# Australians at War Film Archive

## Stanley Kirby (Stan) - Transcript of interview

### Date of interview: 28th April 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1865

## Tape 1

00:30 **So Stan, I believe you were born in Melbourne?**

That's right, in Kew; one of twins. I'm the youngest.

**Younger of the twins?**

Yes; 1919, fourteenth of December 1919.

**Is there just two in your family?**

Yes, two boys.

01:00 Twin boys. Our father was a cartage contractor in Kew.

**And what does that mean?**

He had drays; him and his brother, they had drays. Very old, family-oriented Kew identities. Large family; about five boys in the family and one girl. One was killed at the war – Walter.

01:30 That's the one my second name was named after. My mother was a South Australian of German descent, I do believe. She was from…Bal…up in the hills. I can't think of where that was now.

02:00 **In the hills of Germany?**

No, the hills of Adelaide, South Australia. Balhannah, that's it. She was born in Balhannah and came to Melbourne. She met Dad in Melbourne. They were married in Collingwood in Melbourne. And just the two boys, rather late in life. I was a pretty small baby; weighed three pounds. They didn't think I'd live.

02:30 Didn't think my mother would either. But we both survived.

**Still here!**

I'm still here, yes. Anyway, we were bits of villains at school. An interesting school life. East Kew State school. And they had two rural classes on the ground floor that had the eight grades in each room.

03:00 Well, two boys and two girls from grade one, and you sat along grade two and so on up to the eighth grade. Well, Arnie and I – that's my twin – we were the two boys in grade one. We went there in… that'd be 1929 or '30 or thereabouts. No, 1924 or 1925, 'cause we'd be four or five years old.

03:30 We used to change seats at school, and that caused a bit of a problem. So they put Arnie into Rural B, and I stayed where I was in Rural A. Another lad came in there – I've got a photograph that I'll show you later on – and we went right through that school in that same room. Didn't change rooms.

04:00 I didn't appear to have any trouble studying, though I was always in trouble with not doing homework. We went right through with one teacher up to sixth grade – a Miss Stenway from down in Gippsland somewhere. And she was marvellous. And Arnie's teacher was a Mr Hogan. He had the same teacher right the way through to the eighth grade. I had a change of teacher in the sixth grade, and was Miss Dick.

04:30 Well, when I finished the school there – in the eighth grade; got the Merit, no trouble – but I'd been in a lot of fights in school. I wasn't very popular and inclined to look after the underdog. If someone was an underdog, I'd go and fight their battles for them and get a hiding myself. It didn't matter.

**Was Arnie a bit the same as you?**

He was worse. He was a real fighter. When he got in the navy he'd take

05:00 on anything. He was a villain and he liked fighting. But I didn't. Never mind. We got through school all

right and got a few scratches here and there. It was quite enjoyable, schooling days, and a good learning period.

**Did you play any sport?**

No, didn't have time for sport. In the sixth grade, around age ten or eleven, I was playing in a school band with bugle and drum.

05:30 I played the bugle and Arnie played the drum; then they decided they'd get a brass band: East Kew School Brass Band. Of course, we graduated to cornets and we played in the school band until I left school. Even in the air force I played, in the Scotty band there, at showgrounds. I played a drum down Adelaide Terrace – wait a minute – South Terrace

06:00 in Adelaide – to the college where I was being educated as a fitter. I played a drum there. In Ascot Vale I was in the Scotty band and played the drum there. And when I went to Lavin I played in the brass band.

**Sounds like you might have come from a bit of a musical family, Stan?**

No, Mum wasn't musical. It just seemed to come. Arnie and I – he played in

06:30 the navy band as a volunteer; they didn't have permanent bandsmen in 1936 – but he was playing in a band at the World Fair when war broke out, and they went straight to Crete, where he got decorated. Never mind, that was when they commissioned HMAS Perth. Not to do with the air force. Anyway,

07:00 from there, over the course over the years…I left school at twelve – the State school – then I started to go to the West Melbourne Technical College in the city…

**Before we get into that, I just want to ask you a few more questions about your childhood. You mentioned that your father was a cartage contractor…what did that actually entail?**

07:30 Yes well, cartage contracting in those days was by horse and dray. He carted manure for gardening, screenings for putting in a driveway, gravel, stuff like that. And ploughing people's backyards. They were

08:00 bigger backyards than what they've got today. He used to be an expert with a scythe. I've seen him use it, and was good. He could cut a paddock down with a scythe and you'd think a mower had been over it, and then he'd gather the grass for his own horses. When they were building the Boulevard I think he had four or five horse working there.

08:30 It was the depression years then of course, and the drivers were not…they'd never seen a horse. He had a lot of trouble with drivers. He didn't employ them, the government did that. He just supplied the drays and horses. And of course, they were always beautifully turned out. I used to have to sit on the manure pit and hold them while he washed their legs

09:00 and all this sort of thing. So, apart from that, we had a lorry and a jinker…

**What's that?**

A jinker, that's a horse jinker. We had a pony to get around on too. There were no cars. Bonny, she was a lovely horse. We used to go to the stables and crawl through her legs and that. She was a lovely horse. Yes, he was a real horseman.

**How many horses did your father have?**

At one time he had about ten. And from where we lived – which was near

09:30 the cemetery at Kew – of a Friday night a Saturday afternoon, depending on the state of how Dad was washing them or looking after them – I'd ride one horse and the rest would follow down to Harper Baron Hotel, down a road whose name I can't remember, to a paddock there. I'd turn them out into the paddock.

10:00 You couldn't do that today with one horse, let alone with the others following along behind like that. They'd all follow Old Dopey. I'd ride Old Dopey. Then I'd have to go out there and get Old Dopey to come up near the fence so I could get up on his back to come home. So I'd get a ride home. Just sit up there on his back, set him in the direction and he'd come home. He knew what he was about. They'd all congregate at the gate. It was a good lifestyle.

10:30 **What sort of regular duties did you have with helping out with the horses?**

No, Dad did it all. He curried the feet and all. He did the feet and all. All I did was… I never saw Arnie. He seemed to be a bit of a pet. Never seemed to do much about the place. He never seemed active in any way. It was more me. I'd get in and hold the horses and all this sort of thing, and Arnie, he was… I dunno what he was doing.

11:00 I've never worked it out. He was always missing. But never mind, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the horses.

**It sounds like he was getting away with it and you weren't?**

Oh well, in a sense. I don't know; he might have been reading books. I couldn't read books. Dad used to pick up nuts and bolts off the road, and bits and pieces like that, and I'd pull them apart and put them back

11:30 together. I was always a fiddler. Still am. I'd drive nails into wood and funny things like that. Just to amuse myself. I wasn't active in sport, though. I liked running and jumping, but of course, once I got in the band, with weekends and band practice, when sport was on I was doing band practice. So that cut out any sport.

12:00 **Would your mother help out with the business at all?**

Mother was good. Some of these fellows were camped in the loft. We had a beautiful stable, where the chaff used to be kept – it'd run down a shoot to a big pounder box, to feed the horses. A couple of fellas camped up there and she made hot meals for them. She was a real worker, y'know.

12:30 And the men all had appetites in those days. No prepared foods. We ate well.

**What sort of food did your mum cook for you?**

Stews and roast lamb, roast beef, stuff like that. Ate a lot of lamb, and Dad had a good vegetable garden. Of course, he had so much manure. We used to grow our own vegetables. We had a very big allotment – backyard – and three lanes converged on the back.

13:00 The lanes were mainly for the loo. You'd have your loo on the lane and the night carter would come along and empty them from the lanes. The roads were rough as goat's knees in those days and the drays would make a clatter coming down there from the hill one way; and two streets on each side, they came in the other way.

13:30 So you wouldn't know from where they were coming. You'd go and open the gate and help unhook the horses, then run under the dray where Dad kept his lunch. He'd always take his lunch and a couple of bottles of tea – black tea. And it'd be nice and cold when he came home. I loved that, I'd go under the dray first thing and drink any he'd left.

14:00 So it was a very active life.

**Did you have to upkeep any of the equipment for the cartage business?**

Yes, he'd prop the drays up and grease the wheels. And the harnesses, yes. My mother used to make the Blackmon on a wood stove. Now, there's turpentine in that, so how she accomplished it, I'll never know. I've often thought about that.

14:30 We had to keep out when she was doing it. She'd boil the stuff up on the stove – it was like boot polish – and that's what Dad used to polish the harnesses and horses' hooves with; slap it on, then put nugget on, then shine it up. The Clydesdales, they just turned out beautifully.

**How did you make the black stuff?**

I don't know. There was turpentine in it, I knew that. But she'd make it up on the stove, and we weren't allowed near, because being young kids would, could have done something stupid.

15:00 It might have caught fire.

**It sounds like it might have been a bit toxic?**

Yes, it would be today. But she was clever the way she did it. She'd make a pot of it and add it to the four gallon tin – that's how much she used to make of it; a great big pot. Dad'd just dip it out of that and put it in little tobacco tins. He'd stack it around like that, because it'd dry out

15:30 otherwise. He'd use it for harnesses and brushes and things like that. Always active. In the early days of course it was all hurricane lanterns. There was no electricity. Then we got one power point – this is interesting. Got a power point in the house. Mum only wanted one power point for an electric iron, instead of using the old iron.

16:00 When you had the power point on, you had to have a red light in it as well. Well, we were devils; she used to break the law. She'd pull that light out and put a globe in it. And if there was a knock at the door, then boom, in would go the red globe. She was terrified she'd get…Then finally we got electricity.

16:30 Arnie and I slept in a sleep-out. As far back as I can remember…an uncle built us a sleep-out. The two of us slept there with hurricane lanterns and candles.

**Is that a verandah?**

No, no. It was in the back of the house. After the stable was built we got reticulated loos – not reticulation, I mean plumbing. That was put on the

17:00 back of the house instead of having to walk right up the backyard. So when the stable was built, it was pretty comfortable living.

**How old were you when the plumbing was put in?**

I'd have been very young then… five to seven; because the street lighting back then was gas lighting. They used to come along with this big taper on a pole and he'd light it and put it up there. There were these rings, and you'd pull them, and up would go the mantle and you'd light it. And then he'd have

17:30 to come and shut them down at eleven or twelve o'clock at night.

**It sounds like a full time job.**

Yeah. And when they wanted to put in a new mantle he'd pull the whole light down. We used to watch him. He'd ride a bike carrying all these

18:00 long poles, all screwed together on his bicycle. We used to follow him around and watch him doing it. He'd get up and pull it down, then put a new mantle in; and then he'd push it back up there. The wire was wound up on a little reel on the pole and the light would go back up it, once he'd lit it.

18:30 **Was it just one street that had this gas lighting?**

Yes, the main street, Egginton Street.

**Can you tell us a bit more about your family?**

Well, we were rather fortunate. We did have a phone; we were about the only phone in the street. During the depression years there was a lot of people so badly off that if there was a tragedy somewhere they couldn't even afford to get a taxi – a Hansom Cab it was in those

19:00 days – and they'd come and use our phone. It was handy that we had a phone. Other than that, a lot of the menfolk would go out into the forest to cut timber. They'd be away all week, then they'd come home with a few bob [shillings] or vouchers for groceries.

19:30 It was a very hard time. It was hard for me when I left too. I started work before I was fourteen. To get a job, there was so many looking for work. So I know a bit about the Depression, job wise. I was anxious to get to work – I didn't go to college or anything like that.

20:00 But the fellas who were working on the Boulevard, they were well off, because Mum was looking after them. They got the weekend off, and if it happened to be a holiday on the Monday, one of the fellas who lived at Colac, he'd get the train and go to Colac. But otherwise they just stayed there all the time.

20:30 They couldn't get home to their family because they couldn't get the time. It was overnight, and you worked Saturday morning back then. So Saturday afternoon you'd have a sleep or go to the pub and have a few beers or something like that. Sunday, they'd do their washing. So you see, they didn't have much time. They didn't have much leisure.

21:00 **Sorry, what is the Boulevard?**

The Boulevard today is all around the River Yarra, from Dights Falls to Studley Park…Dad lost one horse there. The driver was unaccustomed to using horses, and it was a bit fidgety. He was trying to back it up to tip the gravel off – building up the roads, you know. And instead of giving

21:30 the horse a bit of a crack on the rump to settle it down he went for its head. Of course, immediately he went for its head, the horse went back with a rush; over it went with the load, and down it went, down towards the river. It was killed. Dad was very upset about that. The driver didn't get hurt, but the dray had to be hauled back up with a winch. He repaired it. Then they had to dispose of the horse

22:00 That was one of the tragedies of his life. He thought the world of that horse. It was a real good rat-tail horse – a real good worker. Naturally that fella didn't do any more…so there was learning about tragedy in those days, as well as being poor, I suppose. Although Dad didn't make too much money. He was too generous with the workers. He'd give them

22:30 meals and clothes, and say, "Buy this." He looked after them very well. Anyone who worked for him was well accepted, as family more or less.

**It was a pity they didn't know much about horses.**

Yes. I didn't mind the horses. I'd look after them that way; make sure the

23:00 barrel was filled with water and that sort of thing. I'd ride the old pony we had for the jinker. We had a jinker and a lorry. We had a buggy there one time. They were great ride on. I particularly liked the jinker.

**And what were they like?**

Beautiful ride, y'know. It had cross-springs, so you'd sway, hit a bump or something and you'd

23:30 sway. Of course, the roads weren't all made. They were lovely to ride in, though.

**What, they're like the sports car version of a buggy?**

Yes, like a sports car, I suppose. One horse. You'd balance yourself – see, the seat could move backwards and forth to balance yourself so there was no weight on the horse.

24:00 And you'd just float along. It was lovely. You had to watch out when you were going up a hill that you didn't have the trace – you'd practically fall out. But then you'd just lean forward. You'd get used to it.

**It sounds dangerous.**

No, it was a good experience really, but we took it as normal.

24:30 **You mentioned that you got into a brass band. Was that while you were still at school?**

Yes. Mr Davidson was the music master. He had a music shop in Melbourne, in Lonsdale Street. He supplied the instruments that were bought by the committees. Mr Marshal – one fellow I remember – but there was a lot of boys in the band.

25:00 And of course other schools had bands too. Clifton Hill were the champions; they used to take off all the prizes in the contests. Then the RSL [Returned and Services League] got onto us there and Arnie and I were among two of twelve boys who went into Anzac House to be trained on bugle. To do the Last Post, for when a soldier died,

25:30 they'd come and pick us up from school – one or two of us – or someone would arrange a tram or bicycle for us. We'd go to the gravesite, and at the appointed time we'd blow the Last Post.

**It must have made you very aware from a young age about the whole Anzac tradition, and World War I.**

Yes it did. They were dedicated fellows

26:00 There were no young fellows in the RSL then. They were all ex-servicemen; the 1914-18 diggers. It was very trying for a youngster to stand up there like that. We were very nervous. We got our photo in the paper one day. The two of us were standing there looking at each other with our bugles. There's a print of it somewhere.

26:30 **Would you talk to any of the World War I diggers?**

Yes, oh yes. You'd meet them at the funerals or something like that. Even though my father didn't go, my uncles did. But they'd never tell us too much, never mention much. They'd go on the lighter side and not talk about the tragedies like Gallipoli and that.

27:00 **When they did discuss the war with you, what sort of subjects would they discuss?**

Mainly the girls, believe it or not. They'd tell you about the girls they had in France or somewhere like that. They'd tell you how nice it was. They liked the French girls or Italian girls or whatever. That's all I remember anyway. Probably they were just talking amongst themselves and I was only eavesdropping.

27:30 **Well, girls are an important subject no matter what age you are.**

I guess so, yes. They played an important part with us in the cheer-up huts they had in Adelaide, and the dugout in Melbourne. You get leave, and go in there, and they'd be marvellous. The girls and wives and families, they were marvellous. In my book they did as much as the men in the war.

28:00 They don't get much commended. And the workers who went up to Darwin there. the Commonwealth Construction Corps – I must pay them a mention. They went up into that desert from the cities and toiled. When we went up there, there was a bit of a camp kitchen or something. They were putting strips in there and working fourteen hour days. The privation of it – there were flies and there was the heat, and they were working liking bullocks – dedicated fellows.

28:30 **It sounds like a very rough time that they had there…**

The wartime was not pleasant, no. Not for anyone; there was rationing and everything like that.

**Did both you and Arnie leave school at about 13-14?**

Yes.

**And what did you both do?**

Well, when we were at the tech school, Arnie got his junior tech certificate, I think. I'm not sure. But I didn't. I fell out with a teacher.

29:00 He was a bit of a rough customer, a South Melbourne footballer or something. He belted him over the ears one day. You had to watch out at school then. You'd get a belting. It was a very rough school. I had a go back at him…

**This was at the tech school?**

Yes. I got away from him then and run out of the place and never went back. Mum thought I was at

school but I was down the wharf every day.

**Doing what?**

I'd jump a lorry and go round the wharf and hang around all the ships. I

29:30 was there when the Louis Holland – a ship – came in. I was standing there looking at it and a fella said, "Come have a look at this." He took me down and showed me. They just had refrigeration installed on the ship. It was ammonia refrigeration. And they had apples and oranges they were bringing from somewhere overseas, and they were frozen solid.

30:00 He gave me a couple of these, and I got up on deck, and he was laughing because I was trying to get into this apple. It was frozen solid and I couldn't bite it. But, that's what I'd do all day, then I'd catch the tram back. The college was near the end of the tram terminus in Spencer Street. So I'd just go there and jump off the tram before it got to college and go down the wharf all day.

30:30 **What were you supposed to be learning at college?**

Mechanical drawing and stuff like that, but I never… I'd had enough of him, and knew I was in trouble if I went back there. So I just kept away.

**So your parents didn't find out about you playing hooky from tech?**

No, I told them.

**What happened?**

Oh, I might have got a belting.

31:00 I told the bandmaster that I wanted a job, and one of the school band committee got me a job at Jakes Brothers in Melbourne, as a boilermaker. I was only… I hadn't turned fourteen; was still thirteen. I was only a runt of kid too. But I put in a couple years there.

**What were you learning to do as a boilermaker?**

Well, I was billy-boy

31:30 and rivet-boy – y'know, heating the rivets, and marking off with pegs and scribers and things like this. I didn't operate too many machines for the first year; but I was assistant to the boss and he was a… he was bullocky. They worked. They'd run everywhere, and it was hard work. I finished up because it was too hard for me. I had to give it up.

32:00 **What sort of machines were they?**

Big guillotines and punching machines. They just punch holes through metal. And the guillotine was about a six foot cut. Three-sixteenth plate – it'd just cut it like a knife. You had to look out your fingers didn't get under it; if it jammed up they could cut your fingers off or smash them. So, I was operating that for awhile. And big shears that would cut quarter plate, no trouble at all.

32:30 And big grinding wheels. For a time I was making spokes too, turning them on an old lathe. And making pulleys. Things like that. Cold riveting about three-sixteenth rivets on the buckets and elevators they used in the quarry. They did a lot of quarry work. You had a sit-down job there, but boy, was I busy. You had the boss sitting there, listening all the time, making sure that hammer was going all the time.

33:00 You really had to get some muscle up.

**So, you didn't enjoy this sort of work?**

I enjoyed it, but I was a bit of devil.

**So what did you do this time?**

Oh, I'd dodge the boss occasionally and he'd be chasing me, looking for me. He'd pick me up by the scruff of the neck or the seat of the pants and cart me up and down the shop a few times.

33:30 They were pretty rough days, but I deserved it. I was a bit of a villain.

**So, did you actually get sacked from this job?**

No, I was apprenticed. No, he didn't want to sack me. He knew that I was cluey and could do the job if I wanted to. But if I started to give him a bit of trouble, or defy him, that's the way he'd answer me. But anyway, I finished up there after I got a few poisoned fingers and things like that. I didn't

34:00 like being off work. I still wanted to go to work, but I was in a lot of pain one day and they growled at me, and I…I looked like I was going to throw a punch at him, I was so terrible about it. I went home and cried to Mum and she got the doctor to look at me. He said no, it was too much; taking too much out of me. He said they'd better pull me out.

34:30 So they did. Then I went looking for jobs. They were hard to get. One job I had was riding my bike from Kew to Malvern. You'd have to know that distance – with the hills and that, to know how far that was – delivering wreaths with my own bike, and helping in the shop. I started at nine, and knocked off at four every day, plus Saturday mornings, for fifteen shillings a week.

35:00 And my Dad, when he found about that, he said, "No more of that." And he stopped me. Then I got a job in the city. Arnie had got a job at Manton's in Bourke Street, working there selling material. And I got a job doing the same thing at Norman's Corner Stores. I finished up being

35:30 promoted to the head of the lady's shoe department. Back then, ladies' shoes – the Toyo shoes – were selling for four or five shillings a pair, something like this. And Bamberg silk was eight pence three farthings, and nine pence three farthings for two rolls. People didn't know. I'd bring out two rolls of the same cloth and show them, and put eight pence three farthings on one and nine pence three farthings on the other. This was when I was in the silk department,

36:00 and the boss didn't know how I was getting so many customers to come into the shop. 'Cause when they saw it like that, I'd switch the prices over and say, "Here, you can have the good one." They'd come in and say, "Where's Stan?" And that's how he promoted me. Anyway, I was pretty short-lived there, because they were Jewish people and he was all right to work for, and I was a good worker, but…

36:30 **What, you got busted with this, sort of scam?**

No, no, no. He was doing that sort of thing all the time. It was part of the trade. He knew I was pretty cunning, that I woke up to what the trade was. That was in the trade – you did that. And if someone wanted to pay nine pence three farthings, then you'd accept their money. They still do it today.

37:00 Anyway, what happened one day was that I went down to the office to get some dockets. I was up on the second floor and went down. And as I was going down I passed the girl on the switchboard. She was laughing her head off and everything like that. And I run around the back – being a devil at that age; sixteen or seventeen – the back of the switchboard to see what she was at, and she was reading a book to another girl. And I thought, "This'll be funny," so I was fighting with her to get the book.

37:30 I wanted to find out what it was. And the boss come along. He didn't ask any questions, just sacked me on the spot – out! Away I went. So I said to Mum, "I got sacked." I told her all. She said, "Oh, didn't he ask you what was going on?" and I said, "No, didn't ask me any questions, just out." Next day there was a phone call.

38:00 Mum says, "You're wanted on the phone." So I answered the phone and it was the boss, Mr Sharp. I said, "No, I don't want to talk to you," and hung up. The phone rang again and Mum says, "It's Mr Sharp." I said, "Tell him I don't want to talk to him." The next day there was a knock on the door. I'm at home just mucking around in the back yard, and Mum says, "You're wanted at the front door." I said, "Who is it?" and she says,

38:30 "Mr Sharp's here, he wants to see you." Well, I said I didn't want anything to do with him. That poor fella. He must have found out what had happened, too late. He did everything to get me back. I'd left my scissors at the shop or something, and he'd come over with them as an excuse to try and get me back. But I wouldn't go back. I said, "You should have asked me what was happening, and you'd have seen

39:00 that it was just a bit of a joke." Whether the girl told him or not, I don't know. But anyway, then I paddled around for awhile before I put in to join the railways – the Victorian railways. I was seventeen and got in. There were two of us, and we got in out of so many. We went through the medical tests and…

39:30 **This was a highly prized job at the time, was it?**

Oh yes, if you got in the railways you were set for life. That was all right. I don't know whether I should make too much mention of this, but there was a bit of a religious bias on it. I wasn't in the… like, sect … that I should have been in. I wasn't the religion I should've been.

40:00 **Was this a Catholic thing?**

Yes. Yes it was…

**This is good for the Archive, from the point of view of anthropology and what was going on at the time.**

Yes, well. I didn't like to mention it myself, but it was; it was a Catholic thing. Anyway, I got promoted onto a group job from Glenferrie. I used to go to different stations – relief work – on the porter's day off. I loved the job. One of the jobs was…I used to go to Kew Station, Camberwell,

40:30 Canterbury, and out to Golf Links – they renamed it Willison later on, I think. And I'd go out there on a train – leaving on the Ashburton line – and open up this little office. You couldn't see a house anywhere. And before the train came back from Ashburton there'd be dozens of people buying weekly tickets or monthly tickets. It was the only time the office was open. .

41:00 You'd only go out there on the first of the month, and then I'd have to bundle up all the cash and the machine and the tickets, then jump in the guards van and go back to Camberwell. Well, that was quite a

good experience. It was better than sweeping platforms. You used to punch tickets and everything like that. And one day I was at Camberwell,

41:30 relieving, and I'm sweeping the platform. And there was this fella there walking, and getting in my way, and looking at me. I'd had a bit of an argument previously with the fella from Surrey Hills – kept asking me whether I'd been to Mass. Finally, I let up – I said, "Look, I'm not a cooey, don't annoy me." Well, he tried to get me cleaning windows at ten o'clock at night for that.

# Tape 2

00:30 **So what was the future of that job position Stan?**

Yes, it was one of the best jobs I had, in the railways. I was a bit annoyed. I told the stationmaster back at Glenferrie – I was doing the relieving work from Glenferrie – and he said to me, "I warned you about that; that you'd have to watch him." So I thought that that's all right

01:00 and thought no more about it. Anyway, the next time I got to Camberwell, I'm sweeping the platform, and this fella, I saw him looking at me. He was standing there, but he didn't get on the train. So I let the train up and the train down, and I picked up the broom and went back to sweeping. And as I got near to him he said to me, "Are you Stan Kirby? I'm Inspector So-and-so."

01:30 I said, "What do you want? You've been watching me long enough," and he said, "What did you do with the money?" And I said, "Money? I don't know what you're talking about." And he came back, "You know what I'm talking about – what did you do with the money?" The only money I ever handled was balanced and everything was OK. I said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

02:00 But he kept at me and at me. I was pretty fit in those days, so I said, "Mister, I'm trying to sweep this platform and you're in my way. If you don't get out of my way you'll finish down the pit." And I meant it. That was enough – he turned on his heel and he went. So I went into Mr Lean – the assistant stationmaster – and I said, "What's that bunny doing there?" And he said, "That's the Inspector." So I told him what had happened, and he said, "You're finished. They'll sack you."

02:30 And I said, "No, they won't," and I wrote out my resignation. I beat them. So that finished my job. When I got home, Dad said to me, "I told you to watch out." He was fuming, because it was a job I liked. So that was the finish of the railways.

**What money was he talking about?**

I don't know. I never ever found out. I never bothered. I've been told in

03:00 my lifetime that I'm the most honest bloke they've ever dealt with. And Marie will vouch for that. Never had a touch of dishonesty, ever. Wouldn't ever entertain it. And didn't in those days either. My mother brought me up to be honest, and I was honest. Anyway, in a fit of despondency one day… Arnie in the meantime had got a job, an unusual job.

03:30 He got a job with a crew in Burnley in Melbourne. They used to tune organs; the pipe organs. This fellow used to go round tuning them, in the churches and theatres. Arnie used to go with him. And as he was tuning and playing the organ he'd sing out, "Flat" or "Sharp" or whatever, and Arnie would do something to the pipes.

04:00 He never explained it to me. I would have been interested in that job myself. But Arnie wasn't – he just did what he was told. Moriarty was the tuner's name. Told me some funny stories… they were in the church one day and this Moriarty got on the organ and he started rattling off, you know, he could play an organ. So he's in the church this day and he's swinging the hymns. And suddenly the priest arrived, and Moriarty settled down and played the hymns just beautiful.

04:30 He says it was quite humorous. Anyway, this particular day – I don't know whether he'd given up the job – I remember the two of us were riding our bikes down in Port Melbourne, and round about the Graham Railway Station there was a lot of banners in this building.

05:00 They attracted our attention, so we went over to have a look. And it was a recruiting drive for the navy. 1936 it was, a navy office. So we said, "We haven't got a job, let's go and join the navy." Just like that. We went and signed up, but didn't let on much at home. Arnie got a call a few weeks later. He had to go to Flinders Naval Depot. He got in. And I waited around and waited and waited for my call,

05:30 but I didn't get one. So I went in to see the navy in Melbourne and they said no, they wanted me to be a signaller because of my eyesight. They must have known more than I did, because I went for my amateur licence as a radio operator, everybody seemed to have trouble with CW – that's Morse code – except for me – I learned it overnight.

06:00 How they fathomed that out in advance I don't know. Anyway, I wouldn't go for that, so they said I should go down to Flinders and they'd enrol me as a stoker. Which I did. They gave me a voucher and

put me on a train down to Crib Point. I went with about five or six other fellows.

06:30 We were all lined up, and our names were read out, and we swore the oath on a bible and that. And we were given a number. Anyway, we started to walk along to get our equipment – uniforms, hammock and that sort of thing. Suddenly, my name's called out in a loud voice, and there's an officer there, and he says, "Come with me."

07:00 He led me out of the, and he points to the railway station at Crib Point and says, "See that train – you're on it; you're on your way home." I never found out who did it, but someone must have pulled some strings somewhere and got me out. Apparently Mum… she might have broken down or something and confided in someone who knew Dad well. They pulled me out, anyway.

07:30 They just tore up the papers or something like that. I was a bit annoyed with Mum, but she said, "No, one of you is enough; I've only got the two of you." So as the war went on I went down to Melbourne with the idea of joining the navy when I was eighteen. Then she couldn't stop me. But I'd go and do a couple of years in the back of Jakes Brothers first, get my apprenticeship,

08:00 and then join as an engine room artificer. That way I'd go in as a rating, as a tradesman. So I went and worked in Melbourne. Dad had scrapped the horse and drays by then. He'd bought into a property up at Maryborough, Victoria. It was an orchard; he was going to run the orchard. He'd never done that before, but he could plough and look after trees and everything.

08:30 We shifted up there and it was terrible, believe me. I tried to prune those trees – 1800 of them there were – in the middle of winter. I said, "This is not for me," so that's why I went back to Jakes Brothers in Melbourne, to get out of this. When I got there I found out they hadn't signed up my apprenticeship papers. There was a manpower shortage, of course,

09:00 because it was a reserved occupation. But I was there to stay. They got a shock. I was… that's right, I had a motorbike. That's what made the decision. I had been working of a night time at a hamburger bar to get extra money to buy the motorbike – a 1936 Pushrod 500 – no, 350 – horsepower. A fella had said it was a beautiful bike.

09:30 Of course, I had a girlfriend in Maryborough – who later became my wife – and that meant I could leave Melbourne and go home for the weekend. It was a beautiful bike. Anyway, I was leaving on a Friday night this one time to go to Maryborough. I didn't work Saturdays those days. I'd pick up my wife when she knocked off at Coles at

10:00 Maryborough at nine o'clock. I parked the bike in Elizabeth Street in Melbourne – there were hundreds of bikes there – while I went and bought a spanner I wanted for something or other. I remember I had a very distinctive jacket on, much like the maroon waterproof jackets you see today. Very unique jacket. I think I stood out. Anyway, when I came out I couldn't find my bike.

10:30 It had been stolen. Terrible. I thought the world of that bike. I polished it up and it was beautiful. I reported it but… anyway, in a fit of despondency I thought, "Blow this." And I went into the air force office. I said to Mum that if I couldn't get into the navy I'd join the air force. And she said, "Well, get in ground staff then." So I went in and enlisted in the air force.

11:00 **Whereabouts did you enlist?**

In Melbourne. In…I think it was Collins Street in Melbourne. Anyway, they had recruiting depots everywhere. I still used to play in the bands a lot then, and you'd go on recruiting marches. I was still playing in bands then. And I just enlisted. Went back

11:30 to Jakes Brothers on the bus and said, "I'm finished." And they said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "I've enlisted in the air force." I was that disgusted about losing my bike, and I couldn't get home, and had no money. He said he could do something about that…and I said he hadn't drawn up the apprenticeship papers like he said he would. That shut him up.

12:00 So I finished up and went into the air force, down there at Laverton with the rookies.

**What was it like moving to Laverton?**

I enjoyed it at Laverton. I enjoyed marching and playing in the band. And doing my rookies, I quite enjoyed that. I felt comfortable and never had any trouble.

12:30 **How were you greeted when you arrived at Laverton?**

Good, it was good. You were given a palliasse filled with straw, a couple of blankets, a uniform. You were shown your board and hut, and picked your bunk. I was in no hurry. I settled down there very well, because I'd

13:00 been looking after myself in Melbourne. At a boarding house; private board and that sort of thing. It was good tucker too. In those days the air force mess – the airmen's mess – they had tablecloths! And tomato sauce sitting on the tables. We had eggs for breakfast and that sort of thing. I

13:30 was into that. Once I'd done my rookies I got into the band. And that was heaven. No parades – except

the band parade – then I'd go back and clean the band room and go and have a late breakfast on my way back to AD. I was a bit of a villain, but… All the time I was in the air force when I was at Ascotvale

14:00 doing training I played in the Scotty band. When I was in Adelaide I played drums in the drum band there. That was while I was training to be a fitter and turner. So the band was always a big thing; very prominent in the band work.

14:30 **What kind of training did you do at Laverton?**

Well, we did the 126-Fitter-2E Course. There was no training done at Laverton. It was at Ascotvale firstly, then to Adelaide. Once I finished at Adelaide I was accredited as an AC1 [Aircraftsman] Fitter 2E. When I went to Laverton I went there to work on aircraft.

15:00 I was with a squadron there that had Avro Ansons. It was the first squadron given war status, I think. it was a general reconnaissance squadron – that's what they called it. Actually, we did a lot of flying over Bass Strait looking for the raider of the City of Flint. You probably

15:30 wouldn't know about that. The City of Flint was a ship torpedoed in Bass Strait. It was a pretty active squadron for the training of pilots. Alongside us was two squadrons of Wirraways. And further up at Laverton near the main hanger – it was an airfield then, not a strip – there were two squadrons of Lockheed Hudsons.

16:00 And of course, as the war progressed, all those fellows went into service. To Darwin or Malaya or what not.

**Back to Laverton. Can you tell us how you got your Fitter 2E class?**

Yes, it was just granted after I passed the exams. All through the course I

16:30 averaged 86.5%, I think. Firstly – I neglected to mention this earlier – firstly when I went to Laverton I had to meet up with an English squadron leader. He congratulated me on my course average, and said he wanted to make me an instructor. Now, I was still twenty years of age then. And I was supposed to be instructing

17:00 mechanics coming into the air force just the same as I was – and also accredited A-Grade mechanics from garages and that. They were mainly older fellas. And I was supposed to be instructing those fellas? I said I couldn't do it.

17:30 And did I get dressed down for that! He says, "This is Her Majesty's service and you'll be a corporal." I said, "No, I refuse." And did he give me a dressing down. But I got out of it. So, I was sent up to AD to work on Rolls Royce, Merlin, and Kestrel engines.

18:00 Then later on we got the Alisons from the Americans and I assembled those from scratch. In the early days there were two of us. The chap I was with – he was a bandsman too, Sammy Langshaw, an ex-garage proprietor from Mildura. We'd assemble a Kestrel engine from scratch – put the lot together. We'd put it together, time it, test it, take it out to the test stand and test it.

18:30 And I had an ability I didn't know about. We'd be testing a motor there, and there'd be another test apparatus near us, and they'd come over to Sammy – he was a good mechanic – and say, "Sammy, we're having trouble with this motor; can you help us?" And Sammy would shrug his shoulders and look at me,

19:00 and I'd say, "They've got one of the magnetos retarded." I could tell by the sound of it. I had pretty sharp hearing. He said, "D'ya reckon?" And I said, "Sure of it." So he says to the fellas, "Check your magnetos; my mate reckons it's one of them." They checked and it was. And they said to Sammy, "You tell your mate he's got an uncanny sense with motors."

19:30 So anyone having trouble after that, Sammy would get me to go have a listen to their engine. I'd either say, "Right bank retarded," or "Left bank retarded." Like the Zeros, I could tell. I mean, when we had Jap Zeros overhead you could tell, because they had synchronised motors. I really had a feel for motors, anyway.

20:00 **Do you think you lent your ear for music to motors?**

Yes I can, now. If you had a motor here now, I might not hear you but I'd hear what was wrong with the motor. It's just an ability I had. Sam would bet on it. He won some money on it one day, on the fact that I could tell them what was wrong.

20:30 **Do you think it had something to do with your musical ear?**

I don't know. It just seemed something that I was born with. Very often now…actually, there was a funny thing that happened when I mentioned the railways – when I did my medical for the railways the fellow put a watch up to my hear to see if I could hear it tick. I was having trouble hearing it tick, and he said, "Is it going or is it stopped?" And I said, "Well, I don't know about the watch, but you'd better do something about

21:00 your kettle – it's boiling its head off." And he stopped straightaway and said, "There's nothing wrong with your hearing." I could hear the kettle boiling in another room, but I couldn't hear the watch tick. Anyway, it proved me in good stead as far as Sammy was concerned. We went ahead doing that, then I got transferred to Catalinas. I did examinations so I get transferred to Catalinas.

21:30 **I might just interrupt here, Stan, if I could, and ask you to describe the first course that you did?**

The fitter's course. I've got all the papers here somewhere, I think.

**How was the course run?**

I remember for one part of the course – one of the optionals – I drew the whole oil diagram for a Gypsy Major engine.

22:00 It was very involved. I drew the whole diagram and explained it. Mainly the course taught us how to use equipment associated with testing – micrometers, DTI's – Dial Test Indicators – various things like that. You had to be able to file a surface, scrape dots. See, the Rolls Royce engine

22:30 didn't have gaskets. So, you'd run a plane surface over it and it would show blue dots where the high spots were, and you'd have to hit those with a scraper to get it back to a smooth surface, so it would be metal to metal.

23:00 **Was that a blue carbon?**

No, no, it was blue paint. You'd paint it on, and then put the two surfaces together and rub them. Where the blue showed, you'd scrape that. Then you'd do the other surface. Once you had a good surface, the engine wouldn't leak. So that was a pretty technical thing. But in the…you were getting marks

23:30 while you were being trained. You'd get marks for your filing, and you'd get marks for your bending. You'd have to bend parts, and get them to an exact shape. At Ascot Vale you'd be asked questions on the procedures you were learning – how to start an engine and things like that. I remember one unfortunate incident at Ascot Vale

24:00 when I was there. It was being examined on how to time an engine. It was there, in a stand and everything like that. Well, the first thing you'd do when you go to time an engine – you'd have a dummy prop on, which you can swing with no compression – well, I went up to the engine to do this, and swung it, under supervision from an instructor, the right way.

24:30 A hell of a scream went out when I did it, because there happened to be a fellow right behind, where we couldn't see him. And he happened to have his finger right where he shouldn't have. Well, the magnetos went on and it cut the top of his finger off. That was Terence… I forget his surname now… 19754, that was his number though. Mine was 19755, that's how I remember. Well, poor old Terence; he went through

25:00 the war without the top of his finger. And at the time, the sergeant collapsed too – he just collapsed. We had to get medical attention for him as well as the poor old boy with his finger cut off. I wasn't blamed for it because I couldn't see him – no one could see him. The bloke in charge said he shouldn't have been there, and shouldn't have been fiddling with the thing. But he was, and he got the top of his finger cut off.

25:30 So, it was just one of those unfortunate things that happen. But then, you'd be assessed on tasks like that and you'd be accredited marks for it. That was happening all the time. Then they'd crew you up, and you were sent off to your various duties.

**How long was the course?**

Months and months. I can't remember now, but it would be three months or something like that.

26:00 **Was there a theoretical side to the course?**

No, we didn't touch much on electrical. That was done separate. You had to know how to connect it up and what it was, but the actual magnetos, that was a separate course. You could specialise in that if you wanted to.

26:30 I did carburettors; that was one of my specialities. I was endorsed as a Seco carburettor expert. I think my record should show that. There was only paperwork. If you came and put a Seco carburettor in my hand I'd say, "What's that?" But I did it on the paperwork. I'd soon know what it was once I'd pulled it apart though.

27:00 **What other specialisations did you do?**

Well, I was qualified as a Flight Engineer on Catalinas. That was my aim – to get on Catalinas.

**What attracted you to the Catalinas?**

Well, water. Not desert. I liked the idea because it still had a bit of navy about it.

27:30 I never got a posting though. I could never work out why at the time, but I found out later on. The bandmaster was blocking the postings to keep me there playing in the Loan Marches and that. I was playing soprano cornet – which was important in the band – and I was pretty good at it. So he wanted to keep me there, and he kept blocking any postings I got.

28:00 Finally a posting came up that he couldn't block, because it was from the Director of Technical Services… we'll get into this later on, how this happened.

**What was the posting?**

I had to report to barracks in Melbourne opposite the shrine… what did they call it? St. Kilda barracks? Anyway, it's the main army barracks there.

28:30 I had to report there to a Mr Lee. So I went to Melbourne and got up to St. Kilda, to the barracks there, and I go looking for this Mr Lee. There was a sentry on guard and asked him, and he said, "I know where you've gotta go." So he takes me down through this side door

29:00 and I meet this civilian fella sitting at a desk – not in uniform. He introduced himself to me as Mr Lee. We shook hands, and he says, "Right, Stan, you're the second one. Ben Champion has already arrived, and we've got to wait for a few more yet."

29:30 So he says, "Will you come back here at nine o'clock tomorrow morning?" Then he signed my leave pass and let me go for the day. I thought this was good. Anyway, so when I went back to his office at nine the next day, the sentry knew and took me round to the office again. That's when I met this Ben Champion. He finished

30:00 up a good mate. You'll hear more about him and the oxy plant later. He was the first one I met that was involved with the oxy plant. And then another one arrived, and another one, and…there was about four or five of us there in the end. This went on for a few days. I didn't mind…

**What were you doing to occupy yourself during those days?**

Nothing. I knew Melbourne well, so I just walked around. I wasn't a boozer

30:30 and didn't drink, but I had plenty to do. I showed Ben around Melbourne – where I'd worked and that sort of thing.

**I thought musos liked a drink?**

No, I was never a big drinker. Even when I went up north I wasn't. I used to trade all my beer for cigarettes. I liked the smokes.

31:00 Anyway, we got this movement order to Brisbane. We were to go to the American camp at Eagle Farm in Brisbane. That's all they said.

**Was there any briefing about the purpose of your posting?**

Yes. They told us were going to manufacture oxygen.

**What did they tell you?**

Nothing. But I found out that Mr Lee was something to do with Aust-Ox,

31:30 which is the main company in Melbourne for supplying oxy acetylene for welding and boilermaking. It all came from Aust-Ox. I don't know if it was government or what. But he was the boss or something. Well, he'd come from Aust-Ox on the tram – from City Bars…I don't know if you know Melbourne… come straight down the road to St. Kilda barracks, and that's where

32:00 he had his office. As I said, you never saw him in uniform. Whether he was army or air force I don't know. But he was – and I want to put this straight on the record: he was the Director of Technical Service. My pay books show "DTS" and

32:30 the dates for 1944 or something. That was the date I met this fellow. It shows "DTS." And everywhere I ever went in the archives to try and make some enquiry or some sense out of this, I was told "Department of Technical Services." And I said, "No it's not. I had nothing to do with any Department. He was the Director." And no one could get that – they wouldn't have it.

33:00 They wouldn't listen to me. Anyway…

**Was that during your post-war enquiries?**

No, no. This was after, when I got discharged and wanted to get a pension.

**So this was your post-war investigation?**

Yeah, I applied for a pension and they queried this DTS business all the

33:30 way along. See, I was in the Darwin area and qualified for the full entitlement of medals, and our officer

had warned us… well, I've gotta answer the question… the thing was, if ever we want any of our records, we'd find them in the St. Kilda Army Barracks, there, in

34:00 the archives of the St. Kilda Road Barracks. Well, it got burnt down, so the records were lost. So, anyone trying to trace my records will have a difficult job. They'd have to go through some other… the officer would be the logical one, because the boys that were all in this unit –

34:30 the Oxygen Unit, as we finished up manufacturing oxygen – the archives were all kept there. Anyway, we went to Eagle Farm. Does that answer your question?

**Yeah, no, that's fine. I'll just interrupt you here, Stan. Once you were seconded to the Oxygen Unit at Eagle Farm, did you work on aircraft again?**

No.

35:00 **What did that mean to you?**

Well, nothing at all really. I didn't work on aircraft then, but once it blew up I got transferred back to Laverton. Not on the assembly line, I was on what they called the Dismantling Cleaning Section. That's where you checked parts to see if they were still in working order. Of course, the war getting about over then.

35:30 **You mentioned the Avro Ansons and Lockheeds before. What strip was that at?**

That was on the apron – the tarmac – at Laverton.

**How long did you spend there?**

Oh dear, I'd have to look at my pay book to find that out. Maybe six months?

**And what were you doing during those six months?**

Playing in the band and working at the squadron. I was at the squadron for a month I think, then they put me up to AD [Aircraft Depot] because I was a bandsman. I guess they wanted to keep me because I was a bandsman. That's how it worked, I guess. So they got me up to AD, working on aircraft.

36:00 **What is "AD"?**

Aircraft Depot, at Laverton. See, that was the big maintenance deport for all aircraft.

**So how long did you spend doing maintenance for aircraft at Laverton?**

Again, I'd have to look at my pay book to see that. But it would be twelve months or so, I suppose. Maybe nine months…

36:30 **I think we should probably spend some more time talking about those twelve months before we move on to the Oxygen Unit…**

Yes, well, there we were mainly busy working on Merlin aircraft then; we got the Merlins in. Laverton went from being an airfield to…of course, Point Cook was close by, for the trainees.

37:00 They had a band also, and if they were short we used to make up the numbers for special occasions like their passing-out ceremonies for pilots and gunners and so forth. So I didn't spend all my time at AD. I'd be away a lot on street marches and that. Mr Hearn – the CO [Commanding Officer] – he got a bit fed up with it, Sammy and I being away so much. He was always

37:30 very cordial to us. He was a very good boss. Anyway, at Laverton we were putting together the Merlins for the Spitfires, and then Laverton became an aerodrome. They put in a strip. Interesting there, I might mention, while that strip was being built – it was well away from the hangers – and the aircraft

38:00 were dispersed in three paddocks down to Werribee. Often the pilot would jump out and leave me to ferry the plane down through the paddocks and gaps in the fences, and shut it down at Werribee – the young pilot that I had on, he was a bit of a villain. He'd jump out and leave me to it.

38:30 I'd shut it down and leave it. They were only old Ansons, those. Nevertheless… when they were doing the strip, Werribee was a vegetable growing area. A lot of Italians there. This is worth mentioning… one night when I was doing my rookies there, I'm on guard at AD. It was the night of my twenty-first birthday, or it was close to it. I remember I wasn't

39:00 feeling too happy. And I could see, out on the strip, there was this light flashing on and off. It looked like Morse code. When the orderly officer came around, I said, "Come over and have a look at this." He had a look and he said, "That's suspicious." So he got four of us into the truck, all loaded up with live ammunition and everything like that, and

39:30 we went off after this light. And all it was, was an Italian that had been working in a market garden. He was finding his way home with a hurricane lantern in his hand. And as it was going past his leg as he walked, it was making the flashing. He was well outside…he was cutting through the airport area, and he shouldn't have been there. But as he was walking, he was making the flashing light.

40:00 They put the poor fellow in the boob – ah, Australians, I dunno. I felt sorry for the poor devil. He could hardly talk English. He'd say, "I want to go home." And they'd bang on the door and say, "You awake there?" And he'd say, "I want to go home." And then they'd get outside the door and say to each other, "Eh, are you in the firing party for this fellow tomorrow?"

40:30 They had him scared. He thought he was going to get shot! I was real maggoty at the boys for that. But it's worth mentioning. Of course, the morning came and he had to go before a couple of officers, and they just took him home. But he was a wreck; it wrecked him. He shouldn't have been there – but he'd lost his way, see. Couldn't find his way home to wherever he lived and just finished up on the airport. Tragic for him that these silly young fellows chose to harass him for it. They thought it was a great joke.

41:00 **I don't think he would have been careless enough to become lost again in that area again.**

No, no, he wouldn't. But they were playing an important part there. They grew a lot of vegetables there for the troops up north, and, I mean, that was for the war effort. Yes, I thought I'd mention that story, anyway.

# Tape 3

00:30 **You were just talking about this Italian bloke – do you think it was because the Italians were allied to the Germans, and this was one way of getting out some anger?**

I think it probably was, as far as the boys were concerned. I thought it was terribly unfair, because I was the instigator. I was the one who'd got this fella in the mess. No way was he

01:00 into trouble. He'd just lost his way. You know, it was as simple as that. But they had to take some precautions I guess, and the orderly officer had to make a report or something like that. But it was just one of those things that could happen. I'd guarantee he never did it again. But it certainly looked suspicious.

**I mean, you were just doing your job. You had no idea that that would be the outcome…**

No way.

01:30 [ interview interrupted for 30 seconds; camera left running ]

02:00 **Stan, I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about playing in the band when you were at the rookie course at Laverton. It sounds like a fairly glamorous thing to involved with rather than rookie training…**

Yes, well, it was something that I enjoyed. It was very good. We had bright buttons, I suppose. Glamorous, I guess. I was married in that time. I

02:30 got married in Adelaide, and was the father of a little baby boy…

**Well, all this happened quite quickly. I want to get back to that bit, because it's a whole new section. But, you were just mentioning the uniform. What sort of uniform were you wearing for the band?**

It was a normal air force uniform. But the insignia on the buttons, the

03:00 LAC [Leading Aircraftsman] insignia, and the air force badge, they were all gold – or rather brass. And a peaked cap, not a Glengowrie. That was the bandsman's uniform. Of course, you had better-type shoes and…I didn't mention, I had a lot of trouble with my feet on the rookies.

03:30 The standard shoes they'd gave me, well, I'd walk out of them in a fortnight. And they'd sweat; I got tinea. They'd sweat and go all salty at the bottom. They used to send me up to Semmler Shoe Company in Northcote to get shoes especially made, and I had some supplier they gave me the address for, he gave me silk stockings…black socks.

04:00 That's while I was there. It was because we did a lot of marching and things like that. So I had a lot of trouble with my feet, tinea and everything, throughout my service career. You'll hear more about this later on. But that was the only thing. I did suffer a lot from marching, and even standing. I finished up with papillomas in my feet…

04:30 **What are they?**

They're like corns. They grow on the sole of your feet, inwards. So as soon as you put your foot down, you can imagine – painful!

**Well, this has got to affect you, as far as doing the rookies' course is concerned?**

Oh yes, a lot of marching early in the piece. When this developed, I had trouble wearing the big boots, but the shoes – I'd put them on and they'd

05:00 sweat that much that they'd rot. I had a permanent chit for replacements. As soon as they got tatty I'd go out to Semmler Shoe Company and get a new pair. They used to make them specially out at Northcote. So that was handy there. But you'll hear more about feet troubles later on.

05:30 But with the band playing at Laverton and Point Cook, they were good days. But I didn't feel I was doing enough for the war effort. I wanted to get away.

**How many people were in the band?**

Twenty-two, all voluntary. They didn't have permanent bandsmen. One would get posted away, then we'd get another one. The bandmaster was

06:00 always frightened of losing them. Hughie Niven was the bandmaster. He was also the bandmaster of the Melbourne Fire Brigade Band and the Melbourne Police Band. Very highly regarded they were. He was a very good bandmaster. It was quite enjoyable to be in the band.

06:30 **How often would you be rehearsing?**

One day a week he'd come out, on a Friday afternoon I think it was. That meant, if he felt in the mood, we'd get an early leave pass for Friday night in Melbourne – dances and that.

**And what sort of things were going on in town?**

Well the main thing was the Dugout. It was for troops. It was an

07:00 underground thing, and you had thousands of troops there. Americans and all could come to ours, but we couldn't go to their canteens and shows. It was a bit strange. When I was in Brisbane I arrived there just as

07:30 what was known as the Battle of Brisbane was on – just two days before I had arrived there. It was fought over because the Yanks could go to the Australian canteen, but the Australians couldn't go to the Yankee canteen. So they soon corrected that and became reciprocal.

08:00 **With the Dugout in Melbourne, was this a private facility in the town that was taken over by…**

No, it was run by the Compass Fund, somehow. They paid for the bands. They had big bands, you know, Glenn Miller and that. They had some distinguished artists there. It was just a dance hall and you'd take your own grog.

08:30 Of course, you could get kicked out quick there. They had plenty of service police there policing it. The girls would be there, and you'd have a great time – real good fun.

**Would you take a girl there, or would you meet them there?**

No, I was married then. I wasn't in the market for girls. I didn't mention that I'd got my girlfriend into trouble in the early days – at my enlistment at Maryborough –

09:00 her parents weren't too pleased about that. And my mother took it upon herself to get the girl and take her down to Adelaide – when I was in Adelaide doing training – so that we could get married in the Registry Office there. It was a boy…

**So what actually was the reaction from your parents?**

My mother was very supportive. Dad didn't say a thing. But Mum said,

09:30 "Well, that happens." I hadn't been instructed too much in life or anything like that, and it just sort of happened. You know, these things happen. You get a bit emotional, I suppose, and it's a girl you think a lot of, and we're all human. And, well, no precautions, and she finished up pregnant.

**Do you think it was a lack of sex education?**

Yes, definitely. I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I was only twenty-

10:00 one, and I was a pretty shy boy at that time. I used to play at dances and things like that, but I wasn't even game to get a girl up dancing. Actually, my wife was the one who got me down from playing in the band to dance with her. She ended up with me, and that was it.

10:30 **Well, this must have come as a pretty big shock to you, finding out that your girlfriend was pregnant?**

Oh yes. I was really upset. And Mum said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "Well, I'll do the right thing and marry her." I was in the services. So she, "All right, that's your decision." So she saw her parents and… they shut the door on her for a start, but my mother was a lovely person. There's a photo of her somewhere. She was

11:00 a lovely, lovely mother. And she doted. She'd met Beryl; she used to come out there, about four miles out of Maryborough, and she knew Beryl well and got on well with her. She said to her, "Do you want to

go out to Adelaide and get married? If you do, I'll take you." And she said, "Yes," and they went. We stayed at my auntie's place, stayed there while I

11:30 was doing this course in Adelaide. Then she went back to Melbourne, and of course I was posted back to Laverton when Norm was born.

**Did you get any leave for getting married?**

No, didn't ask for it. Mum arranged it all. Just went into the Registry Office and it was over in a couple of minutes.

12:00 **So, your mother was the only witness?**

Yes, and her sister, my auntie. Can't think of anyone else who was there. I just walked in a single bloke, and came out a married bloke. Well, I deserved it.

**Was there any social stigma – from your point of view – for getting a girl pregnant in those days?**

Ah, no, I don't think so. But if you

12:30 did, then you usually married her. You didn't desert them, no, that wasn't the going thing. Not like today, you didn't dodge your responsibilities, no. Either that, or you'd see that the child was looked after, y'know. I think that values have changed drastically today. Anyway, if I hadn't, my mother would have – she'd

13:00 have felt responsible.

**It sounds like she made the best of out of a bad situation, and was the mediator …**

Yes, of course, Arnie was away at the war, and there was only me. I think he was on the Adelaide then. It was a steam-coal burner. Then he got on the Perth after it was reconditioned.

13:30 They were in the World Fair in San Francisco when the war broke out. We got a photo of him there sitting in the…he was playing in the band on board the ship. But I don't know if you want to go on with that…

14:00 **I'm interested to know where your brother was. So he joined up before the war, and was literally in the midst of it when war broke out?**

Yes. He was…they went straight from the World Fair to Crete. When he came back, he was shell-shocked. He was a terrible cot case. I was at Laverton at the time, and he came to see me. You couldn't slam a door

14:30 or anything like that – he'd jump a mile. And he'd pick a fight as quick as look at you. He was a good fighter. He used to clean up all the navy boys. He'd go to Jimmy Sharman's troop, him and his mate, take on the rest. They'd practically wipe the place out. He was a real bruiser, y'know.

15:00 If you didn't annoy him he'd leave you alone, but if you wanted to fight then he'd be in there quick. He'd just up and be into it. Born fighter, I think. Not like me – I was a bit of squib. But anyway…

**Do you think that the experience in Crete had made him more violent?**

No, I think he realised that he had to straighten himself out a bit. He was

15:30 very shaky. The Chief Drafting Officer that I mentioned – the one from the main depot at Flinders Street in Victoria – the Chief Drafting Officer there that handled all the drafts, he was a schoolmate of ours. We went to school together.

16:00 A fella named Teddy Payne. And he was the Chief Drafting Officer at Flinders Naval Depot. Of course he had a special interest in Arnie. Anyway, the Perth was leaving Melbourne and going into the war again, and Arnie wasn't fit to go on it, but they were short of a chief stoker. By this time Arnie was

16:30 a chief stoker. Teddy thought he'd do the right thing and put him on to Sydney. Arnie had an open leave pass to have a few days in Sydney. He had to find his own way back on the train or whatever. That's what he explained to me anyway, that he had an open leave pass to recuperate.

17:00 But what happened was that I came home from being out – my wife and I and the baby were out somewhere – and I came home to find a note pinned on the door. This was at the little flat I was living in at Brighton. It said, "Rejoined Perth; see you in a few days."

17:30 What happened was the ship didn't call in at Sydney. It went straight into the Straits. That's where it got skittled, and he got killed. Poor Teddy Payne got in touch with me on the phone – I don't know how he found out where I was – he was crying his eyes out. He said he was responsible for him being killed.

18:00 He shouldn't have been at sea, he said. And till the day he died he had it on his conscience. I was terribly sorry for him. He thought he was doing the right thing, and he made a very bad mistake. But I

never held it against him; not even my mother held it against him, because it was done in good faith. So that's how we lost Arnie.

18:30 **How did you find out?**

Mum got the notice, you see. It broke her up. Of course, this was later on in the…she never regained good health after that; she went down, my mother. Both of us being away was one tragedy, and Dad getting on in years was another. One thing I did do, was that I taught

19:00 her to drive a car. I bought an old car, and she managed to get a licence. She'd come out from the orchard and hit the main road and drive up to Coleman's Garage. That's where I bought the car. It was better than going in the jinker. It was a good old Dutch car, and she could drive it well. You had to go up a rough track and over a creek to get to the main road

19:30 and she'd park it outside the bowser at the garage. And the Colemans – they knew her – they'd turn it around for her and put it on the other side of the road. And when she'd done her shopping she'd get back in it and drive back. She did that all through the war.

**It must have been pretty devastating for you too, to realise that you'd lost your twin brother?**

Well, we weren't that close in a sense,

20:00 because he was away. And, well, once he started fighting – he gave me a couple of hidings – well, we lost real sort of family ties. Do you know what I mean? He was still my brother, and although I'd still defend him, I didn't want too many more hidings. He was a bit severe. He just had a killer streak about him. That's what got him his decoration in Crete, I think.

20:30 He got a decoration for something there. I never found out what it was, because later on in this story, as you'll find out, I finished up on my own and…family died, and my mother died, and…all things happened…There was a big bust-up of everything, marriage and everything. But never mind, that's another story.

21:00 **Where was your wife at the time, just after she'd had your son?**

In Brighton. We shared a house with a woman in Brighton. I was granted Living Away status, and I could go home every night. Go home on the train to Brighton every night to my beautiful little boy…

21:30 **So how long was the journey in between where you were staying and where you did your duty and service?**

Well, I don't know it went on before I got this posting. It wasn't that long, four or five months or something like that. It was good while it lasted.

**I mean, did you want to stay where you were?**

No, really, it was what I joined up for. Now Arnie was gone, I thought I

22:00 had to go and do my bit too. I was very conscious that there was a war on, and I was going to have a go at something. You know, I didn't want a cushy job. I could have had that right from the start. I was determined to get into something.

**Did you receive any training as far as firing guns was concerned?**

No, not really. I had no fear. I was on guard at the F Station there, and if anyone had come up, I'd have knocked them off, no trouble at all.

22:30 No, it didn't scare me at all that I was going to risk my life.

**I was just wondering if you did any training with bivouacs or gunnery?**

No, I was a good shot with a rifle. I'd proved that with a 22. I could shoot out of that and knock a match over in the sand. So if someone had got in my sights I'd reckon they were taking a big chance.

23:00 **Were you doing this as part of your training, firing guns, that is?**

Yes.

**How often would you do training with guns?**

I was fairly awkward. Sometimes I could barely hit the target because they'd make you get into such awkward positions, even before you'd fire it. It was safety. If they just let me go I'd have knocked the target over.

23:30 But no, all I wanted to do was to pull the trigger and get rid of the rounds.

**How did you find bayonet practice?**

I don't think I could have done that. I don't think I could have stuck a bayonet in anyone.

**But you still had the training…**

Yeah, we still had the training. It'd have to be me or him before I did that.

24:00 **What would your average day have been like when you were doing the rookie course at Laverton?**

Well, it wasn't unpleasant, but you worked. You had a job to do and you really worked. You'd be putting engines together, and you knew it backwards. They'd alter it. Instead of putting a whole engine together, just two of you, one would do a section.

24:30 One would do the production gear for the propeller, others would do the superchargers. I was on that for a while, balancing superchargers.

**What sort of equipment would you need to do that?**

You had special equipment to do that. Line boring – you could line bore an engine block by hand, though. You didn't need machinery for that. It was all done by hand. Rolls Royce made a terrific engine…

25:00 **How did you learn to do all this?**

This was all in our training. You'd learn to file; you'd learn to use instruments. There was no problem. And you were always with someone who was senior to you – a corporal or someone like that. He knew what he was doing, and you just floated along with him till you became a corporal, and then you'd have someone coming along with you.

25:30 It was very well done.

**How much of this would have been on paper?**

None. There was very little paperwork. You'd just put a tick here if it was right or a cross if it was wrong. There was very little paperwork. No, we were all manual workers, hands on. Our fingers were always busy checking things. No paperwork at all.

26:00 **So with your average day, would you just get up in the morning and go straight into that?**

I'd work down the band room as well. You know, polish the instruments up. They were all brass, y'know. Then get out on parade, ready, then we'd march them up to AD, then march back down to the band room. And if I hadn't had breakfast, then I'd sneak in for a late breakfast. There were

26:30 ways you could do this, y'know. If one of the officers or sergeants or Mr Hearn asked, "Where's Stan?" they'd say, "He's doing something with the band," or something like that. I had an open go. Not that I was shirking work or anything. I had plenty to do, but I looked after myself – make sure I had breakfast and things like that.

27:00 When I was on the job I did it properly. But Sammy and me looked after each other. If someone asked, we'd say, "He's gone to do…" you know, something like that. If he was away, like if he wanted to go see a fella about something, then…oh, interesting one day…the old CO that had the General Reconnaissance Squadron

27:30 with the Ansons – Stillwell was his name – somehow, the first Spitfire that came to Laverton…it was there for show and for demonstration. We had a look at it of course, to see where the Rolls Royce engine was fitted and how it looked in an aircraft. And this Stillwell – he was only a young fella – he got

28:00 in the controls. Somehow he talked someone into letting him take the Spitfire up. Now it puzzles me how they did this, because he'd never flown a Spitfire before. Anyway, he was flying it somewhere over near Point Cook and it got out of control, and down it came. Straight into the sea. It killed him. Sammy and I were elected to go with the diving

28:30 recovery crew to pull it out of the sea. Navy fellas. They pulled it out and we got the motor and put it on a low trailer thing and towed it back to Laverton. And for the whole weekend, Sammy and I worked on that motor, pulling it to pieces, to find out if it was a motor failure. We had to

29:00 be very careful with that; did a lot of paperwork for that one. Surprisingly, the engine, which had only been in the water for twenty-four hours, was all full of live lice. Live lice, we could hardly believe it! It was full of sand, of course, but live lice as well.

29:30 You'd pull the cylinder off and all this gushy stuff would run out. We had a brutal job, especially to think that the guy had been killed with it. Anyway, we worked all weekend on that. I think we had four hours' sleep, then we went back to it. They wanted to know if it was an engine failure or not. Anyway, come the Monday we had all the parts laid out.

30:00 Sammy – he loved his beer did Sammy – we were going to go for a sleep, but Sammy said, "No, I'm going to see Mr Hearn." So he went in to see Mr Hearn and said, "I want a bit of leave, sir." And I'm standing outside listening to this. And Mr Hearn said, "Sure, corporal, I think you've earned it."

30:30 And he gave him a leave pass. Sammy was still in his overalls, and Mr Hearn gives him his leave pass, then says, “Pepper and salt – where’s the other half of you there, Corporal Langshaw?” Sammy says, “He’s outside the door.” And Mr Hearn says, “Better send him in – you’ll need a chaperone.” Because he knew I didn’t drink. So, credit to the commanding officer. He sent me

31:00 with him to look after him. And Sammy got a belly full of beer and then he was happy. Then we came back and had a sleep for two days. He was a lovely fella, that Sam, and a good cornet player too. I get a bit weepy about it now, because he was such a good friend.

**It sounds like you were pretty good mates.**

Oh, we were mates.

**Did they find out anything about the engine?**

Nothing that was reported to us, no. Never, ever found out. It was a pretty job.

31:30 **That must have caused a pretty big stink, you know, a Spitfire and all?**

Yeah, loss of a Spitfire, yeah. I guess that someone somewhere was going to be reprimanded for that. How he got control of it I don’t know. Of course, I wasn’t in General Reconnaissance then, I was up at AD. But I had to work on that engine.

32:00 And I think our commanding officer – Earndon was his name – was a very shrewd man, in that he never harassed me or Sam. He knew he had professional men on his turf, and he picked the two of us to do that job, because he knew we’d do it right. And we did it. We were proud of it.

32:30 **What were the living conditions like at Laverton?**

The conditions were good. You had blankets – no sheets – but the tablecloths disappeared off the tables for that. We started to get this powdered egg and stuff like that. No butter, but there was margarine. And peas, good gracious. We were fed peas like rice is to China.

33:00 We got so sick of peas! Then we got this gold fish – it was like big sardines, but they were gold. You couldn’t eat the stuff. Many a meal I just turned my nose up.

**Were the gold fish…did they come in cans or was it fresh?**

In tins, yeah. They’d just

33:30 open a tin of these and…I got a five-gallon round drum, from down under the counter where the tools were, and made a lid on one end of it, and put a wire mesh in there as an electric element, so it was a toaster. One of the boys used to bring in pies.

34:00 He was making a bit of a business out of it. He used to have this big case, and he’d always be going up to AD with this case. It was full of pies. Rudy his name was, a funny bloke. He never did any work. He was a con man. But he had these pies that he’d sell, because at times the fellas couldn’t eat the food. I used to buy a couple of these and put them in my little oven.

34:30 I was living like a king, then. A bottle of sauce and we’d have a good feast. They were good pies too, believe you me.

**Was he making them in the mess?**

No, no. He was getting them from somewhere, and he’d bring them in, in this big suitcase and sell them and make a few bob. Sammy and I, we’d put our pies in this little oven I’d made.

35:00 A lot of things you did in there…you think about the Australian way of being adaptable. Now, when we were at Showgrounds – I mentioned Showgrounds before – when we were there it was so cold. You’d go out and then come in from there and you’d be freezing. Well, I had this electric iron. I’d put it up my palliasse and my blankets, and

35:30 sit the iron upside down like that, with a bit of butter on it. Now, tobacco tins were round then – you know, fine-cut tobacco – so you’d cut the bottom out of that, and you’d have an egg ring. You’d cook the egg on the iron. And I’d made the little toaster, so I’d have egg on toast.

36:00 When I’d done that, I’d put the iron in the blankets and I’d have a foot warmer. It was terrible cold at Showgrounds.

**So what were the living conditions like there? It sounds like it was pretty basic.**

Well, for a bloke that came straight out from the city with no experience,

36:30 maybe. But I’d been out camping, so I’d toughed it before. But some of them did it hard, believe me. And when you’re in a group like that, one complements the other. You know, you look after the fellas who are doing it bad. It was wartime and it was mates. The people outside were putting up with a lot, y’know. The ladies were making cakes and jumpers and all these sorts of things.

37:00 I marvel at what the people on the home front were doing. Sending food parcels to troops and things like that. It was a marvellous effort.

**So when you got to the Melbourne Showgrounds, how long were you there?**

Six weeks there, I think.

37:30 **And what actually did you learn there?**

Paperwork, all paperwork: engines, parts of engines, servicing of engines, carburettors, a little bit of electrical. Not much electrical though, because they were all magnetos then, and that was a specialist's job. You had procedures to do in squadrons, and actual motors themselves. You had to draw them and describe how to test them

38:00 and time them. There was some manual work as well, but it was mainly paperwork. We were up in a great grandstand just freezing to death, and this fella would be giving you the spiel about how to change filters, or how to fix the oil rating on an Anson. The oil ratings on them, you have

38:30 to wind them down to set the pressure. It was mainly procedures, and all your answers had to be in writing. They'd tick them. Like when I go for my radio licence now. They give you multiple choice answers, two right and two wrong. I ticked the right ones and got the licence. I don't know anything about radios.

39:00 It's different today. The exams are easier. But then you had to draw it or write it and give a full description of it to prove you're conversant with it. It was really good – the training – it was very good.

**Is it fair to say that at Laverton you really got the hands-on thing? Whereas at Showgrounds, it was really a case of the paperwork that goes with the hands on training?**

39:30 No, you've got the cart before the horse, there. The Showgrounds was before Laverton. The Showgrounds was the paperwork and actual engine procedures, then in Adelaide it was tradesmen's training using tools and equipment – and manufacturing and repairing. I think you'd call that

40:00 fitting – filing surfaces and making them true. What a fitter should be expected to do. You had to make a cube, and you had to do various things from drawings. And when you got to Laverton, all that came before now came into being, and you were actually doing these jobs on the motors – filing, scraping to get a surface on joints

40:30 and assembly…

**Did you feel like you were really well trained?**

Yes. I was confident that I was able to do my job. And you had superiors who knew their job. That's why I couldn't see myself trying to beat them, I mean, join them as an instructor. I just couldn't do it.

41:00 **But that's an incredible feather in their hat, that they offered it to you?**

Well, they had people that could do it already. They had the drill instructors and the trade instructors. Of course, they had the pick of the whole country to get them there.

41:30 But they were very good, very dedicated. They knew they weren't going away – we were. We'd have to do it in conditions different to where they were. When you get to work on an engine in sandy conditions, it's a different kettle of fish to doing it in a workshop. And in your squadrons, a lot of the work is done outside.

# Tape 4

00:30 **Why were you seconded to go to Eagle Farm?**

I don't know. They must have picked us somehow. They might have picked us at random, I don't know. Whether I had some contribution to add because of my record…maybe they thought I'd be helpful, possibly.

01:00 It was an unusual sort of occupation, so they probably picked carefully.

**Can you tell me anything about the other chaps who were selected?**

No, it was unusual because three of them were just transport drivers, for driving the equipment. With oxygen, there's a lot of bullying work lugging cylinders around, apart from the technical work involved in operating the machine.

01:30 Also, there's the preparation for getting the machine running. You've got two big compressors, one of them pumping air as well as oxygen. That's a special operation, because you can't have any oil anywhere. Lubrication is done by Castle soap.

02:00 And even then there are minor explosives going on in there. You needed some experience with more or less normal-type engines, where you had a generator running an expansion engine, run by an expansion engine, which is an engine run by compressed air. When you do

02:30 that – when you expand the air to run the engine – it's the same process as refrigeration: it cools. That engine would knock like nothing you ever heard, but boy, was it cold! It would cool everything down.

**Was it loud?**

Oh yes! We had to put up with that. That was our lighting. It had to cool the plant down to below 220° centigrade.

03:00 Can you imagine that? 220° below centigrade. Which it did. At that temperature and at a pressure of 600 psi – pounds per square inch – the air would liquefy. And that was the process we were working on. By a matter of distillation

03:30 the oxygen was distilled from a matter of 18-20% in the normal atmosphere, down to 98%. That's what we were after – 98% oxygen. The other gases, of course, would dissipate as they came back through the machine, keeping everything cool.

**Can you describe the machine and how it produced oxygen?**

04:00 **Yes. Well, firstly, when you operate a machine like this you've got to make sure the air is dry. That's done with big cylinders, big pressure cylinders. They are tightly sealed with silica gel. Two of those. Then**

04:30 **you'd have two cylinders similar, filled with rock caustic. This was the troublesome stuff. You'd get it in a drum, like a forty-four-gallon drum. There's no way you can get it out of the drum other than with an axe. You'd hack off the top of the drum, then split the drum. Then you could take the stuff away.**

05:00 **In the process of doing that, of course – hacking the drum with an axe, that is – you'd hit the rock caustic. If a bit flew off onto you, it'd immediately start burning into you. That's why we'd have to have a good supply of water handy. When you're doing that job, you'd just dive for water. You've got no option. Of course you could wear goggles to protect your eyes. A lot of the time we didn't, though,**

05:30 **because of the heat and the sweat. But nevertheless, if it'd hit you in the belly, with the sweat and that, it'd start burning the skin right off you. So you had to break that up into small pieces – no, that's**

06:00 **not a statement, really...small pieces, maybe chunks about the size of what you could fit in your hand. So you'd fill up two cylinders with rock caustic chunks, and they took all sorts of minerals and stuff out of the air. The silica gel took the moisture out, and the air running through**

06:30 **the caustic would dissolve the impurities. Anyway, 'ozone effect' is what you'd call it today. Then the air would go through the machine, through the expansion engine and the cooling process. The pressure would be applied in the cylinder and you'd get an idea that the air was liquefying by a mercury gauge.**

07:00 **It was on a six-foot tower. It'd show you the actual amount of liquid you were getting in the liquefier. Once you had the liquefier full – of course, this process was going on all the time – you'd transfer the liquid that was forming in the dew box**

07:30 **by opening an expansion valve. Now, once again, you're expanding air, so it's going to get colder. And it gets colder, but it comes over another column down the machine, and it flows on. As it hits the column a lot of it evaporates; goes off. But gradually it comes**

08:00 **down and down and down like this, and gets colder at the bottom, until its starts to improve the quality. Hydrogen is going off the H2O, and all you're left with is the oxygen.**

**Is that a complete description of the process, then?**

It's a rough outline of how it operates. You've…well, it becomes the

08:30 liquid oxygen in the end. That, I can let you know, is blue. It's like the colour of the sky. In liquid form, pure oxygen is blue. Liquid air is just water, but you don't…we used to test it with apparatus, with ammonia and coils of copper to test the purity of it. We'd test how much of it the copper would absorb in the form of rust.

09:00 But this is scientific and not of much interest to the present purpose. So, what you'd do then, is that it would backflow through the machine, keeping everything cool as it's coming in, and go back to a gas. That would be held in a big Zeppelin balloon – it looked like a Zeppelin; thirty-three foot long, and

eighteen foot high. It was quite a

09:30 problem in windy, gusty conditions to keep that on the ground. But never mind. That's where it would be held. When it filled up you stopped the smaller compressor, which was the oxygen compressor. Then you'd purge that, so you're getting pure oxygen into it to compress, and that would then be sent out

10:00 to the rack to be put into cylinders. You'd put your cylinders on a rack – there's photos over there that I can show you; it's pretty primitive – we had no testing equipment to test these cylinders. And they were coming in from places like New Guinea and other war zone areas. That was always dangerous, because they could

10:30 have been left open or something, if those cylinders had sucked in the slightest trace of oil somewhere along the way, then that would be the end of it – they'd just blow up. As it will unfold, we did have an explosion, but I'll explain about that later on. I did find out later on how it happened, even though the official inquiry didn't. So, it was a pretty dangerous process. You had to make sure you didn't have any oil anywhere

11:00 on any installation that you screwed up, or anywhere the oxygen under pressure came in contact with. It was practically instant combustion. Very highly explosive. So in that regard it was pretty dangerous, and therefore we couldn't position this equipment anywhere near a camp. It had to be well away from the camps,

11:30 and one condition we did need was plenty of water that we could jump in when we were breaking up the caustic. We were pretty hungry on water and petrol. We had two big motors running twenty-four hours a day. It would take approximately a day and a half to get it liquefying, for a start. So that'll give you an idea of what an expensive and noisy apparatus it all was.

12:00 You'd be servicing the motors all the while they were going, of course; keeping the oil up to them, watching your water, checking the pressures. So there was plenty of mechanical work going on to keep you occupied.

**How did the crew operate the machines?**

Well, we operated four on, four off. Everyone, and that might go on for six weeks if

12:30 we had a lot of bottles to fill – a few hundred, say. Then we'd shut down, and get the plant all ready to start up again, then we'd go bush and shoot a few wild ducks and have a bit of relaxation out in the bush.

**And when it was operating, what was your role in the crew you worked with?**

You had one fella that would do the…there were a couple

13:00 of good key men that were clued up on the whole process – much more skilled than I was – they'd be doing the operating. I could do it, but they were the ones that did it. What you'd be doing – if they wanted a spell or something – is that you'd keep checking on everything and altering valves

13:30 and things like that, to keep pressures up and liquids flowing, so it didn't run out of liquid, or so it didn't take too much out. You had to look after the load on the expansion engine too. There was a lot of work to do. You were doing something all the time. You had to pump petrol up into the tanks and things like that.

14:00 And oil. You'd have people coming with cylinders, so you had to unload those all the time, and lay them out ready for…one-man operation that, and it was a busy job. Everyone was pitching in where they could. There was really eight crew members, so you could have two crews of four, or

14:30 a crew of three, while the fourth one was getting supplies or cooking dinner or something like that. Of course, we were doing our own cooking at one stage. Then they gave us a cook, so we had an extra hand at the plant. It wasn't without some failures on the plant and its engines. Then you had to

15:00 do your points and plugs, and make sure your valves were ok. When it started up you wanted to be sure it would keep going for the period you wanted it for. There was always a lot of maintenance on the cross head compressor; on fibre buckets for the rings and stuff like that. Because there was no mechanical part there that could be lubricated with oil.

15:30 It had to be lubricated with soap solution. That was a big job. Making sure that it was getting lubricated, and that the temperature was right. All in all it was a job you couldn't take your mind off for a minute.

**It sounds really labour-intensive.**

Yeah, it was. When you knocked off you just went and crashed. No trouble sleeping, you'd just crash. It was very hard. Hard work, but it was our job and we did it.

16:00 **Did you know what the oxygen you were producing was being used for?**

Yes, it was for high altitude flying. It was for the pilots. And it was used in the workshop, and of course

in hospital use. So it was a vital thing.

**How was it used in the workshop?**

16:30 Welding, mainly. Welding, and doing oxy-cutting and things like that. There was a lot of it used.

**And how was it being used in the hospitals?**

Well, if you're in trouble, the first thing they do is put an oxygen mask on you, don't they? That's the way it's used if you're injured, or coming out of anaesthetic, or not doing too well.

17:00 It's vital in hospitals. And it was always the hospital cylinders that were clearly marked – as opposed to cylinders for high altitude flying or workshops – the hospital cylinders were always 98%, a very pure oxygen.

17:30 We did have a problem…we were getting a lot of American cylinders and filling them up to our normal pressure, which we'd put in our Australian cylinders, but when the heat of the day would get up it'd blow the safety valves off. We had to reduce the pressure a lot to withstand that. It was good oxygen, but we weren't

18:00 getting as much in those cylinders as we could have down south.

**Why didn't the American cylinders hold the same pressure?**

Well, it was just the way they were made. Every cylinder is supposed to have a safety valve in it – a little ruptured safety valve that blows out at a certain pressure. If the cylinder over-pressurises, it busts out and lets the pressure down rather than having it blow up.

18:30 That's the safety mechanism in every cylinder. The American ones, for some reason, were set lower. They were smaller cylinders, and easier to handle compared to our big, bulky, awkward and heavy ones. And they were all the same size. We were lucky to get those. We liked those, because they were easier to handle. You know, in that heat, when you picked up a cylinder that had just been filled – that was all right because it was cold – but

19:00 if they'd been lying around in the sun for a while, when you picked them up and put them on your back, they'd scorch your back off. We didn't wear shirts or anything.

**Were you issued with any safety clothing?**

No. The tragedy that will unfold in this was…the officer that was killed had, that morning or the night before, sent a telegram to his wife in Perth

19:30 …sorry, this is painful…to tell his wife to expect him home. He'd arranged a lift with an American pilot who was taking a plane over to Perth. Then he was going over to Head Office in Melbourne to arrange for some testing gear

20:00 so he could test these cylinders. You must remember that these cylinders were outside in all conditions. You could hardly tell these ones were cylinders. They were rusty, they'd been dumped, they'd been in explosions. We had no way of testing whether they were safe. You know, if they'd been left somewhere with a valve left open

20:30 they could have – through expansion – sucked in some gas or liquid or oil vapour or anything like that. We just couldn't take the risk of filling them. So, this officer – Bill Miller, our great mate – he said it was too dangerous. So he was going to Melbourne to get us some testing equipment for these cylinders. Now, if I go any further than that I've got to tell you about the accident…

21:00 **Well, we might pause it there, because I think that accident happened when you were posted to Darwin later on. Is that all right?**

Yes. OK. Well, I'd like to talk about our camp at Mataranka. That's the first camp we set up.

**Well, I'd like to ask you a little more about Eagle Farm too. Would that be OK?**

Eagle Farm, ah yes. I brighten up when I talk about that, because we had a great time there. When we got there

21:30 we went to the Yanks; they had tents there for us. We split ourselves up, two to a tent. The tucker was marvellous. We never had anything like that before. It was like the Chinese food you get today. You could eat it with a fork. No need for a knife.

22:00 For the beer drinkers it was good. When they had mess, every few weeks, they'd go into Brisbane and commandeer barrels of beer and bring them out. They'd put them on the back of a truck and spin the taps straight into the keg – froth going everywhere – and they'd say, "Right, come on – Kirby, come 'ere."

22:30 They'd have four-gallon kerosene tins that had been blackened on the fire, and they'd fill those up with beer. Crazy. I remember, when I was running the plant one night, I heard, "Hey Kirby, you'll have to

have a drink! We're with the Americans, so you've gotta have a drink!"

23:00 It was this great big strong fella with a bushy beard. He lifted this four-gallon tin up and he said, "You drink that." And I said, "I don't drink." Well, he couldn't get over that. But they were good guys. Well, when they set their plant up, to get it going they had two staff sergeants – that's what they called them.

23:30 Bob and Mark were their names. They were there to show us how to run this oxy plant. They were the experts. So, the first day we're there we go up and look it over. Checked it out and read up on it. Then we started the motors and got it going. After two days it was running flat out.

24:00 We got the compressors going day and night, and we've got shifts going. So the next morning Mark says, "We've got the liquefiers full of liquid. Now we'll show you how the process works." And I'll never forget this day so long as I live. We're all standing there outside, looking in on the control where he is – he was only a little fella –

24:30 and he's looking up at this big mercury gauge; it's about six foot in length. He's proudly looking up at this, and he says, "There's the liquid, guys, there's the liquid!" And we say, "All right, Mark, what do you do now?" He says, "Well, you open this expansion valve…" and he gives the valve a kick, and looks up, and looks and looks.

25:00 And in a matter of half a minute nothing's happened, and now he's looking down at the bottom of the gauge. And he calls out, "Hey, Bob," to his mate outside, "there goes the f-ing liquid!" We were puzzled. You'll have to excuse the language, but that's what happened. So we asked him, "What happened, Mark?" And he says, "I dunno."

25:30 So we wait another two days and do it all over again. This time there was a lot of apprehension, and when Mark says, "Right, you turn this valve…" the same thing happened again. "There goes the f-ing liquid!" So we shut everything down. They'd have done that for the rest of the war. So we pulled it all apart.

26:00 I don't know if you've ever seen this rock wool. It's fibre and stone for packing and insulation. Well, we had to pull all this stuff off the machines. It gets in you and everything. Of course, by now we'd got a bit jack of this. We wanted to see the thing working. So we pulled the whole thing down, dismantled it. And we found a crack in the

26:30 bottom of the pot. It was copper. Didn't know how the crack got there. So we had to take the whole thing apart. And there were these two sergeants around to help. Ron Clifford. He was a genius. He took it away and went with it around Brisbane to places he knew. He got it welded or a new one made – I can't remember which. Anyway,

27:00 he got it done pronto and he brought it back. We put it all together again and packed it up. You've never seen such a job in all your life! It was the most unpleasant job. Anyway, we got it all together and started it up, and this time, it was different – something happened! The gauges went and temperatures started to show and everything like that. You see,

27:30 it was going up and flowing over the next column and everything it was supposed to be doing. So we got it going; we got it working. They're not like us, those Americans. Like, you'd see them working on an aircraft and you'd shudder. They'd use a shifting spanner! Can you imagine that – working on an aircraft with a shifting spanner? I tell you what, if you showed up with a shifting spanner in your pocket or your kit and they'd throttle you!

28:00 We always had the right spanner. They had no idea of that. But they knew how to operate the plant, and we'd got it going and filled a few cylinders. We'd made oxygen then. So that was it. We learned a lot – more than they thought we'd learn – but in the process, of course, we were working twenty-four hours a day. We didn't have much time, no leave.

28:30 And, what's more, we'd run out of money. We'd spent what few bob we had down at the American canteen, getting cigarettes and that. So we went to Forward Echelon at HQ [headquarters] to get pay, and they wouldn't pay us. We went with our pay books and they couldn't find us.

29:00 Bogus, as far as they were concerned. Fortunately I had a banking account. We were all running out of smokes and everything. I went to the bank manager and told him who I was, and said, "I'm in trouble." And he just pulled a five-pound note out of his pocket and gave it to me. He said, "Here lad, you take this. You need it more than I do." He gave me five quid. He said, "Yeah, it's in your account and all,

29:30 but I won't draw it out of there – you can have it here." Five pounds. I thought this was fabulous. I put on an American shirt and just waddled into their canteen and bought up five pounds worth of cigarettes and tobacco. I was going to buy some beer but I spent it all on tobacco, all but threepence that I needed to get back on the tram.

30:00 I get back to the camp and none of the boys were there. They'd all cleared out. The Yanks had lent them some money or something and they'd all gone for beers. Cleared out. And I was there on my own. I could smoke my head off, but I didn't have threepence even to go anywhere, and there was no one around to borrow off. But did I give 'em Larry when they all come home. They were half-full and all. I let 'em have a piece of my mind.

30:30 **Why did the Americans have a camp at Eagle Farm?**

Well, I think it was on the way to Fenton Field. They were down lower than us, at Gorrie. The Liberators – the ones that did all the damage – they were there. I know, because we had to go down there all

31:00 the time and fix their plant up when it broke down. They couldn't manage it. But it was the way from Brisbane. When our plant arrived, when it finally arrived…see, the first one they tried to send out, it got sunk. So they despatched another one,

31:30 and it came into Brisbane. They flew it into Brisbane by aircraft – a Hercules or something. It weighed twenty-two ton. And then they had to put it on a ship to ship it to Darwin, where we were. And the two fellows who went on board ship with it

32:00 were new. We hadn't met them yet. There were six of us that had formed so far. It was only when we went to Brisbane that we met this fellow – Bertie Hoffman. We had no officer then. So an officer was appointed. He went to Brisbane – Bill Miller, from Perth – he went to Brisbane. We hadn't met him. He went on the ship that brought the plant round to Darwin.

32:30 The transport boys – Alf Mildren and another West Australian, I can't think of his name right now – they went to Darwin to bring it back down to Gorrie.

**Before we move on to Gorrie, there's a few more questions I'd like to ask you about Eagle Farm. What did the Americans have set up at Eagle Farm?**

33:00 They had everything. There was training there for grader drivers. It was just a big army camp. They had equipment coming in; transports; the big autocars. Mainly to do with the making airfields, you know, when they first take ground. This was part of the equipment.

33:30 It was basically an equipment base. A very big show. But they treated us like kings. They were good.

**How were they equipped in comparison to the Australians?**

Much better equipped. All round. The uniforms, the equipment, the guns – everything was much better. They were much better equipped. The tools they used were Herb Brown tools, we'd never seen them. It was

34:00 a pleasure when we got to use them.

**What about when on leave? What sort of reputation did the Americans have with the locals?**

Well, huh. When the Battle of Brisbane was on, because the Australian troops weren't allowed into their canteen, there was a bit of a fight. But the poor Yanks missed out, because the Australian MPs [Military Police] were clouting Yanks

34:30 and the Aussies, but the American MPs were clouting the Yanks and not the Aussies. Both ends. And it was a big fight, believe you me. I got up there two days after it. And the remnants of it…well, you didn't look crossways at anyone for awhile. Everybody was on tension. But apart from that they treated us really well.

35:00 **What do you know about this Battle of Brisbane?**

I heard rumours, rumours of fights, and blokes standing there watching them. They reckoned the poor Yanks were copping it from both ends. The American MPs were dobbing the Yanks, and so were the Aussies. It was because they were pinching the Aussie girls, I suppose.

**Were arms drawn?**

I think yes, a couple of shots were fired, yes.

35:30 They'd had their song and dance with the beer, like I told you. They'd be running around in the middle of the night firing revolvers. They were a bit crazy with firearms.

**At Eagle Farm?**

Yes. They'd be firing in the air. If it had been an Australian camp, they'd have been in the brig [gaol] quick.

36:00 **So what was the discipline in the camp like if they could willingly fire off revolvers?**

Pretty dangerous. But still, they did their job. They were more rough than anything else. The Eskimo bloke who held the beer up for me to drink – I mentioned him earlier – he was the roughest looking bloke you've ever seen in your life. And tough. But that was their job. They were grader drivers and maintenance men and the like.

36:30 **Did you think that the discipline was satisfactory?**

Well, they were courteous. Discipline, yeah. Because we were outside their discipline. As far as we were

concerned, we did what we liked, when we liked. No one queried us. We'd walk into camp and they knew us – all the guards knew us. Just walk in or out, take anything we want, it didn't matter. We were all here to fight a war,

37:00 and Brisbane was a very big war zone.

**How did you react, seeing these Yanks pull out revolvers and fire them off into the air?**

Thought it was a bit stupid, a bit dangerous. Those bullets had to land somewhere.

**Did you have a laugh?**

No, I didn't laugh. I kept well out of their way.

37:30 **How much did you worry about your safety?**

No, I don't think…I was in something that was…we never seemed to have any fear about safety at that age. The place was at war, and we were going to do some damage to some Japs.

**Even with drunken Yanks with their guns blazing?**

They do that all the time. They do it now. They're gun-happy.

38:00 But I don't think they'd point it at you and shoot you. They'd fire them up in the air. It was like crackers to them, you know.

**How often did you go into Brisbane?**

We didn't get in there that often, because once you got the plant going you were stuck there. I went in once, I remember, and it was steaming hot. I went into this shop to try and get a cool drink – Ben and I and a mate – and

38:30 just as we fronted the counter, the place was overrun with Americans. Just about to serve us and then all these Americans. It was just opposite a big hall, a town hall or something. There was a symphony orchestra or something on, and all the Americans were there. This was the interval for the matinee crowd or something.

39:00 I tell you what, they were three or four deep behind those counters, and there were two Greek-looking blokes serving, and they served all the Yanks before us. They were all served and out of the shop before you knew it, and there we were standing there like stunned goslings. Because we were Aussies.

39:30 I just got this bloke by his hairy chest and pulled him toward me. Ben was startled that I was so annoyed, but I said, "Mister, if you don't get me an ice-cream and a cold drink now, you're going head first in that bucket." That bloke moved so fast. And he said, "Don't pay, no pay," but I was so annoyed that I just threw the money at him. They were just running around after

40:00 the Yanks, and they were paying big dollars for it. We'd pay eightpence for a malted milk. It was two shillings to the Yanks. They were making money. I grabbed him by his hairy chest and I was going to let him have it. Anyway, I threw the money at him and said, "Keep it."

**What about Yanks and Australian girls?**

**No, didn't get on too well, generally speaking. It wouldn't take much for**

40:30 **an Aussie bloke to get stuck into a Yank. I've got to admit that. We were allowed into their canteen in the end. They fixed that. Of course, you must remember that the war had been progressing and was going badly for us at that time, and those fellows that were there were in transit, leaving Brisbane for the Japanese theatre.**

41:00 **And a lot of them had already been in war zones. So, it wasn't a good place to open your mouth. It wasn't a happy place, I'd put it that way. The local population – they kept well away; they stayed home and out of the city because it was a war zone.**

41:30 **The few businesses that were there were making big money. And, of course, the pubs. They'd open the pubs for an hour. It was green beer. It was a rush when Benny wanted a beer. It was, "Right, pub's open, let's go." Helter skelter; we'd run down the street. You'd get down there and it'd be a queue of fifty!**

# Tape 5

00:30 **Could you tell us a little about the living conditions on Eagle Farm? What did the base look like?**

It was a very busy place. There was stuff coming and going all the time, and there was training of men

in graders. It was a noisy place. They had graders going night and day. I think they were sort of advance parties for the islands. Big transports were landing somewhere close by. Not on Eagle Farm where

01:00 we were, but somewhere nearby. It was very noisy. And of course our plant wasn't quiet either. But accommodation-wise, we'd just front up to their mess. It was different to ours. Their mess – because of the type of unit they had, working day and night – you'd just walk in anytime and sit down and grab a meal. It was smorgasbord. You'd just take what

01:30 you wanted. And it was good tucker too. I think I liked a stay-at-home cooked steak better. But it was a change from bully beef and stuff we were used to – like peas. Those peas!

**What sort of accommodation were you in there?**

Tents. I tell you what, the mosquitos there were big! When Marie and I

02:00 were in Darwin – she couldn't stand Darwin – I gave her the option of Cairns or Perth. Either one. Then I thought again, "Hold on. Those mosquitos are too big in Queensland." They ate us at Eagle Farm. It was known for it. You'd have a fly net

02:30 and you'd put it around you, but you'd wake up next morning and there'd always be half a dozen of them in there – at least. You couldn't keep them out.

**Were you under mosquito nets at Eagle Farm?**

Yes, under mosquito nets.

**Did you have any other protection from the mozzies?**

No. But working at night on the plant, the bigger problem you had was with moths. They'd come around in droves because they were attracted by

03:00 the light. And they'd stick on you, see, because you were so sweaty. And they were a confounded nuisance, fluttering on your body all the time, you know. Some of the fellows with hairy bodies, they were trying to get them off all the time; sticky moths. It was just that time of the year, when I was there. They were a nuisance. They were very prevalent.

03:30 **Sounds terrible?**

It was. You'd light a candle, and they'd put it out.

**It sounds like they were big ones?**

They were. Bugs and crawlies and flying insects. They'd come in swarms. They were all being disturbed. And they had big machinery there doing a lot of digging and disturbing things. And they were teaching fellas how to drive graders, so they were probably disturbing the habitat. So there was quite a plague of them there.

04:00 **Did you get any sort of a new uniform when you went to Eagle Farm?**

See, we were using this caustic all the time. Early on, we cut up one of those to see what it was like. And of course, with no water around, it just burnt up all our clothes.

04:30 So we went up to Forward Echelon to see what other togs we could get, and they couldn't help us. They didn't want to know us. We couldn't get pay off them, we couldn't get any satisfaction from them at all. They'd say, "We don't know you; we've got no record of you being in this area." So the Yanks, they said, "Here you go." And they just gave us American gear. So we moved around Brisbane and, if one of the fellas wanted a beer from a pub, then I'd just hold his hat and in he'd go.

05:00 And if it was a pub for Aussies only, he'd put the Aussie beret thing back on.

**So what did this uniform the Americans issued you with look like?**

05:30 Just the same, really, though the shirt was better quality. They were really good-quality shirts. They washed good too. They were sort of a nylon thing, so they didn't need ironing. We looked pretty flash. It might have been officer's gear, but it didn't matter.

06:00 **So what you're saying is that the Americans had a better-quality uniform?**

They were bringing stuff out themselves. They weren't relying on Australian materials. They had everything with them. Equipment, supplies, everything. Everything was shipped out of Brisbane. It was the area for bombs and equipment and mines. It was all in Brisbane; a very big defence port.

06:30 They couldn't use Darwin, of course, because the harbour was blocked with ships. Small ships could, but not the big tankers. Thousands of troops there.

**The training plant you got going at Eagle Farm – the oxygen plant – did that belong to the Americans?**

Yes, that was theirs.

07:00 It finished up near us in the Territory. Just down from us at Fenton Field, the big Liberator base. They were manufacturing their own oxygen there. They didn't work too hard, I think. We used to send stuff down to them. They didn't seem adapted, like we were; not as dedicated.

07:30 The flight sergeants reckoned they should have been telling people what to do. That's not being too personal, but as far as supply was concerned we put in ten times as much time as they did. Still, we were eager, and we were new at it.

**This mobile oxygen plant – was it an American invention?**

It weighed twenty-two ton when assembled, including the big balloon. It was hauled by a big autocar – transporter, these huge things the Yanks brought out here.

08:00 It was a huge thing. You had to climb up to get into the cabin. It was a very big diesel thing…no, I think it was a petrol motor. They were a very handy thing to have, because they travelled well; and when we went to Darwin, of course,

08:30 it wasn't a bitumen road. We went to Gorrie as an advance party and we dug trenches and cleared ground there. I've got a few photos of that. We erected tents for an ARD group to come later on. We were an advance party. We had no officer in charge of us,

09:00 but we'd get an orderly sergeant come along – if we were digging a trench or something – and he'd say, "You and you and you – you come with me." You'd have to go and unload a transport or something. It didn't matter who you were, you just went and did it, because it was all in the war effort. You were on, seven days a week. So whatever they asked, you did.

09:30 The CCC [Civil Construction Corps] – I had the greatest admiration for them. They put up these mess huts, just a tin roof and fly-wired in. So you could sit down and have a meal. The first meal we had when they'd completed them was bully beef, of course. It was lousy, and you'd just tip it out in your dixie. You'd just look at it on your tin plate and then you'd throw it way.

10:00 You'd starve yourself.

**How did you get from Eagle Farm to Darwin?**

From Brisbane to Sydney, then Sydney to Melbourne, then Melbourne to Adelaide, then by convoy out of Adelaide to Alice Springs.

**Can you tell me a bit about that journey, and why you were taking that route?**

10:30 **That was the movement orders – they said we were transferred to 14ARD [Army Recruiting Depot?] at Gorrie. That's all it said. We didn't even know where Gorrie was. Even though I'd been up to Alice Springs. So, the thing was,**

11:00 **when I went to the Movement Officer on the train station at Brisbane, he said, "Yeah, right, we'll send you via Melbourne," and…**

**Were you there with the team on the train?**

No, there were only about four of us there. We didn't have a full team at that time. There were only about six of us then. That's the original team from Melbourne.

11:30 **So you're going from Brisbane to Sydney?**

Yeah, Brisbane to Sydney by train, then Sydney to Melbourne by train. I forget what they called the fella at the stations – he was like a Movement Officer. You used to take your orders to him and he'd find out what train you were on and when.

12:00 And away you'd go. You had your gear on you, and you'd just take it with you.

**How free were you to have time off in Sydney or places like that?**

Well, they had SP police everywhere. You couldn't say, "Right, I'll have a day off today and they won't miss me." You couldn't get away with that. I thought about it a couple of times. With us, of course, we were a team and we had to stick together.

12:30 If I was travelling on my own I'd have taken a day off somewhere, I guess, because I wanted to have a look at Sydney. But I didn't.

**Who were you travelling with at the time?**

Ben Champion, one of the boys. The other boys, they either travelled separate or went in groups. We all had to meet sometime at 14 ARD, Gorrie.

13:00 So Ben was from Leeton in New South Wales, and him and I teamed up. I said, "Well, I know Melbourne, so if we get any time, I'll show you around Melbourne when we get there." We didn't, of course. Went

straight through on the Adelaide Express.

**What were the train conditions like?**

Crowded, heaps of people. Mainly troops. From Brisbane, it was all troops. You had troops trying to sleep up on the luggage racks and on the floor. You were stepping over people all the time. And they

13:30 were loaded. No air conditioning or anything like that. You just tried to rest. But you were travelling. The RTO – that's the man; the Routine Travel Officer or something – you'd see him at any station you pulled into, and if you had to get off because you were sick or something like that, then

14:00 he'd give you a report card and another train to get later on.

**Sounds like it was chaos at the stations?**

It was. It was an amazing thing. I've seen fellas crook, and they'd get put off a troop train, and when I've got where I'm going, they're there! Done something with them; put them on another route or something. Of course, when we got to Adelaide we had to get to Port Augusta, and then you teamed up in mobs…

14:30 **Are they feeding you all this time?**

On the little Ghan going up there was standing room only.

**But are they feeding you on the trains?**

No, you'd have to take it with you. You took your own tucker with you – bully beef and biscuits and stuff like that. And when you stopped at some places – like Vaughan – the local ladies had prepared food. You had

15:00 thousands of troops moving through there and they had hot pies, sandwiches, and when we left Adelaide, the Cheer-Up Hut Group and the Salvation Army were there handing out cardigans and mittens and things like this. People didn't realise how cold it got up there of a night time. The water would freeze in the pipes at night in Alice Springs.

15:30 So there were all these little goodies like this for the troops. Cakes and little parcels, all done up nicely. It made you feel a bit like home. There were a lot of weepy eyes there, seeing the boys go.

**Was this the Comfort Fund that was doing this?**

Yes, and private people as well.

**How about the Salvation Army? Were they doing this…?**

Yes, they were very active. But not so much there.

16:00 Every stop, every station you went to, the Salvation Army had a hut there. Anything you wanted, you'd go to them. They didn't worry you. And when you got up north, a van would come along with cool drinks. You'd get ice from somewhere – because every camp had an ice-making facility – and you'd get some ice and make some cordial up.

16:30 So you'd be working away in the scrub somewhere and suddenly this van would pull up and this guy would have cigarettes and a cold drink for you. It encouraged you to smoke, of course. I was only a casual smoker back then – of course, Mum didn't know I smoked. If I'd have got lung cancer then I could have said that they caused it! As soon as you'd go to get on a train you'd have someone hand you a packet of cigarettes, you know.

17:00 So anyway, a whole heap of you would get on the train and away you go. The trains, being steam, they could only go a certain distance and then they'd have their stops to refuel – take on coal and, of course, water. So while they're stopped, everyone would get off and stretch their legs and run about. When they got going again there was a whistle and the train would go slow,

17:30 so you'd have to run and get on. At one place, I remember there was a big bore. It was warm artesian water. And clear. Just a hole in the ground as big as this room, and you could look down and it was clear – so clear, clearer than the blue lake at Mount Gambier. And in we jumped, no clothes on. Teams of fellas. It was limy sort of water though, so you could have a wash, but you couldn't drink it or anything. You could

18:00 jump in with your clothes on and wash them that way. Then you'd get out and in five minutes they'd dry. It was hot.

**What was the journey like from Adelaide to Alice Springs?**

It was good. The boys were singing, and one bloke had an accordion. He played that. I had my trumpet but I never pulled it out. I thought, "No way, if I start I'll never get time to breathe." And it was too crowded; you just couldn't move.

18:30 But I took my trumpet. It went everywhere with me.

**What sort of songs were popular at the time?**

Vera Lynn was becoming prominent. You know, a lot of the old war songs… 'Tipperary' and 'Gundagai'. Someone would have a bit of a lark with the sand-gropers or the crow-eaters; you know, a bit of teasing between the South Australians and the Victorians and that. Or someone would go on about the weather in Melbourne.

19:00 Then they'd start on footy or cricket. There was always something going on.

**What about gambling; was there any of that?**

A bit of Two-up and some cards, that was about all. If they could get room to play cards then they'd do that. It was a pretty good journey. You'd hang out all over the train, and you could even go up on the roof if you wanted to. There was no one to stop you.

19:30 They were open sort of carriages with the railing in the front. You could walk out there and jump over to the carriage in front. Most lads just settled down, though. In one compartment of the train they had an old piano. It was bolted down on the floor. Some of the boys got hold of that, and they rattled out some tunes on it. I was tempted to get the trumpet out when I heard that.

20:00 But I thought, "No, you won't get a bit of sleep." Oodnadatta, I'll never forget. We pulled up there at Oodnadatta and there's this huge pub – from here to the road, or further – with a big sign, 'Oodnadatta' on it.

**Was this South Australia?**

Yes. It's just red sand there. Not a house in coo-ee.

20:30 As soon as the troop train pulled in there, it was whoosh, and they're gone. They only had a certain amount of time. They had beer there I think, sort of. It was a pale ale and wasn't very good, they said. They were looking for VB [Victoria Bitter]. But they got a cold drink, anyway. I didn't go over because I had no interest in it.

21:00 Then, when the driver reckoned it was time, he just pulled the whistle and the train started moving. The boys would race out of the pub and clamber on…

**That would have been fun to watch.**

Yes, of course the steps on the train are made so you can get off the ground. They're like those American things on the movies. Not like the trains today that have got to pull into a platform to let you off. That was the way the Ghan was back then. So, it was

21:30 a pretty loaded train, and you had a few army vehicles on it as well. But it shifted along quite well. At Quorn…we came into Quorn and…see, I was cunning. I thought, "Right, going up north, I'll sit on the shady side." But when we got to Quorn the train turns sharply and all of a sudden I'm on the other side. I'd made a mistake there!

22:00 And it was the hottest part of the journey then, too, in the sun! But never mind.

**You wouldn't have known?**

Nah, and didn't care.

**Was it hard to sleep on the train?**

Tiredness…you'd just sleep. It wasn't comfortable and you had no bed or anything. And it was crowded. So you could lay down. You'd have people all propped around you and you'd get kicked. So you'd just sit.

22:30 Everyone was in the same boat, though, y'know. I never saw any friction though. Everyone was quite resolved to what they were doing. There might I have been friction, but I didn't see it. Of course, they had officers patrolling, and SPs. They give you a bit of a lashing if you…they knew they couldn't control the mob if they went crazy or something, but everyone was pretty well behaved.

23:00 We weren't looking for that though. We were looking for Japs, not our own kind. It was an unforgettable journey, though.

**Was there a lot of troops en route from Adelaide to Alice Springs?**

Thousands, thousands.

**Were they heading for Darwin?**

Yes, and beyond. Once you left Alice you went by road convoy…

23:30 **Did you have any time off in Alice?**

An interesting story there…I got into Alice Springs, and of course I've got no unit number, and the train pulls in, and they say, "You've gotta go to the staging camp." I went down there, just behind Gillen's

Airlines, and had a shower and got cleaned up.

24:00 Then I pulled out an old leave pass I had in my pocket and just fronted up at the gate with it in my hand. They didn't take much notice, and I just walked out. So, I got up town – everyone was making for the Stuart Arms Hotel – it was a tin shed then. Everyone was going

24:30 in there. And a vehicle goes past me, and I had this flash. I thought, "Gee , that fella looks like Bucky." Now Bucky was a Fitter 2E when I was working at General Reconnaissance, when we were working on old Ansons. George Buck was his name. And at that time he was driving

25:00 one of the latest model cars – a '39 Buick. He had a garage in Coburg and he had a bit of money. But he was in the air force. And I thought, "Gee, that looks like Bucky." I could tell you a few stories about him…but never mind. Anyway, the next thing I know the truck turns around and comes back. It pulls up next to me and he leans out and says, "Stan Kirby, what are you doing here?" Couldn't believe it.

25:30 He was driving this truck, in civilian clothes. I said, "What are you doing?" Well, he used to pinch petrol. He made an extra tank on his big Buick, and he made a filler on the other side, and when we were servicing aircraft, he'd collect the petrol we drained from them. And Bucky, I've seen him walk down the main street of Laverton, past the Post Office to the car park, with a bucket of petrol in one hand

26:00 and a mop in the other, over his shoulder. He's just walking along there, whistling away. He'd just put the funnel in his car and fill it. Well, they must have caught up with him see. He was selling it to the garage, and making a fortune. He wasn't interested in the war – he was doing well. And he was a good looking fella too.

**Was he AWOL [AWL – Absent Without Leave]?**

No, they cashiered him. And as punishment, because he knew Alice Springs, they sent him up there to work in a mica mine.

26:30 So that's what he was supposed to be doing. He was driving a truck for the mine, I guess. So he says, "Where are you staying?" and I said, "At the staging camp." And he says, "Well, I've got an answer for that." Well, he still had his car – the big black V8 Buick – and he told me what to do.

27:00 Well, there was a big dance on that night, and I'd only arrived the day before. Bucky says, "Come over and have a drink." And I said, "No, I didn't drink before, and I'm not drinking now." So he said, "Take the Buick, and when you get to the staging gate, then

27:30 just drive through. I do it all the time. Don't stop, just drive through." So he made me take my shirt off – you just needed a singlet in the day there – and he says, "Come up the hotel at about seven o'clock, and we'll go to the dance."

28:00 So I said, "Fine, I'll be in that." So I had the means of getting in and out of the staging camp. I thought, "This'll do me." So anyway, I tried this. I just drove up in a singlet and they opened the gate, and out I went. Well, that night I get up to the Stuart Arms Hotel and I find Bucky. He was there boozing, and he says,

28:30 "Come up and meet my wife." Well, I've seen some gorgeous women in my life, but Bucky's wife was … she was blonde, and she was beautiful. The figure, and everything. Of course, Bucky was a dapper looking bloke himself. Run up with rings, and you name it – she was a model! So we're sitting down and she's drinking martinis or something like that, and we're talking and waiting for George and she says, "Have you met George's uncle?"

29:00 So she takes me into this other little room of this tin-shed-bar thing, and introduces me. And I says, "THE Bob Buck from Alice Springs?" And I saw her just nodding, like that. He was the bloke who went with the Lasseter business…

29:30 **What's this, the Lasseter business?**

Have you read the book – Lasseter's Last Ride? Bob Buck was the fella who went out and found…he was the uncle of George Buck, whose number was the other side of mine; he was 19756 when we joined up. Anyway, I got talking to old Bob about Lassiter and that – got very friendly with him, see.

30:00 He had a pension and he'd sit there all day. He was part and parcel of the Stuart Arms Hotel, because he was famous and that. They used to feed him. Anyone who came in could play cribbage with him – you buy him a rum and he'd play cribbage with you all day.

**What's cribbage?**

Cribbage is a game you play with pegs in holes. For the scoring. You've seen those boards? That's cribbage anyway, a very old game.

30:30 Anyway, he says, "Do you play cribbage?" And I says, "No. No way." But if I ever knew anyone going to Alice Springs I'd say, "Go say hello to Bob for me." And I'd tell them to take a few bob and buy him a rum and play some cribbage with him. Anyway, so I met old Bob Buck.

31:00 **This Lasseter bloke…was he some sort of gold prospector?**

Yes. He was the one who looked for the gold in the book, Lasseter's Last Ride. Lasseter was supposed to have found a gold reef. But old Bob reckoned he was a…

**Isn't that a fairy story though?**

No, no. They never found the gold. I said to Bob, "Is there any gold there?" And he said, "No, no." 'Cause he went there. He knew all that country. He went out there and found him – found his body – later on.

**So the whole gold thing was just a big story?**

They think he went mental; Lasseter went mental and dreamed it all.

31:30 They never found the gold. The Catholic Party and various others went out there and spent all this money. They could show the tourists where they went, and where they sat and drank their grog and everything like that. The packing cases were still there. Then they went back and ran out of money. No, no gold.

32:00 Anyway, it came time for the dance, and I'm saying, "Where's Bob? Go get him." And she says, "No, he's not coming." So finally, she says to me – I forget her name, now – she says, "Come on, we're going." So we jump in the Buick and we sail up to the…I pull up to the Catholic Hall, where the big ball was on, and there's crowds of troops everywhere. We could hardly get into the curb to pull in. But everyone steps back and lets this flash car in.

32:30 Then I get out of the car and go round the other side and open the door for this beautiful lady, and she gets out. Well, half the blokes standing there are the blokes I knew from the train. And they are aghast – they're standing there looking like they're thinking, "How's he do this? How's he get the latest model car and this beautiful girl?" Good gracious me. I just couldn't look at them! Anyway, Bucky didn't arrive. I ended up dancing with her all night, then taking her back home. Bucky, he'd got on the grog.

33:00 **Sounds like a bit of a mythical, starring moment?**

Ahhh, it was joyous for me. I enjoyed it. She was good dancer, too. And, ah…but I was feeling uneasy all the time too, 'cause I was thinking, "Where's Bucky, where's Bucky?" I was stone cold sober, of course, too, I hadn't had a drink.

**And of course you'd stolen his wife and his Buick!**

Yeah, and all these blokes were ogling at me. Bless me! So anyway, I had his car while I was there, and I could go uptown and do what I pleased. I never took anyone with me

33:30 in case I got caught. I was cunning about that. Bucky, I saw him a lot. He just seemed to be in town there a lot. Anyway, I had a good time there. Good tucker, and the hotel was pretty good.

**So how long were you actually in this staging camp?**

34:00 Three or four days. Then I had to get on a convoy again and go up to Gorrie.

**It sounds like the best three days of your life, from what you're saying.**

Oh yes, it pulled me together after the journey and that. And particularly on the side of the…I'd read the book – Lasseter's Last Ride – and knew all

34:30 about it. And I had a good look at Alice Springs. So, the trip up on the road convoy – with the troop tenders – to Gorrie…that was a nightmare. Honestly, hundreds of fellas. And the dust! You know, you couldn't see yourself. These troop tenders, with a canvas top, and about a dozen fellas in there. You're travelling along and you couldn't see the bloke beside you at all.

35:00 And the dust! Hour after hour. And they had these comfort stops where you'd get out and shake the dust off yourself, and stretch your legs. And they had these water bags hanging on the sides to cool the water down. Then back in again and away you'd go. But you'd come to a staging camp – Elliott is one I remember – it was a very big one. The first thing you notice when you go in there is all the steam.

35:30 They had all these forty-four-gallon drums cut in half, with fires underneath them, and you'd go along to a kitchen with your tin plate and cutlery – you'd drill holes in them and hang them on a wire like a big safety pin. You needed that when you came wash them. You'd dip it in the boiling water while holding the wire, and you'd brush and scrub them off that way.

36:00 There was a reason for it – so you wouldn't get transmitted diseases and infections and things like that. It worked; it was very good. So you'd go along and get your bully beef or scrambled eggs or whatever they were dishing up. The egg powder…whoa, it was horrible stuff. But you had to eat.

36:30 I couldn't, though – just couldn't eat some of this stuff at all. Sometimes, of course, they'd put on something that was edible.

**Was this at the staging camp?**

Staging camp, yes. They had tents there, and you'd just fall into one of those with your palliasse on the floor. You'd just crash in there. You'd front up and they'd

37:00 say, "This row…" and you'd go crash there. Then next morning you'd fall out in front of your tent. Army, air force – it didn't matter who you were. Some with gear, some without gear. Then they'd say, "Right – you twenty – there's two tenders there; go fill them up." You'd get in those and off you'd go to the next stop.

37:30 When we got to Gorrie, they unloaded us. Well, there was one Borden Hut – that's what they called them; they're made out of masonite – well, I think the sergeant had that. And they were building a bit of an eating area. They had racks too, and they used to get the bully beef and pour it into big trays, then put the trays on the racks to get them hot – out in the sun!

38:00 Oh…it was horrible stuff. We got word on the grapevine that we were going to get stuff called 'meat and vegetables' – M & V, they called it. They did the same thing with that! Well, the crows got all the M and we got the V. It's a wonder we didn't all die, y'know.

38:30 **It's surprising that leaving it out in the sun like that, you didn't all get sick.**

Yes. We had no MO [Medical Officer] and no medical facilities. I finished up getting dengue fever. I can remember, my mate said I was vomiting and…the other end…and dizzy, and he put me…he lowered me…I mean, I made a cross-section out of packing case and put my palliasse on it, up off the ground…

39:00 So I made this tent, and fortunately I was near a big concrete tank and the showers. The water for them was in a tank up on the hill. But you couldn't shower from it during the day because the water was so hot. Even at night time, you had to let it run and run and run and let the water cool down a bit.

**Was it just a gravity type of plumbing system going on?**

Yes. They hadn't covered the piping. They didn't have PVC [polyvinyl chloride] – it was all

39:30 metal pipe. Anyway, I got this dengue fever. My mate – Ben Champion – he was terribly worried about me. I'd fall out of bed and he'd rally me back in. One time he came looking for me – I wasn't in bed. He must have woken up and seen I wasn't there, and I'd crawled up to where the shower was. I must have been trying to have a shower or something.

40:00 I was, you know, incognito. I was just laying there. He said I was lucky, because the snakes used to come up there for the water. He said there was a snake about two feet away from me when he arrived. It probably wouldn't have bit me, just slid on past. But I could have stood on it or something. So finally, he ran out onto the main highway – we weren't far off the main dirt road – and the

40:30 first troop convoy that came along he flagged down. There were troop convoys going along there all the time. So he asked for a medical officer on board, and there was none at Gorrie – no medical facilities, just forty or fifty fellas. No one with any medical experience. He tried everywhere.

41:00 **Was it common, the dengue?**

Oh yes. It's worse than malaria. If you get it you can die very easily.

**I'm surprise to hear that there was no MO in Gorrie.**

Well, they didn't have them. We were an advance party, and didn't have anything like that. You got sick and…fortunately for Ben doing that. Anyway, he found a sort of medic fellow and he said he'd come and have a look at me.

41:30 He came and had at a look at me and gave me something. He said it was just as well that he'd had a look, because in another day or two I'd have been dead. He gave me something to settle me down, and he said the less I ate, the better. So anyway, Ben somehow got a can of pears.

42:00 I don't know where he would have got them. But he got this can of pears and took it up to the shower, and dug a hole in the sand…

# Tape 6

00:30 **Why had you gone to Gorrie?**

Well, that was the staging camp. We were going to set the machine up there. See, the war was at a pretty bad stage then.

**What was happening in the war then?**

Well, Darwin was bombed, of course. They were ready to cede the top of Australia to the Japs, and they had the main base at Gorrie. They thought that was safe, safe from the seaport of Darwin.

01:00 They had the big Liberator base there. They were a main strike force. And the Mosquito squadrons, and RSU [Repair and Salvage Unit] and everything. Gorrie was the terminus, or rather the start of the line – going north – from Darwin. The railway only ran from Darwin to Birdham or Gorrie; the same place. It's all the same thing; Gorrie and Birdham are within a

01:30 mile of one another.

**So it was a very busy spot?**

Thousands of troops there. They were out in the bush for miles either way. Off the highway, either way. A very active place.

02:00 **Where was the oxygen plant located at Gorrie?**

What had happened – in the meantime, while we were there – they had secured another plant and it had arrived in Brisbane. Then we got word through one of our sergeants that the plant would be arriving in Darwin, accompanied by an officer by the name of Miller, and another crewman, LAC [Leading Aircraftsman] Bert Hoffman. He was a Brisbanite, and a bit older than I was.

02:30 I was shocked to learn of his real age. But he was a real active fella. And we found out as soon as it had arrived in Darwin, so three of the transport boys got on a convoy up to Darwin and waited there to bring it back to Gorrie for us.

03:00 In the meantime we're at Gorrie trying to dig a big hole we were going to use as a reservoir for water. It needed a lot of water, and we needed it to jump into, because of that procedure I mentioned earlier about the rock caustic. But after ten days we managed to get a foot in the ground. It was this sort of limestone,

03:30 and we used explosive to try and blast it out. You'd get a puff of smoke and all you'd get was a hole you could put your finger in. You couldn't shift it. So the boss, when he came down and saw what we were trying to do, he said, "This is no good; we've got to find a better place than this." So he went searching, and when he came back he said, "You boys will be pleased – we're shifting." So we packed everything up and set sail

04:00 on the track to this new place, at Mataranka. We went off the main road at Mataranka looking for water of some sort. I think he knew where he was going. He was looking for Hot Spring Creek near the Mataranka homestead. Now it's a big tourist attraction. We found a spot where the army had previously grown potatoes.

04:30 There had been a market garden there, using water from Hot Spring Creek to irrigate it. But once again, it was just a bit of topsoil with all this limestone underneath it. They got a good crop of potatoes, then in the second season they couldn't grow a thing, so it was abandoned. And we came across an old-timer there

05:00 by the name of George Armstrong. He had a mob of natives further over in the bush…when they dispersed the native population…and Bill Harney had a mob down near Alice Springs, and this George Armstrong had a mob out there. So we told him what we were going to do. He'd said, "What are you doing with that great big thing?" and we told him, and he said, "You don't want to camp down there – it's the coldest place in the

05:30 Territory." And he was right – it was cold. But never mind, we had a beautiful warm creek. This was before the plant was running. You'd freeze at night. You'd put on all the bedding you could, but you'd never get warm; and if you got any sleep, then as soon as you woke up you'd dive in this creek. No one, at any time would light the fire…we had the

06:00 wood laid out, and some petrol. All you had to do was strike the match and you'd have instant warmth, but no one ever volunteered, because it was so cold. So what we did was draw straws. Whoever drew the shortest straw had to get out in the cold and light the fire. That went on every time we didn't have the plant running…

06:30 **Sorry to interrupt there, I just need to adjust your microphone there, Stan…**

Yes, thanks…I was going to talk about this Salvation Army officer who came in. He brought us a cool cordial drink and cigarettes. Of course, at that time we were doing our own cooking. My mate Ben had been a shearer's cook in his time.

07:00 And what we were doing after we'd got the plant operating – we had a good supply of oxygen going, and we're getting our cylinders from 9 Stores Depot. They were somewhere along the line, I don't know where. They were coming in and dropping off and taking away the cylinders. We had the plant going well. And we'd felled a tree so we could get across this creek –

07:30 and one of the boys, a West Australian, he learned to swim there. You'd get in this creek – it was so fast flowing – we put a rope around him, and he'd go out and have a few paddles and then grab the rope again. It wasn't all that deep – he could have stood up, but…not many fish of any size in there. We got a few fish. We caught them in a wire net and were going to cook them;

08:00 but as we were pulling in the net, up came this great, big, long eel…no, not an eel…it was this great big python, a rock python. It put its head through the wire, ate the fish, and then couldn't get out. And it was a big thing – scared the daylights out of us. Harmless, it was. But we couldn't find anything to hang it up to skin it. Anyway,

08:30 the idea was we were going to work the machine until we got all the cylinders filled, then we'd shut it down. Then we'd service it – the silica gel, which we'd dry out by the sun or by electric heat. We had electricity there – so that we could re-use the silica gel. We'd redry it out with a heating element we had.

09:00 If you don't know silica gel, it's like a crystal, and it changes colour with dampness. So if it's got colour in it – a bluey colour or a red colour – then it's damp and you have to dry it out and it goes back to an natural colour. Anyway, we'd get all that ready and get the planted all fuelled up and ready to start and everything like that,

09:30 and then off we'd go into the Vesseys' property along the Roper River to shoot wild ducks and geese. We'd fish, and camp out. And Ben was there with his little camp oven, and he'd say, "Do you want a goose or a duck?" You'd get the whole lot, and have a real good feed. So, that's how we made up for the time working twenty four hours a day on the plant.

10:00 **It sounds like good times.**

Well, it was relaxing. You'd get sick of the noise and the heat of the engine room, and the toil of…it was hard work. And the danger; we were in danger all the time. So that was relaxing, and then we'd come back and get into it again. And so it went on.

10:30 As the Japs…as we started to get ascendancy over the Japs they decided we should be further up north to save all the travelling with the cylinders. So, they decided to move us. The boss said we should get near a camp somewhere, where we didn't have to do our own cooking. They sent us a cook, but he was hopeless. He was dirty and he was hopeless. And he was deaf – deaf as

11:00 a post. He'd been in action somewhere and…but he was a nice lad, only young, only a boy. But he was hopeless as a cook. In fact, we ended up feeding him. But we kept him there, the boss kept him there as an extra hand. Of course, we dispensed with that when we got up to Adelaide River.

11:30 So we packed up shop and moved north. I've got a photo of us there, travelling up the Stuart Highway.

**This would be Mataranka? How long were you there for?**

I wouldn't like to say. I wouldn't like to guess. Some months. Three, four, five months. I can't remember exactly.

**So what was the main reason you were moving?**

To get the cylinders nearer to Darwin. See, there's a big difference in transport. And the 9 Stores Depot had moved up to Darwin – they were right in Darwin.

12:00 Everything was operating in Darwin. Down where we were though, Mataranka was just a passing-through place. They had an abattoir there, which was good. We had electric grinders and that sort of thing, so we sharpened their knives for them. They'd bring their beer down.

12:30 We'd made up a coil, just a copper coil, and you'd put a bottle of beer in the coil and turn the liquid air on like that, and you'd give it back to them frozen solid. So by the time they got back to camp it had thawed out and they could have a beaut cold beer. That was popular. And they'd give us a bit of cut meat – you know, a steak. Our mail used to come via Don R [despatch rider] – the army used to look after that. And we didn't need any money, of course,

13:00 because there was nothing we could purchase. When the boss used to go to Darwin – he had to go to Darwin a lot to get supplies, like the silica gel and the rock caustic, and any spares we wanted for belts and motors – he'd take the truck up to Darwin, to the 9 Stores Depot.

13:30 So we'd go up there and bring it back. On one occasion there was an air raid. It was the only air raid I was ever in. Well, we were there and we got a red [alert]. And that's where I heard the Japs, like I was telling you about earlier. I said to my mate, "They're not our aircraft. Let's get going." Our motors run out of synchronisation, not like those planes. We tried to get out of Darwin quick. They were hitting something.

14:00 But we got out all right.

**Why do you think the Japs ran their motors out of sync?**

Yeah, they were out of synchronization, they'd go, "boom – boom – boom – boom." That's how they sounded to me. I don't know, I could never work

14:30 it out; see, it could be that twin aircraft in those days…the propellers, see, they spun in opposite directions. Whether the Japs had them spinning the same way and offsetting the tail to compensate for that, I don't know. That might do it though. I never had a look at a Zero. One time I was very curious to

find out. But that would do it, if the

15:00 motors were running the same way. That would accentuate it. Anyway, they weren't on the same beat, if you know what I mean. One motor was running faster than the other. Of course, when you've got them both running like that the aircraft is running against the thrust, you have to adjust your trimmers to bring the aircraft back straight again. Funny things like that.

15:30 **How often did you go into the stores department?**

Not too often. This day, we got out pretty fast. A funny thing happened. There were these big black Americans. They were the drivers of these big autocars. They had these autocars, like us. It was good for running through the bush, especially for breaking up the tea-tree for firewood. It would just knock them down. As soon as the siren started going – they were in front of us – these two trucks and suddenly, you should have seen them go. They just had the prime mover.

16:00 They didn't know we were driving behind them. When you were going into Darwin over the Daly Street Bridge, you turn and go along the railway line. You had to look, to see if there were any trains. Huh, these fellows were that scared, they didn't turn. They went straight down on the railway line.

16:30 And the other one went straight down too. I looked back to see what had happened. I could see the pair of them, I could practically see their eyes. They were making for Stuart Park and the bay and the scrub. They were that scared. And there's the two prime movers down there. I don't know how they got them back again. Jap damage, they did to themselves.

17:00 But they had that much equipment, it was unbelievable.

**The sort of stores, did you need to go and pick up?**

Not for provisions. At Mataranka we had to go for bully beef and AI, and anything the boss could scrounge – a tin of fruit, occasionally. Stewed fruit, pears, peaches, things like that. They were beautiful; they never varied. You'd go and buy it from the canteen.

17:30 That was 34 miles from Darwin – you'd go in there and buy it. They couldn't issue it to you, that was terrible. No, we did all right. And we used to go out to Marrakai and Naremboi [?] – they were two inland areas – they were banana plantations. And pineapples, and stuff like that.

18:00 But, you had to go out there before night, because they wouldn't go and cut bananas for you then. We'd take the ute, and get three or four big bunches of bananas; then hang them up in the tent with hessian over them to keep them dark, and they'd last a long time. Things like that. We had a lot of watermelon too. There is a bit of a story about that I'll tell you later on.

18:30 And of course, we'd catch a lot of fish. They were pretty good for tucker. When we moved to Gorrie – to Adelaide River – to be near 4 RSU…7 RSU were there as well, but they were just pulling out. I have never met one of them here, they were all West Australians.

19:00 4 RSU, that's Replenishing and Servicing Unit, but we just pulled in there, about a quarter of a mile away from the camp near a hill. That suited to us, because there was another little hill up the back that we could run up with fuel; instead of having to pump the fuel, we laid pipes so we could run it by gravity.

19:30 We set it up pretty well there. We managed to get some timbers from Darwin; some good timbers instead of bush timbers, for the racks. We had a good setup there. It was very good at Adelaide River.

**What as at Adelaide River?**

This RSU was there – thousands of troops.

20:00 What is now the Adelaide River War Cemetery was a pretty open stretch along the river, just off the highway. There was a hotel there. It was an officer's mess during the war. That's where they had an open air theatre. And you could see, in the horizon, the dust of them coming for the open air theatre. They'd come from thirty or forty mile away.

20:30 You'd bring your own chair – these folding chairs we had – you could sit on those. Even if it was teaming with rain it didn't matter; you'd sit there with this cape thing over you, with just your eyes showing. And the water was that deep flowing alongside of you, but you'd still sit there and watch the pictures.

**What kind of pictures were popular?**

Oh, Westerns and things like that. Whatever the Yankees liked. But

21:00 anything was worth seeing because, of course, there was no television there. And another bonus, there they had the biggest mango trees you've ever seen there. I loved mangoes. And these ones had a particular taste. It didn't matter how many troops were there, you could always get a mango. You'd be sitting there,

21:30 eating a mango; you'd peel the skin off and you'd be sitting there with this squashy stuff all over, and it would be raining, and you'd just put your hands out and wash it off in the rain. They were free; you'd

just go and get them. Good tucker!

**What about the actual river?**

On the way up there…see, this is worth mentioning…

22:00 we went…see, in the dry season you'd go down the riverbank and ford it. But in the wet season when the river was flowing, you'd go up the line and cross it with the railway bridge. You had to watch out there was no train coming. When we came there – I happened to be driving – and we came down to Adelaide River to ford it. Well, I got up the

22:30 other side, and I could not see where I was going. It was raining that hard. I pulled up and – Ben was sitting alongside me – and I said, "Ben, I can't see where we're going." Of course, the others were in the truck and the ute. They'd gone on somewhere, ahead of us. We were on our own, though we all knew where we were going.

23:00 And the boss, he was in the ute, following. We stopped, so he stopped. Anyway, it was teeming with rain and we couldn't see to drive, so we had a sleep. I woke up and there was this unbelievable roar outside. I thought, "What the goodness is that?" Now, just overnight while I was asleep – it was only a couple of hours, because you didn't sleep that long when there was trouble about – anyway, not far from the back of where the trailer was

23:30 the water was – sixty-five feet the river had come up; sixty-five feet! There was cattle hanging up in the trees – you'd look up like this and there's a steer up in the tree. Of course the water was only shallow underneath them, but when it all went down, that's where it had left him. It came up that fast it was unbelievable. Just floods for miles. Then as quick as it come up, it drops down again.

24:00 So we were very fortunate we'd got to the other side. The truck was twenty ton and we'd have had to push it. They wouldn't have liked that on the railway bridge. We would have got it over, because with the big tyres and the small tracks…so we were lucky; we just got over in time.

24:30 It was only a few miles on from there to Pell Strip, a little north of Adelaide River.

**What was that?**

Pell Strip at Adelaide River. That's where we set the plant up. That was near 4 RSU at Pell Strip. The strips were alongside the highway, to camouflage them up. The Spitfires and Hurricanes or whatever would land on the strip like that,

25:00 and then go straight in under cover, so no surveillance from air could find them. There was Truscott – named after Bluey Truscott – and…oh, I forget the names of the strips, now. They were pilots that had lost their lives.

**What did you see in Darwin?**

Bombed out wrecks in the harbour. It was full of ships. You could go

25:30 anywhere. It was devastated. It was terrible. The surprising thing was that a lot of the officers had got in there early – in these homes, in these beautiful homes that hadn't been damaged – and they were there with ropes strung up with their washing on them. You know, things like this that you would see in …no, it was terrible.

26:00 The carnage…the bank there; half the bank was blown away. The post office, of course, and even the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]…you had to go past the RAAF to get to Darwin itself, and they'd pelt the RAAF a bit. Fortunately, the road was all right. They got quite a few aircraft there. But they had Wirraways there then.

26:30 And they sent them up. But Wirraways, jeez…they shot 'em down like peas; they shot 'em down. They had anti-aircraft guns and all, but they had nothing. Of course the Japs didn't bomb the hotel. That was going to be their headquarters. They were flying in at tree-top height and knew what they wanted. They were going to use the Darwin Hotel as their headquarters when the invasion came.

27:00 Of course, we got busy then, and Macarthur came into it, and we pushed them back.

**What do you think of the speculation that the Japs had no intention of invading Australia?**

That's not true!

**A lot of people contend that it is…**

Not true at all. An offer was made to Japan that they could have the top half – that's how serious it was. But they didn't accept it. They wanted the lot. Oh no. They had maps and they knew exactly where they were.

27:30 They bombed Fenton Field. They bombed down at Adelaide River, at 4 RSU where we were. But fortunately, over the back of the camp, some bright spark had got the idea there – there was a lot of rocky country there – and they drew the silhouettes of planes on the rocks. The Japs bombed that!

28:00 I wouldn't go into a slit trench. When that raid was on we were at Pell Strip. Everyone got the red and sirens were going, and everyone was rushing around telling the cooks to put the lights out. They were getting breakfast. Everyone rushed out and got in the trenches and that. But I just laid in the bush, looking for them. Then we got the all-clear. And this is where the hearing was handy. I said to Ben, "Don't go back yet; there's still one of them up there."

28:30 Ben said, "Nah, you're crazy." And I said, "No, I can hear him; still one there." So he's just about to tell me I'm crazy again, and BANG, just beside us, where they'd painted these aircraft on the rocks. They went for it. He dropped his bombs there. So after that, Ben knew I could recognize a Zero. And that was the only time I ever looked like getting damaged by enemy fire.

29:00 I was of no risk to the Japs, but the plant was.

**What was the demand on the oxygen plant up there?**

Tremendous. As much as we could produce they wanted it. Everyone wanted it. Everybody was crying out for it. See, when you consider the hospital usage alone, then there's the workshops that need it for welding and breaking;

29:30 and oxygen used for aircraft – every aircraft had an oxygen supply on it, because you can't get an aircraft that could fly above twenty thousand feet with oxygen. You just run out of oxygen. That's why the motors are boosted with a pressure to drive the air into the manifold; it won't draw in otherwise.

30:00 It's a vacuum, see. So you force it in, down the boost. That means that where a normal aspirated engine …see, my car would get say to seventeen thousand feet above sea level if it was lucky, but with a booster on it – a couple of pounds of boost to blow the air in – I might get it to say twenty-five thousand feet above sea level. For every foot you go above

30:30 sea level, you lose approximately half an inch of mercury. I don't know if you remember your schooling…at sea level you've got 14.7 pounds per square inch…so you could say, roughly, that at twenty-nine or thirty thousand feet you're in a vacuum, where you can float. No gravity, no nothing.

31:00 **So it was very important to have oxygen?**

Oh yes. Look, I'm not giving a lesson on this…it's just interesting to know. That's why the oxygen was necessary. See, when you get there…we were fortunate enough to go into a pressure tank at Melbourne University before we went up there. They wanted to show us the importance of what we were doing.

31:30 They arranged for us to go into a pressure chamber, and we sat in there looking at one another, doing nothing, and they reduced the pressure and reduced the pressure on us. We had a doctor in there with us of course. And he said, "Look at your fingers." And your fingers, at the quicks, would all be starting to go blue. He says, "All right, what I want you to do now is to write me a story

32:00 about where you come from. So he gave us all a pad and a pencil. And we didn't notice much. And then he says, "Now, carry on writing that story." In the meantime, every one of us had fallen unconscious. Suddenly we're waking up and we've got masks on. We didn't notice. And then he brought

32:30 us the writing we'd been doing, and you could see it was gradually getting ragged. We'd have died without the oxygen. So it was just an exercise to show us how it affects you. You just go to sleep and you don't wake up. And that's what it was for. Once you put the oxygen mask on, everything was right.

33:00 You didn't remember anything about what you'd done; you wouldn't believe when you looked and they showed you the writing. So it was done to us to impress the importance of the job we were doing. It sunk in – we knew!

**What was the morale like among the troops in the Northern Territory?**

Good. Never any worry about that. Everyone was doing everything they

33:30 could. The workmanship of the units was without question. There was a team effort all the way, believe me. There were a few rough heads of course – that's normal – but everybody was there to do a job and they were doing it well. That's not to forget the civilians as well. There was a civilian population there, looking after essential services; council workers and people

34:00 like that. They did a sterling job. And they were all giving the troops the benefit of their time, working harder than some of the troops, believe me. Yes, it was a tragic time for Australia.

**How did working in the Northern Territory compare to Queensland?**

Well, it was free, more free. There weren't as many troops about in the

34:30 area we were working in. We had the opportunity to move about more freely. And of course we had Australians around us, not foreigners. Even though we spoke the same language, they often couldn't recognize the things we wanted. That may sound strange, but normal talk between jokers was not always

35:00 acceptable to a foreigner. So that was a bit of a problem. They'd say, "So whaddya want, guy?" And you'd say…see, a spanner to us was a wrench to them…little things like that would become annoying at times, y'know. But it was much easier working in our own environment, with Australians.

35:30 **What is it about the Australians – aside from them being your fellow countrymen – that made them so likeable; such comrades and companions?**

Well, I can explain that truthfully because I know. It's the Australian ability to invent and to adapt. If something goes wrong

36:00 an Aussie will usually find a way to get over it. Americans will say, "Get us a new part." That's it in a nutshell. They used to look at you in amazement if something went wrong and you'd repaired or fixed it. They'd stand around all day waiting for a replacement part. And that's big difference. They're still the same today. It's best explained by…I said to

36:30 Mark, I said, "What does your father do?" This was Mark, the American. You remember I was talking about him earlier. He says, "He works at General Motors. He's got a laborious job." Of course in those years, when his father was employed,

37:00 the cars had a lot of woodwork in them. Woodwork in the bodywork. We're talking about Whippets and vehicles like that. The bodies had a lot of woodwork. So Mark says, "He's on the panel section; he stands there with a big brush and big pot of glue. As the things come down the assembly line he puts glue on this and glue on that. He's got a certain job to do." And he says,

37:30 "If they stop coming, he'll still be putting glue on till knock-off time." I said, "How long has he been doing that?" and he says "Quite a few years, and he's still at it." So, they'd get one job and never do anything else. Here, you'd go barley on that. You'd want another job.

38:00 No, they were quite content to do that. It seemed pretty typical of Americans in those years. So that explains that, I think.

**How innovative were the Aussies?**

Terrific, terrific. I've seen some amazing things done. They'd pull a diff out of a Mazda and put it in a Toyota or something like that. They could

38:30 do anything. Give them a welding rod and a cutter and they'd adapt something out of something. Even the bridge we had to go over at Adelaide River; there was a bit of a culvert there that was hard to get over in the wet season. Vehicles couldn't get through because the water was too deep. So one of the fellas there decided to make a bridge. They scoured round the bush

39:00 and scrounged timbers from Darwin and wherever they could. And this fella built this bridge. He'd never done it before, but he built this bridge. And when we went in, we took a look at this bridge. When we got there, Bill says, "Stop; we'd better check this bridge out to see if it'll take our truck." It was twenty-two ton, see.

39:30 So I jumped out to have a look at some of the structures under the bridge, and two blokes ran out. They were under there having a kip. Shady spot. So I said to them, "Hey, what do you reckon about this bridge? Do you reckon it'll take twenty-two ton?" And he said, "Hold on, I'll get you the sergeant who made it – we'll see what he says." So they brought this fella back, and he was a drill instructor. A sergeant drill instructor. He said we'd have no trouble.

40:00 And we didn't. We went across, no trouble at all. So that's adaptability. For a man who wasn't even a carpenter to build a bridge that'll take twenty-two ton. So for adaptability, I'd say we were pretty good.

# Tape 7

01:00 **Where did you pick up the oxygen plant from before you got to Mataranka?**

I thought I answered that, but never mind. Two fellas brought it round from Brisbane. Brisbane was the main port, of course, because Darwin was bombed out.

01:30 So they couldn't take it straight to Darwin, then state ships brought it from Brisbane to Darwin. On board, to look after it, and drive it, and tend to it, was Bertie Hoffman and our officer, Bill Miller. Now, of those of us there in the advanced party only one of us had met the officer. So when the transport boys went up to Darwin to bring it down,

02:00 There was the first time we met our officer. I didn't meet him till we got to Alice Springs and had a look at the plant. Of course, I'd seen the one in Brisbane…

**Was it the same?**

Exactly the same, yes, exactly the same. And that's when we met our officer. So he took charge, and

organized everything from there on.

02:30 **Did it require special attention when you were transporting it?**

No, not really, once it was packed up you'd just drive it. It was a pretty solid construction; it was all metal. No, no even the rough road didn't worry that.

03:00 **How many parts did it come in?**

When you set it up, the main accessory to it was a pipeline from the compressor. The other was a pipeline from the same compressor to fill the bottles. They had a lot of stuff packed around them when you were travelling

03:30 with eight or nine bottles, and the racks. You'd fill eight or nine bottles at a time; I forget how many. You had one side filling, and while they were filling you'd be changing the other side. A bit of a worry, of course, was the balloon as it started to fill up. You had to watch out for storms and stuff like that and tether it down. It was a big thing, thirty-three feet I think – thirty-three feet long and eighteen foot in diameter.

04:00 And of course, as we were sucking out of it, the machine was putting more in, so it was only those connections. All the rest was self contained. Your petrol line coming in, of course, we fixed that; we had that gravity pipe right over the machine. You just turned it on and filled it up.

**What, into the balloon?**

No, into the petrol tank. You couldn't connect it direct because of the static electricity – you might get a spark, see.

04:30 There were steel pipes coming down the hill. We were lucky, we had a lightning strike; just a hundred yards away. It just lit up a tree like a bonfire. I was just opening a kero fridge under a canopy to get a cool drink, and the flash practically blinded me. And I got a kick through my hand. Couldn't use it for while.

05:00 But it came good. The lightning struck the tree just across the road but it got me because I was by this tank full of water – this urn near the refrigerator. We used to keep cool water in there. We used that when the plant wasn't running, so we could have a cool drink. When the plant was running, we'd just take a line out of the machine and blow a bit if cool air there. That soon cooled it down.

05:30 **How did the weather conditions affect the running off the plant?**

Only in one way. In the wet season, the oxygen content of the air was greater. But you've also got the added thing of drying the air. You had to use dry air for the silica gel.

06:00 We had to watch that. We had to look at it, and if it were starting to get a bit coloured then we'd change it. It was a hard job to do in a sense. You just shut off the cylinders one at a time. You could still operate the plant comfortably but you couldn't change the caustic like that –

06:30 Once that started to go, once you had any trouble with that, then you had to shut down. Then you'd have to dig it out with a pick – it was horrible job. You'd have to knock it out with a crowbar; sticky, it was like toffee, and if it hit you then it'd burn right through you. Then you'd have to get water, straight away.

07:00 **What did it do to you?**

Burned. I've got little marks all over me, from wherever it hit me. Even though I jumped in the water, you know. There was no other way you could do it – we tried wearing protective clothing but it was too hot and too awkward; you'd swing the axe a few times, and you'd just fall over – in that heat and humidity, no…

07:30 And in the wet season we had to do it all under a cover, and that added to the hazard of it…

**What, having a cover over it made it more hazardous?**

No, but it made it more suspect to insects. When you've got something with a cover over it like that the moths and insects congregate in there

08:00 because they get sick of the rain – like we do, I suppose. Geckos and lizards and all those sorts of things.

**Did that cause any sort of hazard, or was it just annoying?**

No, no hazard at all; it was just annoying. Part and parcel of the job. The wet season had its good side though, because your oxygen production was improved

08:30 and you'd get up to twenty-two sometimes – when you'd take a reading of your input – being a humid day. You'd notice this sometimes on a wet day in the old days when you could hear your engines and motors. You might notice that you could negotiate a hill easier on a wet day, your car might just sail up there easier.

09:00 The reason being that on the intake you're getting a much higher oxygen flow. And that combusts. I'll give you some idea. We used to get a mirror and put it on the bottom of the column and put a little bit of oxygen on it. It looked blue, just like blue water

09:30 like you do your clothes with. And suppose there had been a bit of a fire going with some smoke coming from it. You'd think the fire was out, but if you tipped the oxygen on it then the whole thing would explode. See, the expansion rate is about eight hundred – that's eight hundred times. We had Bertie – one of the boys that was killed – doing some washing one day,

10:00 Washing some blankets in a big tub we had – a big washtub. He had these blankets in there and he was scrubbing them like that; and the boss – he got killed too – being a bit of a prankster said, "Let's give them an oxygen wash." They were advertising oxygen washes at the time. So he went and got some liquid oxygen out from the plant

10:30 and behind Bert's back he just quietly tipped it into the tub. And Bert's washing away, and suddenly he's looking up and down, and then the froth starts rising up and up and covering him; and soon it's nearly as high as him. And he's standing there scratching his head trying to work out what's going on. And, you know, he never found out, because the next day he was dead.

11:00 **So it was just a bit of a practical joke?**

Yes, a practical joke. So that's the liquid to air expansion rate; about eight hundred times. So if you've got a square inch of liquid, it'll expand into an eight hundred inch square.

**I'm not clear about this great big balloon. Why couldn't you just use a tank?**

No, it couldn't be a tank because of condensation.

11:30 And transporting it. We were a mobile unit. And it had to be pure of any moisture or anything like that. It had to be really pure. And the balloon is what we had. Of course, you'd feed into that, and it was drawing out at the same time. You didn't only fill it up once. Once it was full you'd have to cut that compressor off, purge the oxygen,

12:00 and connect it up to the filling station and get that going. Then you're filling with the other big compressor. They were big, powerful motors running there. You couldn't stay in there too long. If you stayed in there too long you'd get dehydrated, y'know. So you'd go in and check a gauge or something, and then get out of there as quick as you can. It was extremely hot and noisy.

12:30 But everything worked all right.

**Did the noise get to you?**

No, no. I'm a little bit deaf now, but I've been around noisy engines all my life. No, I was only twenty-one. I don't think you heard noises as much as what elderly people are worried with today. With boiler-making, I was banging with hammers, and clanging. Much more noise than what people get today. Of course, we were out in the free

13:00 air, and that seemed to alleviate much of the problem.

**You mentioned that the oxygen plant was a mobile plant; how long did it take to pack up?**

Oh, we'd pack it up in a day and be on the road. There wasn't much too it if you were organised. There was a place for everything, and by the time you got everything packed away…yeah, one day and you're off.

13:30 **You wouldn't move around very much, would you?**

It wasn't much designed to put in one day here, one day there. You could shift it if necessary to a more vital spot – like we did – to where it was required. And it was very good in that respect.

14:00 The prime mover and the actual unit itself was marvellous, absolutely marvellous. Great to drive, and everything else. Yes, it was very well set up.

**What was your communication like with larger bases so you could have incoming information?**

Like, you mean, on the plant itself?

**If you needed to be moved to another location, say?**

Oh, well our officer would be advised. He was the one in control. He'd know what…we had had nothing to do

14:30 with the paperwork at all. Not with stores, nor orders, or cylinders, or if there was a special raid going on and we needed to provide special sorts of cylinders – he had all that information. Anyway, it was classified. We weren't aware of anything like that. We'd just

15:00 get it going and make as much oxygen as we could. If we had to shift position, then that was his decision – he'd just say one day, "Well, we're going to pack up and move." At Mataranka, I'd have stayed there all the war. That was beautiful. We had a beautiful situation there, and we were well set up. But no, they decided…

15:30 Of course, 9 Stores Depot was at Gorrie early on. Picking up stores, going by road, transferring things from rail – I never had much to do with them myself, but they always seemed to fit into the picture. Then as they moved the Japs north, they shifted the trucks – instead of the rail – the trucks would just keep going straight to Darwin. See, it was a bitumen road. Actually, there was going to be a concrete highway

16:00 and they had a big machine there that they'd brought out. It was designed to start at Darwin, and trucks would just back up and keep filling it, and it was supposed to lay highway until it got to Alice Springs. Every day, day and night, laying a concrete highway. It would have been beautiful. But not too far out from Darwin it ended up lying on the bottom of the ocean, along with hundreds of tons of concrete. The Japs got it. So that had to bitumise it, then.

16:30 **Now, Pell airstrip – that's north of Adelaide River. But where actually were you relocated to? Was it Pell strip or Adelaide River?**

Pell strip.

**So how were you getting your supplies?**

We'd go to Darwin for anything we wanted for the plant. We were being catered for – meals and tents and everything – by 4 RSU. I did mention earlier that there was a much bigger camp there. 4 RSU and 7 RSU were there.

17:00 7 RSU had just moved out, so there was plenty of room to locate us there. It was a reasonable camp, believe me.

**Were you out on your own, or a part of the camp?**

Yes, in a sense we were…if I had been a sergeant or something it wouldn't have been so bad. But I was only a corporal. You had no sergeants' mess, and the hours you worked didn't condone you being with

17:30 a workmate all day and things like that. Whereas at 4 RSU they were in groups. They had fellas that dealt with this part or stores, and fellas that dealt with that part. They had their groups. We had a group of eight, and we were answerable to no one, not even the service policemen.

18:00 **Well, that's a bit of a boy's adventure, isn't it?**

He didn't like that, the SP. He was a nasty fella. No one liked him either. Of course, he had a lousy job to do. He fancied himself as a fighter, too. He was…all right, I'll tell this story…he fancied himself a fighter, and he built himself this

18:30 ring. You know, he had nothing to do and nothing to guard or anything. So he got ropes and timber and canvas and he built this ring. And he'd stand up there and shadow box with himself and that. And I used to smirk when I went past. One day I was going up to the canteen or something, and I walked past and he's showing off and that,

19:00 and he says, "Come up here and have a go, Kirby, you squib." Well, I must have been in a bit of a cranky mood, because I ducked up under the ropes and put a pair of gloves on. And I give him the greatest hiding he ever had. I purposely cut him about the face. It was open slather. And, you know, he couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag. Now, I wasn't a very good boxer, but I thought, "Don't you call me no squib."

19:30 So I knocked him right out of the ring. Nearly killed him. He never spoke to me again; never looked at me again. I got rid of him. But it was a stupid thing to do, because I could have killed him. It was just one of those things. I was fit as a buck – I had a job to do and I had to be fit for it. So he got his just deserts. I doubt he called anyone a squib again.

20:00 **When you were at Pell Strip, who exactly were the blokes with you operating the oxygen plant?**

Hang on, I'll just get the list. The main engineer was a fella named Ron Clifford from Byron Bay – he was a sergeant. A fella joined us in Alice Springs when we were there; he wasn't an original member. He was a Fitter 2E like myself,

20:30 and a corporal – that was Harry Armstrong from Melbourne. There was myself, only an LAC at that time. There was a flight sergeant from Transport, a driver named Alf Mildren. Alf came from Albury in New South Wales. There was an AC1, also from Transport, and that was my mate

21:00 Ben Champion. Ben was from around Leeton somewhere in New South Wales. He mentioned Leeton quite often.

**Ben was with you the whole time, wasn't he, from square one?**

Yes. He was me mate all the way, and a wonderful fella. And also there was a West Australian, Pat Hennessy. I think he was a country lad, and he

21:30 had his twenty-first birthday with us there. We put on a bit of a party for him. A very nice lad he was too. He come from some country area near Perth, and he was in Transport. There was Bert Hoffman. I'm not too sure of Bert's mustering, because he was a Queenslander. He was fine young fella – I say 'young fella'…he was very active,

22:00 and he had a couple of girls he thought the world of, and a wife. And the other one was Cyril Richards. He came from Melbourne and he was a Fitter 2A or 2E. He was a technical man. So that made up the main crew when the machine

22:30 was operating. We did get fellas to come in at certain times if we got extremely busy. Then we'd bring in a general hand. Either from 14ARD or from another camp. The boss would go and get someone.

**So it's a pretty small crew that you're dealing with there?**

Yes. That was the core of the crew.

23:00 **You were telling us earlier about the extraordinarily bad day. Was it Bill that was going to be leaving to sort out the cylinders?**

That's right. We got to the stage where Bill had sent a telegram to his wife – that's Flying Officer Miller – and he came up

23:30 to the plant about daylight – say, nine o'clock. Apparently – on reconstruction – Bertie Hoffman was on the rack, filling, and he must have had trouble with the cylinder in the dark, or rather, in the dim light that we had

24:00 there. The light was restricted because of the possibility of air raids. He couldn't seal it up from leaking. So, he disconnected it, put another cylinder on the rack, and put the leaking one to one side, not far away. Well, fair enough, that was OK. Now, on reconstruction, Bill called at the plant on his way out to see if everything was all right. He was on his way

24:30 to fly down to Melbourne…Bertie told him about the problem he had with the leaking cylinder. He told him how he couldn't seal it and that. This was a reconstruction, and I'll tell you in a while I can reconstruct it so well. So, apparently, the pair of them are looking at this cylinder, and whether they observed that it was an acetylene cylinder or not we'll

25:00 never know. But it was, and I'll prove that to you presently. And someone, somewhere, had tapped the left-hand thread – which is normally the top on an acetylene cylinder – with a right hand thread. Now, if anyone had said to me, as an engineer or mechanic, that you could do that, I'd say, "No,

25:30 the thread would pull out." I wish I kept it. That head was found, and handed to me, down on the airstrip. I looked at it and could see nothing wrong with it. It looked quite normal. Yet I could screw a right hand thread into it, and I could screw a left hand thread into it. No, I don't care what engineer tells me that was impossible, but it was done.

26:00 And they must have got some oxygen into that cylinder, and the heat of the morning sun coming up had built it into a pressure. Now, it was obvious because the injuries sustained – hands off and feet off and faces blown off – they must have been leaning over it, sniffing for acetylene, while Bert cracked the valve to see if there was any acetylene there. And immediately they disturbed it, it just blew them to pieces.

26:30 I heard the bang. I had knocked off at about 2.00 AM, and was lying there on my bunk, and I heard the bang and I raced straight… I immediately thought, "That's the plant." I got up there and could see this big cloud of dust and everything, and I could see Bill Miller…moving, something was moving there, injured. I jumped in the truck and almost ran over Bert Hoffman. I almost didn't see him lying there.

27:00 But I raced down to the hospital with the horn blaring and grabbed the doc and got him in the vehicle, and back up to the plant to unload him. Then I raced round the back and there was Cyril Richards – another one of the operators – he was walking around in a daze. So I got him and led him round to the doc. Then I went into the panel, where we controlled the apparatus, and our best engineer – Ron Clifford – was there

27:30 trying to juggle pressures and temperatures. I had the dickens' own job trying to get him out of there. "Get out of there!," I said, "It could blow up." Anyway, I took him down to the doc and left him. Then I went back. Because that was on the road, and they wouldn't come any further than that. I went back then, I started to shut everything down. You know, if the whole place went up…it would have been a big explosion.

28:00 Yes, well. From there on in, I must have been in shock. I remember we had the funeral – a day or two days later. I remember going to the funeral. And then the next thing I know I'm in Darwin as a guest of the army's Small Ship Company. At Larikea [?], which I loved. And they made me Second Engineer on the brigadier's launch, working out on the launch.

28:30 And I'm thinking, "What am I doing here?" I don't remember how I got there or who took me there. But there I was. And the brigadier came on board and he says, "G'day," to me, and he walks past me…I mean, I'm air force and now I'm on…the officer that was in charge of the Leyla, which was a pleasure boat the army had commandeered and converted into

29:00 a barge. See, the Army Small Ship Company used them to run out to the islands for the DF stations, and for carrying supplies and things like that. That's what the Small Ship Company was doing at Larikea. How I got there was…the fact that the officer who arranged for me to go there, we'd fixed up the compressed air for the launch before. It was a brute of a thing to start,

29:30 and we'd helped them with it one time before. We had to complement the tank on the boat with a special cylinder filled with compressed air for this. That made it easy. Anyway, in return he'd grabbed me and Cyril Richards, the sergeant…at the time of the explosion he was drinking grog in the sergeants' mess, I know that for a fact and…

30:00 But I don't remember after that, until I'm walking home in uniform with my corporal's stripe on. My daughter comes down to meet me at home in Maryborough, and she says, "Dad, Dad, Dad," and then she runs back to Mum. Now, I cannot remember anything else about that time. Hardly a thing. I have this faint recollection of an army officer

30:30 taking me out to Mataranka to look at the old camp site. Why I don't know. When we went out there, where we'd eaten our watermelons and stuff, there were hundreds of them growing there. Watermelons! You've never seen anything like it. We filled up his utility

31:00 with watermelons and went back to the road. Then we stopped the first convoy that came along, and you should have seen these boys getting into those watermelons with their bayonets.

**So what you're saying about these watermelons…**

…is that they just germinated and grew, yes.

**But you were actually away for quite some time and didn't realise?**

Yes, twelve months.

31:30 **So you literally lost twelve months of your memory, of your life?**

No, no. This was the twelve months between Mataranka and the accident. We went from Mataranka to Adelaide River. I was going through Mataranka. There was a hotel there that was called the Dew Drop Inn. It was just an officers' quarters. Later on, post-war, when I was doing the mail run from Alice Springs to Darwin

32:00 I used to stop there. You'd be overnight there with tourists. So I got to know the area pretty well.

**How much memory did you lose after the accident?**

I don't know. No idea. I must have been functioning normally, but I can't recall any of it. I've tried to put the whole lot of it out of my mind.

32:30 See, I've had no one to discuss it with, and never met anyone from the plant since. They were all away, and then I had marriage troubles and things like that…I've tried to forget about it.

**But it's interesting that you actually realised that you had memory loss…**

Well, I couldn't figure out how I got to Darwin. I kept thinking, "How did

33:00 I get here?" I couldn't think. He must have taken me up in his ute, I guess. Why did he do that? Maybe the doc recommended it – maybe he thought I'd seen something and needed a change, I don't know. It was strange. I didn't need an escort, and I didn't need anyone to take me back home. But I can't recall any part of it.

33:30 But there it is. I've tried to recall just one part of it, and I can't.

**How many fellows actually died with that accident?**

Two. The doc couldn't do anything for Bill. He was gone, just moving. Now, I'd like to put on the record that we tried to…we went to the adjutant and tried to stop the telegram

34:00 that Bill had just sent – five minutes before – to his wife, to expect him home. Because she could have received that telegram at the same time as she had a policeman at the door, telling her he was dead. And we wanted to avoid that. They couldn't stop it, and that was annoying, very annoying.

**Heartbreaking…**

Yes, well, they're both buried in Adelaide River Cemetery.

34:30 I've got slides of the graves there, with their numbers on them and things like that. Later on, I had the

idea when I came to Perth that I would try to contact the families. But I got jellied over the idea because I got a job with Ansett and then went back with them in M&A Airlines.

35:00 That's Miller Airlines. I thought that this fella may have been connected with Bill Miller's family, and I wasn't going to compromise myself in my job. So that sort of kept me away from it. I didn't have the courage to do anything about it, and I've never contacted them. I had the slides, and I wanted to show them in case they didn't know they were there.

35:30 But unfortunately I've never had the courage to do it.

**But still, from a military point of view, it's not your duty to do that…**

I couldn't do it. They were two of the finest fellows I ever met. It was very sad, when it could have been avoided. Now, he was going down to get

36:00 some equipment that could have protected us from exactly that sort of thing. But he got caught with it. Tragic. It could have been anyone on the rack doing that. Any one of us could have grabbed that cylinder and put it on. If it had blown up earlier it might have hurt one of them to some degree.

36:30 But the shrapnel must have gone a long way, because somehow, I don't know who, someone presented me with the top of the cylinder, and you could clearly read the letters, "A-C-E." There's no A-C-E in oxygen. And when I looked at that – in Maryborough, when I went back home – I put that bit of shrapnel and the valve top in an old wash house.

37:00 You know, an old wash house with a copper and that. And when my marriage broke up, well, I never went back there, never picked it up. The house is pulled down now. So I didn't want to have any part of it I guess.

37:30 It was an acetylene cylinder. It should never had been done. Someone had tapped it out, and that had killed them. It was a miracle that it could have been done.

**But still, in the end, it caused a very large accident?**

It caused it. I don't know what the inquiry found out. I had to front the enquiry. I remember being at the inquiry – in whatever state it was – and I remember the officer

38:00 saying, "You should get a recommendation for a bravery award for this." And I said, "I don't want it, not a damn thing." I annoyed him. I never got it anyway and I didn't want it. Someone had to shut it down. The commanding officer, he never went near it. Wouldn't even walk on the same side of the road, it was so dangerous.

38:30 Manufacturing oxygen – very dangerous. Even a hair out of your head would set it off.

**When you got home, was the war actually over at that point?**

No. I went back to Laverton. I was a corporal then and I was put in charge of a Cleaning Section. They'd pull the motors to bits when they'd done their hours, to check them. And I was still playing in the band.

39:00 But it wasn't too long after that I was discharged.

**And had the war in Europe ended at that point – when you were back at Laverton?**

Yes. I was discharged in 1946 – full discharge – I've got the certificate there, if you're interested. Eligibility for medals…never collected them. I didn't want them.

39:30 **It sounds like you didn't want to have anything to do with the war after it was over?**

No. I felt so badly about those poor fellows. If they had been killed in action, OK. But not that way. Particularly under the circumstances – he was joyful, all dressed up ready to go home…blown to pieces.

40:00 **So how difficult did you find it getting back into something that resembled a normal life?**

I was a bit negative to unions. I got a job with Patience & Nicholson, and then this fella came round and wanted me to join this union. And he must have thought I was crazy because I barked at him. I said, "Look, don't tell me what I have to do." They sent a fella up to try and talk me into staying there, because I was

40:30 such a good worker. Finally the boss came up and said, "Stan, we're in trouble. The firm's going to be punished." He said, "I'm not going to sack you, but…you can stick here as long as you like, but we're in trouble." I said, "I don't want to be a burden to the company. I'll resign."

41:00 And after that, when I started a taxi service, they were one of my best customers. I even made money out of them.

**It's interesting that you still maintained your principles…**

Well, it didn't seem right to me that I'd come back and I couldn't get my pay in my hand. I had to give it

away to unions, for instance. I said to the union bloke, “You’re telling me what you’ve done in the past; what are you going to do now?” I didn’t like the collecting. I still don’t like it. They’re like kids at school forming a collection thing and waving banners

41:30 and I just don’t agree with it. Protest marches and these sorts of things. No, I’m not for that at all.

# Tape 8

00:30 **So what happened when the oxygen plant was closed down and you were moved back to Melbourne?**

Well, this is a bit of a dull area. I can’t remember going back to that plant, or repairing any part of the plant. I can’t remember seeing it even in a state of disrepair. Once I’d shut it down and been to the funeral of the boys and everything like that,

01:00 I can’t remember. Whether I had to go back to do something there, I don’t recall. It’s completely blocked out of my memory. I don’t remember who authorised me to move to the Small Ship Company and I don’t remember coming down from Adelaide River

01:30 to Melbourne. I don’t remember much until such time as I was on leave. The first thing I can remember is when my little daughter – who was born when I was away – spoke to me. She said, “Dad, Dad, Dad,” then she turned on her heel and ran away. She didn’t much like the look of me. That’s when I started to get back to normal.

**How would you explain that loss of memory?**

I didn’t want to remember it.

02:00 No medical reference was ever made to me about that. Whether I could have remembered in those years, I don’t know. But now I can’t. It’s not there, there’s nothing I have to tell you.

**What happened when you got back to Melbourne?**

02:30 After I had to leave, I went back to work just as normal. I played in the band, and of course there were all these victory marches. And playing one day, I suddenly got notice that my discharge was effective. So I got out altogether.

03:00 **Where were you when you heard the news that Japan had surrendered?**

I was walking along a road near the hangers at Laverton and the news came over an outdoor broadcasting system. A West Australian fellow named Col Meech grabbed me – he was a drummer in

03:30 the band – I used to play in the dance band as well. He said, “Come on, let’s go over to the dance hall.” So we went over to the dance hall. They had big gymnasium that was used as a dance hall. Someone was on the piano and I went and got my trumpet out of the trunk, and we got a dance going. And I played and played until I was so tired then I just folded. I

04:00 went back and got into bed, And it was such a relief to know that the prisoners of war were coming home.

**Were the parties wild?**

Yes, they were pretty wild; there was grog and everything. They tried to get some into me but I wouldn’t have any of it. I wasn’t against drink; I’d have a glass of beer now and then but only when I wanted to – not when someone else forced me. I’m still pretty much the same today. Even

04:30 though I did have a hotel at one time. But that’s nothing to do with this interview, and no sooner was I there than twenty pairs of hands grabbed me and dragged me up there to play again. I was dead beat. I think I fell asleep up there on the stage. I blew my heart out up there, I was so pleased. And this fellow Col Meech, he was a lively cricket player, and he was jumping all the time, I remember that. It was such a relief to know it was all over.

05:00 **How long after that was it before you were discharged?**

Not that long. It was pretty quick, because I had a couple of children. But getting a job wasn’t the easiest. I was granted a training course for National Cash Registers. I thought that this would be interesting.

05:30 It was written on the discharge papers that I could go for this, and I thought I would see about this. I thought that in Maryborough I could open a shop repairing cash registers and typewriters. I was qualified to do that, or at least would have been with training. They were training them at a National Cash Registers.

06:00 So I went back down to Melbourne to look this over, see. So I was walking up the steps of the National

Cash Register office and I saw this fellow coming down. He said, “You look like an ex-serviceman,” and I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Are you here about this training scheme?” I said, “Yes,” and then he said, “Forget it, mate, they are just using us for cheap labor.

06:30 I’ve been here for three weeks and I’ve learned nothing. It’s waste of time.” He seemed genuine, so I turned on my tail and walked out of there.

**So what did you plan to do next?**

Well, I got this job at Patience & Nicholson. When I resigned from that…see, it was very hard to get a taxi in Maryborough if you wanted to.

07:00 See, I lived on one side of the railway line, and the town was on the other; and the cabs wouldn’t go across the line because the gates were shut most of the time. They were hand-operated wind-up gates. Now, the old bloke who was running the taxies was a grumpy old fellow

07:30 And during the war – he was a retired insurance executive – he got a taxi license and started it up to help people and run them around during the war. He charged two shillings for a trip around the town. Just elderly people who wanted to go out to the post office or something like that – Mr. Dixon, he’d pick them up. The garage had a taxi of course, but when the garage closed at five o’clock

08:00 there was none. So Mr. Dixon carried it on; now, I went and saw him – I got a lift with him or something, and I said in passing, “I’m out of work.” And he said, “Why don’t you take this taxi off my hands.” And I said, “That’s a good idea, I’ll think about that.”

08:30 I never had the brains to go to War Service and get a loan or anything like that. I only had about a hundred pound to my name, and my wife, as fast as she’d get the money she’d get rid of it. I was away and had a big allotment, and…I don’t want to speak bad of her, because she only died a few weeks ago …she wasn’t much of a manager. She had a brother who had been a prisoner of war, and she’d dote on him; she was spending money on him,

09:00 and the kids were pretty well looked after…anyway, I didn’t have much money and he said that I could pay him off as I got it. And then my father-in-law said that he had two hundred pound that I could have. I was delighted, and so I bought the car and license from him. It was pretty cheap buy for a 1936 Plymouth.

09:30 So I started. I got a phone installed – it only took one day because they were trying to help me – and I got a sign printed out which I put on a corner in the main street and then I sat at home waiting for the phone to ring. I had a map of Maryborough on the wall near the phone so I could find out where people

10:00 wanted to go – I didn’t know Maryborough all that well. So, it was two bob around the town. We had trains coming in at midnight – that was the Mildura Express, and that came back into Maryborough at 3.00 AM on its way to Melbourne. There was sometimes passengers to go on that; and there was a train coming in at 10 o’clock from the branch line at Castlemaine

10:30 on the Bendigo line across to Maryborough, and that left at 6:00AM. So if you wanted to go to Melbourne by train, then you could only leave at the three o’clock or six o’clock in the morning. So that meant I was picking people up for the train at all hours. Midnight and three o’clock and six o’clock, plus I was doing work during the day. I didn’t get much sleep in a bed.

11:00 A lot of it was up in the luggage rack at the railway station. The clerk at the railway station was a fellow named Frank Pascoe, and his father was the station master. You know, Frank Pascoe finished up working as the head of Ansett Transport Industries. And a very fine fellow he was too. He had married a girlfriend of my wife.

11:30 My wife was a very active girl; she played basketball very well, and…was a very nice girl really. Just … we had a bit of a difference and she got mixed up with another fellow and had a baby to him… it wasn’t mine. And that skittled the marriage.

**How far into the relationship was…?**

No, no. I don’t want to discuss that.

12:00 Now, the taxi service went very well. I finished up with all the mail runs, and of course the passenger service. I had the trains to meet, and a contract to collect the films for the theatre – pick them up and take them to and from the station. I went from one to four cars.

12:30 I did very well. To take a crowd to Melbourne and back, that was ten pounds. You would leave at six o’clock in the morning – after I’d done the six o’clock train – and get back at five at night. Then, of course, I’d have the trains to do at night. So they can shop all day in Melbourne, or do business or whatever, and then be back at Maryborough around six thirty.

13:00 We’d leave Melbourne around five and be back to Maryborough about half past six. I used to charge two pound a head or ten pound for the car. Sometimes I wouldn’t have a full car, and other times I’d have someone to bring back from Melbourne. So that worked out very well, and I made a lot of money.

13:30 In one day there, I think my best takings were forty or fifty pounds. Which wasn't bad when the average wage was about five pound. Five pound a week. So I did very well. After that, I went into other businesses, but I think that's about all you're interested in…

**No, you can give us a quick overview of the other businesses if you like.**

14:00 Well, I got out of that, and my wife wasn't settling down very well, and everyone said I was working too hard; everyone said I would drop dead, I was working so hard; so I bought a hotel off another returned servicemen; I didn't have to buy him out, I could have run him off the road, but being the generous fellow that I was, I paid him twelve hundred pound and took his

14:30 younger brother on as a driver for me. I did that against all good advice, since it was said that he'd had a lot of trouble with the police. The garage fellow that did work for me said, "Don't have that Dave Moonee." The poor lad, his parents lived in a rundown shack, and his father at one time was called Pillar Moonee.

15:00 I don't know why. He had at one time run a hansom cab, but now, him and his wife were just drunkards. There is no other word for it. As soon as they got their pension…Les and his brother, they just had no upbringing. As soon as he got a job with me I dressed him in a nice, clean, grey coat – to hide his shabby clothes – and I got him to scrub up a bit; and every pension day

15:30 he had to go and pick his Mum and Dad up and bring them down the street for some shopping or boozing, and then after an hour take them home again. And that lad turned out a crackerjack. He turned out a great cabbie. Wally Grose – the garage proprietor – said to me one day, "What a difference you've made out of that Les. He's a thorough gentleman."

16:00 I'd been going to Melbourne on a trip, after doing the three o'clock train, and I'd grab a bit of breakfast before going, and on a cold winter's morning, here's young Les up at three o'clock washing the car with a hose. And it was icy. Did it for me; that's what he thought of me. He was an outstanding lad.

16:30 One of my customers was the local radio shop owner named Bill Holland. He was an amateur radio enthusiast. He's still alive today: 3XC. He couldn't drive. He didn't have a car and couldn't drive. So as soon as he'd want a radio picked up, I'd pick it up and deliver it for him. I never charged him. He was a friend.

17:00 In return, he bought up a lot of surplus gear – he was very talented in his shop – and he built me the first radio controlled cab in Australia. It won't show in the Guinness Book of Records, because Bill Holland was also generous to another taxi driver in

17:30 Castlemaine, who got the idea – a fellow named Pela. Pela got him to build a set that sat in the boot of the car, not built in like mine. Mine ran off the battery and had relays that showed when I picked it up and when someone wanted me. And he claimed that he got the first cab. Which was terrible, y'know. But I had the pick of all the frequencies –

18:00 VH3BD was the call sign I had to use. I installed it in my wife's sister's…she got married and had a small business which I helped them get into – and I installed the radio in there and John would take any messages and answer the phone

18:30 and give me the messages in the car. It would operate up to about nine miles out of town. It was very good. And of course it increased the popularity of the car, and was a boost to me. But my wife didn't see much of me. She was a bit unhappy because you'd get all sorts in the cab. I had a bloke who pulled a knife on me once. I had a baby born in the cab…got to the hospital and was washing the car out

19:00 with buckets. This was six o'clock in the morning. And the doc came out, yawning and stretching, and he said, "Stan, send in your bill – you did a good job." The baby went up the stairs and the patient went up the lift.

**You delivered the baby, did you?**

No, but I stopped at the place to pick her up – this lady,

19:30 at three o'clock in the morning, and she just stopped in her tracks and said, "The baby's coming!" I opened the car door for the lady and her bloke, and he said, "I'm not having the baby! Go!" He left me to it. We raced down the road and got to the railway line, and the gate were shut. I blasted the hell out of the gate operator, "Open those gates, we've got a baby coming here!" and I was…I didn't want to go up to the other gates, since they'd be shut too.

20:00 Anyway, he whipped the gates open and we got up to the hospital. I got her to hang onto the baby in her night dress. It was a good, healthy boy.

**What kind of car did you drive?**

Well, I said down in Melbourne that I wanted a better car. You couldn't buy a new car; they were all on the black market, see.

20:30 And I thought that I'd do something about this. Nash was uncrating cars in Melbourne. Have you ever

heard of a Nash car? Well, there's two models. The cheaper model was a four cylinder 600, and I sneaked in around the back and saw them. I thought, "That'd do me." I wanted a black one, but there was a blue one coming on, so the boys said, "Why don't you see the Distribution Officer and tell him your story? You've got to have a car

21:00 for your work, and you're a returned serviceman." So I did. And he said, "Stan, I don't know. But I'll see the boss. If anyone gets it, apart from where it's been allotted, it'll be you." I stayed down there two days waiting for it. Les and John – the brother in law – they looked after the business. I watched this car being built from scratch. Finally, the

21:30 boss comes up with his sheet and says, "This car's going to Ballarat." And I said, "No it isn't, you've made a mistake, it's going to Maryborough." And he said, "Who are you?" so I told him I was the owner of the car. And he said he no record of me, and I told him I'd been sitting around watching it getting built for two days because I needed it urgently for my taxi business. I told him I was a returned serviceman and should be having a say in the matter,

22:00 and then he looked at me and said, "You're bloody right, lad." He said, "Look, get that car and get out of here, quick." And did I ever. I wrote him a cheque for zł1050, and I think I had zł50 in the bank at the time. I knew my bank manager would cover me, because he was always saying, "Get another car Stan, get another car." I got it all right. So I was shivering my timbers up there because of the cheque, though. Anyway, it all worked out all right. And gee, it got me some business. It was a beautiful car. Nash 600, you wouldn't see them now.

22:30 then I bought a single Ford. There's photos of them in that album there. I'll show you after. I wasn't very impressed with the Ford. I had a bit of trouble with that. But then I sold out. I bought a service station in Ballarat and had a mechanic doing his own business there.

23:00 I just had the garage and the petrol and the greasing and things like that. Bought a house – not through War Services; I didn't know anything about War Services. The bank manager mucked something up and I was there, short of money, saying, "I want me money, I want me money!" I got fed up in the end and said I'd sell it out. Because I could sell it and pay the house off, and get a job at Tippet's or somewhere like that, and just work. I had a beaut house and a couple of kids, and a wife. One of my

23:30 customers came in though, and he said he had this little country hotel just out of Ballarat – at Snake Valley of all places. So we went out and had a look at it, and my wife fell in love with it. She said, "This would be good. I want it." So I said, "OK, you can have it." But I got in a dilemma. I found out after that the owner

24:00 had been selling beer to another hotel and putting it under his sales. He didn't make a cracker. I cleaned it all up and fixed the lighting, and was playing at dances to get money. And I was driving a bus, seven o'clock in the morning for that, and getting home at six at night; and waiting up at two o'clock in the morning for some after hours trading.

24:30 The police booked me a few times, because I wouldn't bribe them. Anyway. Finally, it got to the stage where my wife was running around playing tennis and – she was a very attractive girl – and she got mixed up with this fella. And the next thing, she's having a baby. That was the end of it. She went off and lived with this bloke, and left me…I just had to walk away from it. Then the brewery came at me

25:00 for money, and I finished up in debt. I wouldn't go insolvent, so I dragged a hundred pound out of the till and bought myself a car and went to Melbourne. I lived in the car down in Melbourne and got a job driving buses in Williamtown. I got lost on my first night, in the fog, in winter. Never mind, I'd got this job through a friend who had been the town clerk in Maryborough. I went and saw him because he had buses. Because I was driving

25:30 buses in Ballarat. I slept in the car for the first few nights, and didn't even have a smoke on me. I was picking up butts, and I was offered money, but I wouldn't have a bar of it. I was that hungry. Finally, come Friday he said, "I'd better give you some money, Stan." It was welcome. I went up to the Rifle Hotel and had a hot shower and washed my clothes under the shower. Then I looked for accommodation in a hotel. So I worked with him for a while

26:00 before I moved on from there. I thought, "There's a better job than this, at Sansford Pioneer." I thought that if I could get on that and run these tours then I'd have someone issuing me good meals. Because the hotel was only bed and breakfast – get your own breakfast – and counter lunch. There was nothing at night time. So I thought that I could do better than that. Got this job with Sansford Pioneer anyway, and finished up as one of their senior drivers.

26:30 I didn't like the snow, though; I wouldn't go up in the snow. But I did all the city sites – the penguin parade – and Phillip Island by the Hume. I did Adelaide by the Calder…not the Calder; the Western or whatever it was. And I did the coast road, and everything like that.

27:00 Later they took over the tourist business in Alice Springs – Stuart Tour – and I went up there to run KS5s out to Ayers Rock, past an old station owned by Bob Buck – I mentioned him earlier from when I was at Alice Springs. He was running a station there. And Mount Quinn; the Mount Quinn road,

27:30 that's a very sandy road running out to Ayers Rock, stopping at Angaston. Angaston was run by a fella

who found Ion Idriess…anyway. Then on to the Seven Brothers at Double Roger, out near Mount Connor, and then on to Ayers Rock.

28:00 We carried tents and swags and camped out there, then. We had a kitchen, and a cook, and we'd go climbing the Rock. The Stuart boys had put stones up there – there was nothing to pull yourself up back then. And then when Bill Harney came along, they built a hut for his Tourist Bureau there. I'd take the book up at the start of the season and show him who'd been up the Rock.

28:30 So I did that. Then I'd get on the mail run; a three day mail run to Darwin. it was overnight at Tennant Creek and overnight at Mataranka. They had a hotel by then, owned by a Mrs Marsden. Inga Marsden. She was tough lady, but I got on well with her. I was one of the few she'd let start up the lighting plants, so I'd have lights and water in the morning.

29:00 You'd turn on the taps in the morning and there'd be no water; especially if the goats had been in the trough she had there for the stock. They'd drink all the water. There were some funny things happened there. Then I used to do a run from Alice Springs to Darwin – a tour run – Darwin, back down to Tennant, Cloncurry, then up to Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria, then into Cairns.

29:30 Ten days that was. Then back I'd come again. I'd come down and work from Alice Springs to Adelaide on the Territorian, then across to Perth. And then back again. I'd leave Melbourne in April and get back in about November. I'd have a month's holiday in some nice sunny weather, and then by April next, I'd be gone again.

30:00 I was making good money, and I paid back all the money I owed, because I was hardly touching my wages. I was a good tour driver.

**What brought you to Western Australia?**

Well, I met Marie in Alice Springs. She was a tourist. She'd fallen out with her boyfriend and was very upset. She was a New Zealander. I met her, and I liked her.

30:30 I told her I was worried about the fellow, but she didn't listen. Anyway, she was worried and upset and she didn't know what she was going to do. So I told her, "Book yourself on the Territorian; get down to Melbourne, I know Melbourne. We'll get you a job in Melbourne and get you settled down there." She didn't want to go back to New Zealand – she wanted to stay in Aussie.

31:00 So she did that, and in time I got her settled in Melbourne, then I went back up north again. I had an old Holden car that she looked after for me, and I was flatting with a mate then. And when I came back I moved into the flat she had in St. Kilda, and we've been together ever since. We got married, and there you are.

31:30 **So why did you come to West Australia?**

Well, she came over with me on a trip when the Commonwealth Games was on in Perth. What was that …1960 something [1962]. Anyway. She came over to Perth and stayed at Forrest House for a while. And she liked Perth, so when she got back, and when I got back from up north –

32:00 I was a bit fed up, because I was still trying to make friends with my wife. She had the baby, and the bloke had kicked her out, and she was back in Melbourne. And my daughter had gone on a trip overseas, and my son had a girlfriend – so I didn't see much of him. But I'd go and see my wife occasionally. I'd try and take her and her lad out on a Sunday for a drive.

32:30 And on this particular Sunday I went to see her, y'know, just trying to mend the ways and be sociable. The kids always knew where I was, and I always remembered their birthdays. I sent them money on their birthdays. I didn't send money to her. This day she turned on me for nothing at all, and I'd just had a gutful of it.

33:00 So when I took her back to her place and let her out of the car I said, "I don't want to see you again." Then I got in the car and drove away. And I never did see her again. Never, ever saw her again. She died a few weeks ago. Sad, because I did think a lot of her. But she poisoned the kids against me. They've over it now. They've come over and stayed with me. But they don't know half of the story.

33:30 They got one side of the story, and I wasn't going to mess them up. I thought, "No, leave them where they are." They've both done pretty well; married now and settled down. So I think I'm in the best place here. Marie and I – when I gave up the job – I thought that if I was going to get serious with this young lady, then I'd better not stick around with this job. I was playing around plenty on that job. There was a lot of opportunities.

34:00 So I thought, "No, I'm not going to do that to a lady I think a lot of." So I said to her that I was going to give up the job, and maybe go back to Darwin. I'd been offered a job there. So I went to Darwin, but the job didn't turn out what I'd fancied, so I started working again with the airlines – MNA. I was running the tours for Ansett – which they were pleased about.

34:30 I was the Ansett Tour Manager for three months of the year. For another three months of the year I was relieving MNA staff under the guidance of the manager. And three months of the year I was relieving Ansett staff. Whatever they were doing I'd just take over and do. Trucking, delivering, anything.

35:00 Then one month I could put in for a trip; free, anywhere I wanted to go. So it was a pretty good setup. I went to New Zealand and met Marie's folks. I've got a concession for Ansett Airlines and could go overseas or anything. But I'd done enough travelling. So had Marie.

35:30 And Marie couldn't stand the heat in Darwin, so we reckoned we had two choices: Perth or Cairns. We chose Perth, and that's where we are today.

**How do you think the war changed you, Stan?**

I don't think it improved me for a marriageable guy. I think it hastened me. Going from being a shy young bloke into marriage was not a good idea. I

36:00 think that was the only change. It never made me bitter or anything like that. I've mellowed now. I met this Mr Hogan – that I mentioned was my brother's teacher – I saw this fellow when I had the taxis in Maryborough. He was standing there by the McGuiver Hotel looking at me. And he came over. My sign was in the window there – Stan Kirby, phone 362.

36:30 He said, "Are you Stan Kirby?" And I said, "Yes." And he told me what a wild bugger I was at school, and he said, "Look at you now; you look a thorough gentleman." Wouldn't have known him. We had a good old chat, and I took him in the pub and bought him a beer. Apparently he had relatives

37:00 in Maryborough.

**How important are friends, and how important is mateship?**

My mate – I've just lost him recently – the one who got me into this radio business. I miss him terribly. But I've got plenty of mates in the

37:30 workshop. We've got a workshop here that is an absolute beauty. I've learned to do woodwork – you can see some of the woodwork around the house here. We have a great time. We're all old scouts here. We're all getting old too, and some of us are starting to fall by the wayside. It won't be long and there'll be practically none of us here.

38:00 **Do you celebrate Anzac Day?**

No. No, I don't. I've had marching and all those celebrations. I don't think it's any celebration to me. I quietly sit at home and listen to the Last Post, and think of the number of times I've played it over a digger's grave. I contemplate a little remembrance about Arnie, and I think of the triumphs and terrors of war. And that's about as far as I go.

38:30 I don't even march here. I did go a few times, but Marie is a bit handicapped in that when she mixes with someone wearing perfume or makeup or aftershave, she gets sick. Very bad sinus. I'm not against it, but I've done my bit. I've marched my miles on Anzac Day, believe me.

39:00 **Thanks for doing your bit for the Archive today, Stan. And thanks for sharing the day and your experiences with us. It's been a pleasure to meet you.**

Well, it's been my pleasure too. I've got a lot off my chest that I wouldn't normally have told anyone about. You're a great team, and it's been a pleasure to have you in the house.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**