distinguished Service Order], three bars or something like that, but he just had a feel for hunting submarines and he did remarkably well. There's another chap, Captain Walker, but I'm getting away from my history.

28:00 **Can you recall hearing about the surrender of the Japanese and the dropping A [atom] bombs?**

Yes.

What do you remember about that day how you heard the news, and how you felt?

I think we felt relieved, and we thought that maybe this is the end. But no, absolutely no qualms about the rights or wrongs of dropping it. They

28:30 just had to drop it. Otherwise we would have lost a tremendous number of people trying to invade Japan. So don't ever be talked out of that. We were lucky we got it through and it did in fact terminate the war. We'd all had enough of it by then.

29:00 **Where were you when you heard?**

Where was I? I can't tell you that unless I look at my book.

Do you remember if there was an opportunity to celebrate?

No, there wasn't, we were at sea somewhere. The only time we had an opportunity to celebrate was at the end of the war with the Japanese, I was down in

29:30 Adelaide then, just doing a refit. I think the atrocities the Japanese inflicted on all the people in the East, was enough to put anyone off. I get a bit emotional about it, sorry about that.

30:00 I would never trust them, I just feel like they are a different race, they have different standards and that's it. That's one of the things that will stay with me forever I suppose.

30:30 **Have those feelings changed or evolved at all over the last 50-odd years?**

No. There must be something else I can tell you about.

31:00 **I just want to go back and ask you about - what your role was once the surrender of the Japanese was secured? What boat were you on and what were you doing?**

The Ararat was the corvette I was on at the time, they decided that the next thing to be done was to clean up all the mines that had been laid around Australia because we'd laid a lot of mines ourselves, the Japanese had laid some.

31:30 The Germans laid some. We just had to do clearing and sweeps to clean up the coast so steamers could get cracking and moving again. During the war we had swept channels going into each port. The minesweepers would go out every day and sweep an area

32:00 a few cables wide and say 10 miles long, something like that, and just to make sure there were no mines there. So you could have freedom of movement in the Sydney Harbour for instance. So we were nominated to do the sweeping of it, all around Australia, started down in Hobart, over to South Australia and then up the coast here.

32:30 Up to Rabaul, across to Bougainville and finally into the Coral Reef. One of the corvettes sat on a mine there and sank, but there was nothing you could do about it, he was just caught in the reef.

33:00 We spent 12 months cleaning up the mess, cleaning up what was left. We demolished a lot of mines

along the coast of Bougainville, we would go ashore with a bag of explosives and the natives would tell us where the mines were and we'd just put the explosive on the mine and blow it up and on to the next.

33:30 We had to put a return into the navy to say that we've demolished so many mines, we sent the form in that said that and we got a message back saying, "If you must destroy our mines, please use the form to tell us about it." Just bureaucracy at work.

How dangerous an operation was it getting rid of these mines.

34:00 No, it's not dangerous. You didn't touch the things, they were just sitting there, you put on a quarter charge of TNT [trinitrotoluene highly explosive crystalline compound] on them and a bit of primer, start the fuse off and go and hide behind the nearest rock and it goes off.

How did the natives know where they were?

On their fishing trips, I suppose they see these things. They were all washed up on the beach.

34:30 After a while the rust gets in and deteriorates the mooring line, and in theory it should then retract its primer and be automatically be rendered safe. The problem is that while it does break,

35:00 it generally has so many bits of shell fish wrapped around it that as soon as it's sucked back into the mine and being safe, it stays just armed which is highly dangerous. But if you don't roll the things around you, you're ok.

Did you form an impression of what life was like for these indigenous people under the Japanese.

No, I wouldn't comment on that, I

35:30 didn't have anything to do with them. By hearsay, yes, but I have no real basis to form an opinion.

Did you go ashore at Rabaul?

Yes, we climbed the volcano, climbed up that and had a look at it. During the war the air force tried

36:00 to blow it up, they dropped bombs into the crater, didn't make any difference. Still a lake there.

What were your reasons for leaving the navy?

Well I thought I was going to join up to the permanent navy, but I thought, "No I don't want to do that." So I thought, "Oh well, I've been in the navy for a long time, I've been studying for years

36:30 and I've led a fairly spartan [basic] life I suppose," I thought it was time I got out and did something else.

So what was it like adjusting from what you described as spartan to regular civilian life?

I didn't have any troubles slipping back into civilian;

37:00 my parents were still living up at Gosford I think, yes. So I decided I'd get out. There was no real reason I did put into the navy to stay on once, but the next morning I woke up and said, "This is not for me," and withdrew my name quickly. The navy's

37:30 a good life but it seemed a bit pointless. You couldn't go around shooting people, there's no more mines to blow up. Everything was peaceful, what's the point in having a navy. Well that's now all changed of course. The navy's stretched really, there's a lot of big jobs over this side of the world.

38:00 **Did you enjoy the risk-taking element of your role in the navy?**

Didn't ever think of it as that.

Well, you said you didn't see a point in it if you weren't getting shot at.

What I'm saying is that there didn't seem to be a purpose for the navy, at that stage. That's all changed.

38:30 I suppose if I was in the navy now I'd say yes, I'd stay on, there are all these jobs to be done. You've got to look after the tooth fish down in the south. You've got people over in Bougainville wanting to keep the peace, someone over in Persian Gulf again for god's sake. So there's plenty of work for the navy to do now.

39:00 But then, looking around there was no real purpose for having a navy.

Were just wrapping up now and I just wanted to ask you one last question. Given that you and your wife did experience intimate loss, how do you look back and reflect now on the necessity of World War II?

39:30 I'm quite satisfied now that we didn't have any alternative. We just had to go in. When you go to war there are all those losses, and if they have to be personal losses it makes it a bit sour for us, but for the good of the world for the good of your own people

- 40:00 or your own offspring, you need a stable world. Maybe we didn't achieve it in the First World War, it was the war to end all wars. It didn't happen. It's a sad situation but it was necessary.
- 40:30 It's just sheer bad luck we suffered a personal loss. The thing is we don't feel the same hatred as we do of the Japanese. Quite a number of our friends out here are Germans, oddly enough. We talk about the war, talk about how they got mixed up in concentration camps,
- 41:00 all that sort of thing, it's all just friendly chatter, there's no ill feeling. But as far as the Japanese, yes. You'd probably find a lot of the ex-servicemen have the same attitude. Anyway, what else do you want to ask me?

INTERVIEW ENDS