Australians at War Film Archive

Keith Cousins - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:38 **Keith if we could start with just a very brief summary of your life to date.**

Have you got something there or do you want me to?

I'd like you to tell us.

Oh well I was born on the 21st March 1921. If you're wondering

01:00 why I was called Keith I was the end - the youngest of a fairly large family and they were probably running out of names I think and it was in the time when Sir Ross and Keith Smith [aviators] flew out to Australia so that was still in my parents' minds no doubt and they said let's call him Keith. And then they were searching around for a second name and they were thinking of calling me Kilmarnock

01:30 because I was born in a house in Narrandera [New South Wales] and the name of the house was Kilmarnock. And it also tied in with one of my great, great, great grandparent's birth place, Captain Piper. And my mother being of a - from the Piper family tree. And they thought, "Well Kilmarnock's a bit of a mouthful, we'll shorten it to Marnock." So it became Keith Marnock Cousins.

02:00 The house still stands there in Narrandera incidentally.

And how long were you in Narrandera for your childhood?

Until about intermediate high school stage which was fourteen because that's as far as the school went in those days. And then the next two years I

02:30 boarded in Wagga Wagga but I used to home of course during holidays. So that took me up to the - sixteen plus and then I was dead keen on joining the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] but the one thing, I was a bit young. And also I think they wanted higher education qualifications. So I wasn't educated to university status because I didn't do

03:00 two languages for the leaving. The Latin teacher at our high school, at the intermediate high school in Narrandera wasn't the best because the year of our intermediate he had one student pass and the French teacher, that was I could only describe him as a bad tempered Irish import.

03:30 And he had one student pass. Not I. So when I got to Wagga and joining the school there, they said, "Did you do any languages?" "Oh no didn't do any languages." Anyway that cruelled my chances for the air force I would say. But I hasten to mention I won a - not a bursary, whatever they call it to the teacher's college. And by that

04:00 time I was installed with the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney at Barellan as a junior officer. My father was dead keen on it: "Get him in the bank and put all thoughts of this flying nonsense out of his head. "So I worked down the Riverina towns for - oh till 19 - early 1941 when I enlisted in the air force.

04:30 I went through Barellan, Albury, Wagga, Ariah Park. That was a dreadful place, so was Barellan. And Gundagai, had a lot of fun in those towns. And Queanbeyan next door to Canberra. Well I was only there for December, January and I got my call up on the 3rd February 1941.

05:00 So I was into initial training at Bradfield Park. And to my surprise I found out what an observer was because I was channelled into the observer stream. Everyone wanted to be pilots of course. So where am I up to? 1941. Is that early enough or enough detail.

You're going brilliantly

05:30 **all I want you to do now is just briefly tell us the dates of your service during the war and then what you did after the war?**

Well 3-2-41, that's the date of entry to the RAAF. And I trained at Cootamundra Air Observer School for

a few months. And picked up my first lot of

06:00 - what do they call those things? Chilblains. They're terrible things. We used to sleep in those unlined timber huts. It was rather amusing at night to look down a row of beds with the lights coming through the windows and you'd see little puffs of steam coming out of each bed of each fellow breathing. So we spent a couple of months there and in the winter and off to Evans Head for a

06:30 bombing and gunnery school. And that was like springtime there. As a matter of fact about the middle of July we arrived there and I was swimming that afternoon with several others down the local beach. A very pleasant climate in winter at least. So a couple of months there. Down south again to Parkes to do the - what do they call it? Air Navigation School. That was basically

07:00 shooting stars and that sort of thing, at night - navigation. And a couple of weeks leave and I was on the Queen Elizabeth to the Middle East, a magnificent ship. I recall very much the departure there where it was anchored, I think it was Athol Bight and without tugs it just turned the ship on its length and aimed up the harbour and away

07:30 he went. In the meantime he'd churned up a lot of Sydney Harbour's bottom, I suppose one prop going forward and one prop going reverse. Quite a lot of reed and mud came up. But the thing that astonished me, no tugs and away we sailed up Sydney Harbour and I think we might have been doing twenty five knots by the time we went through the Heads. And there was the

08:00 Queen Elizabeth waiting for us outside. And a cruiser. So we went to Fremantle, took on a load, a big load of soldiers there. Mind you we had soldiers out of Sydney too as well as in the air force draft. And off to Trincomalee in Ceylon [Sri Lanka] the first stop. Refuelled.

08:30 Moved out. And then onto Port Tewfik the southern end of the Suez Canal. But I didn't see much of going up the Red Sea because a lot of us were stricken with flu on the ship. Something like - I don't know but we had over six thousand troops on board which seemed a lot.

09:00 Because looking back on it it was rather infinitesimal because I came home on an American ship which I think had fourteen thousand on board. Anyway my knowledge of the Red Sea is nothing because I was flat on my back in the sick bay in the hospital. They had something like, oh hundreds of troops

09:30 fallen down with the flu. First time I'd had it as a matter of fact. Ever had flu? Well the thing that started me, I got out of bed one morning and cleaned up and that sort of thing. And off for breakfast and I walked out the room of the cabin we were in and I fell flat on my face. And I remember particularly looking down this long corridor of the Queen Elizabeth.

10:00 You couldn't see the end of the corridor for the curvation of the ship as a matter of fact, it was so long. It'd disappear out of sight. And as I went out the door the walls just went like that and I hit the deck and that was that.

Now I'm going to ask you the details of that later. I wonder if you could just briefly tell us the rest of your war?

Well we went to

10:30 a holding camp at - just outside Alexandria on Aboukir Bay, where the great battle was fought. Nelson. [Lord Horatio Nelson, English admiral, the battle was in 1798] And then to another bigger holding camp called the Middle East Pool about half way along the canal. And the morale them was shocking because we all thought we'd be in the war in no time. But we weren't, we were waiting for our postings to squadrons.

11:00 And eventually - we were supposed to go down to Kenya or Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe] in those days for operational training but the Russians took most of their aeroplanes. They needed them badly on the Russian Front so they farmed us out around various places, like even ground duty or in my case two of us went

11:30 to 2/16 Squadron. Which got us a bit of flying which was just as well. That was a very interesting pastime. And from 2/16 Squadron onto 458 Squadron when it was reformed in the Middle East. And a few training flights and we were off to the war in earnest. Finishing in Malta in May '43.

12:00 My tail gunner and myself - this was an amusing episode too. Because the last two trips on 458 were to deliver aeroplanes back to Egypt for major overhauls and bring back new ones. So we had a scratch crew, with a pilot, an observer, wireless operator and air gunner and away we'd go. And with the briefing

12:30 "Get back the best you can." And no papers or anything like that which is a bit embarrassing around Cairo if there's hated Red Caps [British Military Police] because they'd just come along and put a finger on your shoulder. "Leave pass" or "Papers." And of course we had nothing, on both occasions. And we didn't think about it until we saw some Red Caps one day, our great mate the tail gunner. So out to the

13:00 Communit aerodromes on the Cairo-Alex [Alexandria] Road. And hitch hiked a ride back to Malta. Arrived there and our squadron had disappeared. And we'd finished our tour both of us. And I said, "Well where have they gone?" And they said, "Can't tell you." I always remember this guy in the orderly

room. He said, “Well don’t you know there’s a war on.” So I said to Harry,

13:30 “What’s this place England like?” He’d been over to England and done a few trips on bomber command there and as a matter of fact he was on the first thousand-bomber raid. And he was always complaining about the climate there and the alternative was to go to Palestine to an operational training unit there as instructors. And I looked at Harry and I said, “We’ve both been to Palestine haven’t we?” He said, “Yes.” I said,

14:00 “Do you think the UK would have the edge on Palestine?” He said, “Yes.” So went back to the landing strip, Luqa aerodrome at Malta and a communications flight DC3 came through and we said, “Which way are you going?” And he said, “That way, West.” And we said, “Righto, got room for two?” He said, “Yes hop on.” So that’s what it was like in those days. And we arrived

14:30 in Gibraltar, we spent one night there and the second night a transport sergeant poked his head around the door and he said, “Have you fellows unpacked yet?” And we said, “Well hardly.” He said, “Well there’s an aeroplane going to the UK in half an hour, can you make it, there’s room for two.” So we did. And there’s a bit of history there because the passengers on board

15:00 were the remainder of a big Churchill-Roosevelt conference at Casablanca. [British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt met in Casablanca, Morocco, January 1943] I’d have to look up my history book. And all these high ranking officers were on their way back to the UK. And they of course commandeered the seats, not very comfortable. There were bucket seats along the side of the aeroplane. And we bedded down

15:30 on our Mae Wests [inflatable life jackets, named after an American film star] in the stern of the aeroplane and had a good night’s rest for the UK. It was rather a long trip, something like eight hours. And arrived in a very foggy morning to a bacon and eggs breakfast. We were provided with a staff car to drive up to RAAF headquarters in London with the flag waving on the front. And all the policemen saluting us and we were flight sergeants.

16:00 I said to Harry, “Well this is the best part of the war so far isn’t it?” And then up to a place I think called West Kirby just outside Liverpool where we were kitted up, because we literally had what we stood up with. Because our gear, what we had, not very much in those days had gone with the squadron. As it turned out they’d moved over to North Africa and

16:30 we actually landed on an aerodrome where they were not very far away but we were not to know that, just on a refuelling stop on the way to Gibraltar. So having being kitted up at West Kirby it was back to London again. And then we were - both of us were posted to this operational training unit in Scotland. To instruct us on - as I said, I shied off the Catalinas [flying boats].

17:00 I steered myself onto Sunderlands [flying boats]. The first taste of the sea so to speak. It was rather strange since we’d been on wheeled aeroplanes, land based aeroplanes to be sent to a flying boat OTU [Operational Training Unit] but that was it. And in the middle of that they decided to send a bunch of us from all over the place to number one ground instructors course.

17:30 Which was badly needed because we were probably pretty hopeless as instructors. And that was a very good course as a matter of fact, that was down near Hull [northeast England].

What year are we in now?

1943. And so arriving there at end - about May ’43 through till the end

18:00 of February 1944 and then the call came to go home. And my section commander, the squadron leader said, “Do you want to go home?” And I said, “No I’m happy with these Sunderlands and I might get a posting to a Sunderland squadron here.” He said, “Well fair enough.” So he put in a good word for me to stay there because having been trained he probably didn’t want to lose a trained

18:30 member of his staff. But the Government back here insisted that we go home and so I was on my way on the Aquitania at the end of February ’44. Spent quite a time in the USA, something like oh three or four weeks, mainly to get on a train to go across the USA. And then to get on a ship when we got to San Francisco.

19:00 Spent about a fortnight I think at San Francisco. And the rest of the time, must have been a fortnight - oh it was a week on the train just about and a couple of weeks in New York City. And it was all good fun of course. And then on the USS America where we had this ship, it was a thirty four or five thousand tonner. And absolutely crammed, jammed

19:30 packed with troops on board. Mainly Americans but a big draft of RAAF - two varieties. Two were expired people like a bunch of us and what we called scrubbed air crew from Canada. Those fellows that hadn’t made the grade. But I remember the OC [officer commanding] of the draft said, “Well they mightn’t have made the grade

20:00 in the RAAF but they’ve made the grade for the RSL [Returned Services League], because they’ve been overseas.” He was very scathing about a lot of them. Then back to Sydney. Rang up my parents. I thought my mother was going to take off, she’d lost track of me for something like six weeks because she’d get the occasional letter but hadn’t heard from me for quite some time. And

20:30 so that was 1944. Sent to a - no down to Bairnsdale [Victoria] to do a general reconnaissance course, a whole bunch of us. That was about September ’44. Very interesting collection of chaps. We had fellows that had been on the Mohne bomb raid [Dam Busters raid May 1943] there,

21:00 that’s the ex-bomber command fellows. Ex-coastal command fellows. Ex-desert air force people. And the first commanding officers parade, CO’s [commanding officer’s] parade, the first one we’d attended since training days was put on there. And I thought the CO was going to have a fit with all the uniforms that turned up. Some were in shorts, some were in battle dress. ‘Cause they

21:30 hadn’t seen battle dress at that stage. And the Americans used to call them the Eisenhower jackets [US General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander US Forces in Europe, US President 1953-61] but it was part of the RAF [British Royal Air Force] uniform. They were a khaki RAF blue…

Keith I’m going to go back and get some details. I just want you to give us the very bare bones of the rest of your war if you wouldn’t mind.

Yes right. Got posted to a Catalina operational training unit Rathmines [New South Wales]. And then to

22:00 43 Squadron Darwin. January ’45. From there we operated out of Darwin and out of the Philippines and basically those two - the Philippines was our advance base you could say. Until just a month before the war, I had a little accident. I tripped

22:30 and did a one point landing on my chin which broke my jaw up there and so I was flown with several other walking wounded back to Sydney and it took quite a time for the jaw to heal up and by that time of course the war had ended and I thought I was okay for a job with Qantas. I’d written and they said, “Come in for an interview.” But I was posted to 34

23:00 Squadron in Richmond. And I spent the next months there until May ’46 and that’s when I got out of the service eventually.

That’s fantastic thank you. We’re going to now go right back to the beginning of your childhood. You said you were one of many children, how many siblings did you have?

Oh well I had one sister living. I’m the last one

23:30 incidentally. Two sisters who died in infancy. I didn’t know them because they were born before me and died before me. They were victims of the big flu epidermic after World War 1. And there were four other brothers. Three of us were in the service - one brother died in an accident.

24:00 One tried to join up because he couldn’t - there was something wrong with his innards. And that left the three of us. Two went into the army and I went into the air force.

And tell us about your parents?

Oh they were good parents. I thought my mother with three of us in the war, I’m sure it contributed to her

24:30 demise. She was a worrier. And I think she popped off at sixty eight after several strokes. And yes - and Dad he was a licensed real estate agent and auctioneer. And used to sell sheep and cattle, livestock. Or sell up people’s belongings when they’re

25:00 moving house sort of thing. This was in the middle of the Depression I’m talking about and a lot of people were selling their houses and selling what goods and chattel they had. I’d been along to a couple of his sales and hearing, “Two bob. Two bob” … and watching these characters just go like this around the sale yard and the same in the auction rooms. And he used to end up buying half the furniture we used

25:30 to say to try and make a sale. And some good stuff too. It’d be worth a fabulous amount of money, some of that stuff we had in those days. But we eventually got rid of it. And anyway he died aged seventy two. Which is not a bad innings but he was a very sick man over the last four years. He, he was

26:00 a smoker and that didn’t help him. And two of my surviving brothers were smokers too and I’ve outlasted them by ten years. But strangely the eldest brother who didn’t drink or smoke, he dropped dead at fifty two of a heart attack. So it’s the luck of the draw and that’s possibly why he was knocked back by the recruitment

26:30 people because they found out something wrong with his kidneys I think. Kidneys and heart I think were related.

Now I’ve been to Narrandera several times and it’s a pretty small town. What was it like when you were there as a child?

Oh it was a thriving place really. A population of about five thousand I think it’s still about five thousand. At one stage, historically I think it had something

like twenty two pubs and it had its own brewery and the building still's there on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River. And it would be in about the middle of the Depression years they gave up brewing there. And the big brick building stood there for many years. They built a memorial to Captain Charles Sturt [Australian explorer]

right by the main road there. But the main road has shifted from that cairn. That was 1929 that cairn went up. It was a pretty town. Trees along the streets, shaded which was much needed. Which brings me to an old friend of mine who became the mayor of Narrandera and one of the first things he

did or his council was strip the main street of the trees. Which shocked a lot of people but it was a cost thing because they used to drop berries and leaves, that was his excuse. But fortunately they left all the side streets covered with trees. And a lot of small Riverina towns, they don't have any trees in their streets so that was one thing that made Narrandera quite attractive.

And of course the river to swim in and the lake. They had swimming baths up at the lake which they still have I think. And yes there was a lot of wealth around the district, even though it was Depression years. There were big property owners there with sheep and cattle. And it was pretty fertile country. Not only sheep and cattle but wheat

and agriculture. A lot of wheat grown in the area.

How did your family fare during the Depression?

Poorly to coin a phrase. I think my Dad went bankrupt during the Depression and possibly through his buying stuff at sales which he couldn't afford to try and get a sale. And he had his own

business and then he went in as an assistant with a big wool and cattle company. And he was declared redundant and he was still of working age and then he went to another firm in the town. He worked there. And when the war came he took off to Victoria

to munitions factory down at Warrnambool. And he used to come back every few months or so. Left mother in Narrandera 'cause he said it was too darn cold down at Warrnambool. Narrandera's cold enough in the winter but that was worse apparently. So they stayed on there until - oh during the war years and after. The brothers,

you asked me how they fared. Well one brother he packed up in the middle of the night and went out jackarooing in the west. He subsequently died through an accident. Another brother worked with the local produce firm. That was the eldest brother. The other two, one went out as a travelling salesman

and the other one he worked as a jackeroo on my grandfather's property over at Bathurst. And he ended up - both of them ended up in Sydney as salesmen, selling furniture of all things, until they went into the war. So it was a matter of survival in those days.

What kind of mischief did you get up to as kids in Narrandera?

Mischief? Not much.

Pinching fruit was always a challenge. Not much of that about. But that's about all. We were pretty respectable kids in those days compared to what they are now. I think the most sinful thing, was we might have smoked a bit of cane. Somebody said, "Have a puff of this cane." And here we were puffing away like a cigarette.

It was dreadful. That put me off smoking for several years. And of course as soon I started work, everybody smoked in those days, it was the in thing. But I gave up about fifty years ago. I've still got a bit of croak would you believe. I hope you don't smoke.

What did you do to past the time when you were kids. Did you play

games?

I was very keen on - well particular at Wagga Wagga High School. One year, that was fourth and fifth year we did - one year we were - our class were mad keen on building model aeroplanes. I'd been into it before. You know the rubber band jobs. And they - I remember getting one in the Narrandera days.

One from the Womens' Weekly - it was a huge thing. Oh about that wide the wing span. And it literally almost flew out of sight. It worked. And then that carried onto Wagga, we were very keen on model aircraft. And one year and the next year we got into radio. And building radios. And then it got to be -

I got as far as building a two-valve set - it was beyond me because there was no instruction, you had to teach yourself sort of thing, out of books. And then we had a competition who could build the smallest crystal set. And that brings a funny memory in the classroom one day. It was Melbourne Cup Day, this'd be about 1937 I'd say we were into the radio. And

I had this small radio built around a matchbox and you could tune it by sliding the match holder in and out to tune in the station and one earphone in the classroom. You'd put up to your ear and keep it out of sight of the teacher. Well it was Melbourne Cup Day and teacher went out - made an excuse to go down the hall right on three o'clock or whatever the time was for

34:30 the Cup. And he said, “Oh I’ve just got to go down the hall for a few minutes.” That meant no talking, everybody keep quiet, that sort of thing. And when he walked in through the door I said, “Did you back White Nose?” or whatever the horse’s name was. And he said, “How did you know?” And I said, “Well just psychic.”

So tell us about your school days, what were your favourite subjects at school?

Well

35:00 Science was a favourite subject because I had a very good teacher. And he - but unfortunately I fluffed my - in those days I was doing honours in Science and we had to pass our first paper before they’d look at the honours paper. But I was very interested in the chemistry honours paper because it was a lot with

35:30 industry chemistry which was starting to become interesting. Making bricks, the destructive distillation of petroleum products and all that sort of thing. And I got really wrapped up in that, so much so that I’d forgotten the basics in the first paper. So when the results came out I got a B and if they’d turned it around the other way and looked at my honours paper I might have got an A.

36:00 But I liked the chemistry and the history. We had a wonderful history master there. So much so that the kids used to stay until as late as six o’clock. He’d be still lecturing on Modern European History, Modern World History. And he successfully predicted where World

36:30 War 11 would open up as it did.

Can you tell us what you remember of what he taught you on European history to come to that conclusion?

He used to walk in the classroom with a bundle of paper maps which he’d drawn up. And they’d drop all over the place which would sort of break the atmosphere. And he’d look around and he’d say, “Oh you look like stunned mullets. Have you had Latin before have you?” And

37:00 the kids would literally be like, they’d be like this. And then he’d pin up his maps and knock the table over in the process and we’d all be in fits of laughter. And he said, “Now don’t forget what I told you last week about the Polish corridor.” He was always on about the Polish corridor. And he said, “Danzig, [now Gdansk, Poland] that’s going to be a bug bear with this…” Because we all knew about Hitler in those days.

37:30 This is 1938. Or ’37, 38 or something like that. And as I say the kids used to stay there till six o’clock and why it was six o’clock - a lot of them can from Junee, up the line and the Albury mail train used to come in at six o’clock. And I always laugh at this. They’d say, “Excuse me Mr Edwards, but we’ve

38:00 got to go.” He’d say, “Alright go and catch your train.” And he’d put his hand out the window and it was downhill to the station. “Don’t forget to look up such and such a chapter and Professor Roberts.” So history and geography. So I A’d in History and Geography. And the geography was very helpful in later years because the lady teaching geography taught us how to read maps.

38:30 Orient them. Get them around and north’s here. Turn your map around. So that was a big help.

What was it like leaving the family home and going to boarding school?

Well I didn’t go to boarding school, I boarded with a family one year and then I moved onto another family because it was a bit disturbing with that first family. The

39:00 husband of the house was a migrant before World War 1. And he was German. And he’d be raving about Hitler. “Listen to him Keith isn’t he magnificent?” And this radio’d be blaring out in the house night after night. And so I moved onto another family near the school for the final year.

39:30 And that I think helped me get through eventually. It was pretty homesick making. I used to go home once a fortnight and I’d only spend half a day at home and I’d be back on the train again, the way the trains ran. But yes it - well I survived.

In the first home that you lived in with the German man who loved Hitler, were there other children in the house?

Yes

40:00 there were - there was a daughter and two sons.

How did you fit in in the family, what was the dynamic like?

And there was another border there, we shared. Oh I fitted in - the daughter was the eldest of the three of them. She was a character. She subsequently got a big job in a magazine world in Sydney I believe. But I didn’t see her ever again. I heard

40:30 of her of course. The other boys. I’ve been through Wagga and enquired about them after the war. And one died an early death from cancer, that was the middle boy. But the youngest son I don’t know what happened to him at all, couldn’t track him down. Because when I’d been through Wagga it was

something like, oh twenty five

41:00 years since I'd last been there.

Tape 2

00:32 **Keith you obviously had an interest in aircraft from a fairly early age. How did that all come about?**

From memory, there was a gentleman by the name of Jimmy Broadbent flew over our house in his, I don't know if it's an Avro Moth but our house was right in line with the local aerodrome. And there was a connection there between Jimmy Broadbent and one of my

01:00 brothers, or something like that. So first thing I did was go out and get a couple of pieces of wood and pop them together and another piece of wood and run around the yard making buzzing noises. And then Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith [aviator] of course was big news in those days. And word came around that he was barn-storming and going to visit Narrandera in a month's time or something like that. So I managed to save up newspapers

01:30 for which I'd get a penny a pound at one of the local butchers and empty bottles, unbranded bottles. A lot of people were - had to buy kerosene in those days. Because they lived out of town and would take home a bottle of kerosene for the old lamps and you'd get a penny of those bottles. So in the course of time I'd saved up ten shillings

02:00 which was the price of a ride on the Southern Cross plane with Kingsford-Smith. So when he came around I couldn't get out to the aerodrome quick enough. And for some reason he didn't use the main aerodrome, he used a big grass paddock to the north of the town. And I had my first ride. Frightened the daylights out of me of course. My god it was noisy.

02:30 There was a fabric side of the fuselage and cane seats, no straps or anything like in those days. And when he banked the aeroplane it was quite awe inspiring. And the ten shillings soon disappeared and in about ten minutes I think we're down on the ground again.

Did you get to speak to Smithy?

Yes. Because he didn't have many customers.

03:00 Or waiting customers. He was sort of waiting around the front of the aeroplane and I've walked up to him and thanked him for the ride. And I remember asking him, "Why don't they put more blades on the propellers. Perhaps it'd give it a lot more thrust." And he said, "If they put more blades on they'd only churn the air." So I always remembered that pearl of wisdom.

03:30 **And you mentioned your model making exploits as well.**

Yes I kept at that for quite some time. With making the old rubber driven ones. And would have dearly loved to have got onto a little motor but that was beyond me financially. But they were just coming in then in those days.

04:00 **Did you ever develop ambitions to join the air force at that younger age?**

Oh yes that was my ambition to join the air force. And when I was in an aeroplane and come around and land somewhere with the red and white blue - and I'm thinking of Wagga now. There were three Hawker Demons flew into Wagga

04:30 one day. I think they had a bit of radio problem with one of them, so all three of them decided to put down in Wagga and a bunch of us on bicycles - out we'd go and we'd pore over the aeroplanes and talk to the pilots about when they were going to get airborne again. They were probably waiting for spare

05:00 parts from Richmond or somewhere like that. They were quite impressive these Hawker Demons, they made a big racket of course and then the three of them took off together. And that sort of kept the spark alive so to speak. And of course when the war came well that opened up the opportunity. My parents were dead against it.

05:30 **When you finished high school in Wagga, what did you do then?**

Well back home to Narrandera and as I said I was still angling how to get into the air force and Dad was very much against it.

Why was he against it?

Oh he thought it was rather dangerous. Rather a dangerous occupation.

06:00 And get into a sure job like the bank. And his office was next door to the Commonwealth Bank and the Commonwealth Bank manager said, "Send him around to see me and we'll get him in alright." And the

Commercial Banking Company of Sydney's manager took a liking to me because I was pally with his two sons, we were great mates. One of them is still

06:30 incidentally. He said, "No don't join the Commonwealth whatever you do. Ours is a better bank." So he talked me into joining the old CBC. And I went off to Barellan and that was a heartbreaking experience really. The pay was two pounds, two shillings and sixpence

07:00 a week which included the cost of living away from home allowance, I've forgotten how much. I shared a room in a boarding house with the local policeman. I was only talking to somebody about that the other day, about dear old George Warburton. And I said, "I was under police protection because George was in the bed next to me." And he'd come home at night and he'd put his rifle

07:30 on the bedside table. Anyway that was the first one.

What did it involve?

As junior clerk, collecting the mail, posting the mail, sticking stamps on letters. And keeping track of the petty cash and the stamps and gradually worked into keeping ledgers and adding up

08:00 and trying not to make mistakes. It was quite a small branch. Manager, teller accountant and the junior clerk. So that was a grounding and I was only there six months and - it was a probationary six months I was posted to Albury. Well that was a plum - lovely town Albury - still is. Had a lot of fun there. And

08:30 I was able to buy my first bicycle. Spent a lot of time cycling in those days. From town to town. And a radio, that was the next thing. Ran off a six volt car battery. And that's when I used to listen to Winston Churchill a lot, coming through on the short wave. Because in Albury I used to sleep on the bank premises.

09:00 Had a little flat there. The manager had his own residence so I used to sleep on the bank premises with my radio and my revolver to keep guard over the premises. And then onto Wagga. That was a good town, liked Wagga. Back to my old school town. Saw some of my old mates there. And also

09:30 joined the Militia [CMF, Citizens Military Force] whilst I was in Wagga.

Why did you join that?

Well I got a bit pumped up with the loyalty business and Bob Menzies [Robert Gordon Menzies, Prime Minister 1939-41] at the time, when I was in Albury, he started the scheme, ten thousand troops and you could see the writing on the wall. And I was listening to Winston Churchill and at the time

10:00 Hitler marched into Austria. And so he - Churchill said, "This man has to be stopped." This maniac they let him get into Austria. And I took heed of Sir Robert Menzies' call to arms. And joined the Militia. And I remember the Labor Party at the time had an

10:30 advertisement which they were pumping over the radio time and time again. "Don't send your son to war, don't send your son to war." With the sound of marching feet. But anyway a lot of us joined the militia there but we were only in it for about one month and war broke out. They came around and took all our rifles from us and said, "Well that finishes your training."

Can you remember the Militia unit you were in?

11:00 No I can't really. As I say we didn't even get to the drilling, it was mainly drill hall stuff. And pulling rifles and machine guns to pieces and putting them together again, that was as far as we got.

So what was your reaction when you heard about Britain and Australia declaring war on Germany?

Well the blokes hopped on our bicycles

11:30 and rode up the street singing 'Johnny get your gun.' And found the nearest pub that was open, had a few beers and went home to bed. And then of course applied for the air force, which took some time to get in.

Where did you go to apply for the air force?

Oh wrote off a letter I think somehow. And did it by mail.

12:00 And then by that time I was in Gundagai and we had an instructor there from the post office teaching two or three of us, maybe four in the class who wanted to join the air force, Morse code, which was a help. And then from Gundagai I went to Queanbeyan and Queanbeyan I got my call up from the air force in February '41.

So it

12:30 **took some time to actually be called up?**

Oh yes, yes.

How did that make you feel that you had to wait for so long?

Oh a bit frustrating but looking back on it, there was a lot of waiting in war time. A lot of waiting around here and there, and nothing happening and suddenly everything happens at once.

13:00 **And you just continued working at the bank at this time?**

Up till February '41. When I came back I'd had this job - this interview with Qantas and they couldn't get their hands on me quick enough. And so I resigned from the bank then and there.

Did you have any girlfriends at this stage?

Any

13:30 girlfriends? Yes. Yes. Some pretty nice ones I might tell you. Had a girlfriend in Albury, we used to go down to - a bunch of us and we were very keen on swimming and cycling. We were a pretty healthy bunch. And this girl - we'd swim

14:00 in the baths a quarter of a mile and she'd say, "Come on one more lap." And I'd say, "No I'm done." And she'd swim that extra lap. Oh I wonder what happened to her. Then my love life in Wagga was a bit - can't remember a lady friend in Wagga.

14:30 Found one in Ariah Park, she was a nice one too. She came from Lake Cargellico I remember, I don't know what happened to her. And Gundagai, another nice young thing there. She came down to Sydney to wave goodbye on the boat. Oh well actually down at Bradfield Park. We all went down to the ship by buses.

15:00 And then - we were growing pretty steady as the saying goes and then I had a letter from her that she'd decided not to wait, she'd found a man whilst I was away. That was alright. So licking my wound I found another over in England. And she was nice too. The same thing happened with her.

15:30 I tried to entice her to Australia but she ended up marrying an Englishman. And then the final one well, she's still stuck with me after fifty, it'll be fifty seven years this year.

I guess as a young man with a steady job in those days you represented a decent catch?

16:00 Well any man I suppose with a job would be a catch. Not a great catch of course. You must remember people like school teachers and bank staff are a bit like the fruit pickers in a way. They're always on the move. They might be a few years in a town but they - if they buy a house they've got to turn around

16:30 and sell it in a few years. And there's a lot of them that reach retirement and they look around and they say, "I hope I've made enough to buy a house somewhere." So I don't know what it's like these days but that's one of the things against that sort of career. School teaching and banking.

What did your parents think of your

17:00 **enlistment in the air force?**

Oh they were rather horrified. And very nervous I think about the whole thing but I used to write regularly and keep them posted of what I could in the mail. Couldn't tell them everything of course. That business of coming home during the war and spending so much time in the USA

17:30 that was a bit of a strain on them because they hadn't heard from me for six weeks or thereabouts. Because back in England we had this - I'm trying to think of the name - the scheme where you could put the letter in your local post box, didn't matter they'd be censored anyway. And they'd micro

18:00 photograph them. Put it on a reel and they'd bring them out to Australia and they'd get a print out, about that size. You were limited on the size of the letter you could write but it'd be blown up. So they'd get at least a small page of a letter, with very small writing on it because they'd tried to get as much as they could on it. But that worked regularly until as I say, going through the year or so, well

18:30 the States didn't have that system up and running then as they did in England and Australia, likewise back.

How did you feel when you finally got that call up to Sydney?

What for the air force?

Yes.

Oh a new world had opened up and what the dickens was it going to be like and that sort of thing. It was a bit of an eye opener to go out to Bradfield Park, well first

19:00 of all to Woolloomooloo and being stripped bare. Well the first thing at Woolloomooloo - before I got my call up I had to go down for a medical and that was in the middle of winter. And down there they had us stripped to our birthday suits and standing around half the time being poked and prodded here and there and looking down your ear, nose and throat and all sorts of indignities.

19:30 Eventually they sorted us out there and then it was back to work until you got your final call up. As I say, that would have been July 1940, for the medical and February was the ‘come see us’ out at Bradfield Park. So marched in there and as with all courses, as the new draft came in there’d be a bunch of fellows hanging around the fence

20:00 calling out, “You’ll be sorry.” Which we were in a way because they really drilled it into us. Physical training and marching, rifle drill. I think I’ve still got a lump on my shoulder from slapping my rifle up there. And getting around in boots instead of nice, comfortable shoes. Having to do your own laundry

20:30 and things like that. I recall one draft coming in there after us - it was a bit comical in a way - some of them had their golf clubs over their shoulders and their tennis rackets. So you can imagine the comments those characters got when they marched through the gate.

What were your ambitions at this point?

Oh

21:00 to become a pilot of course. Everyone wanted to become a pilot when they joined the air crew. But I was talked out of that. I think mainly having a mathematical background, that gets back to Wagga incidentally, that teacher I was telling you about that Melbourne Cup day.

21:30 For some reason or other he took a dislike to me. And didn’t give very much personalised instructions. And they weren’t big classes but I managed to pass his maths 1 and Maths 2. Maths 1 was tough and Maths 2 was tougher. It was the same subjects, algebra, geometry and trigonometry and I think that helped get me into the stream of the observers.

22:00 I don’t know. That’s what I suspect anyway. Because one of my school mates at the same time, he scrambled through his leaving with four B’s I think. He came in the air force after me but they made him a pilot. So you didn’t have to be

22:30 top score in the mathematical and scientific knowledge although some of them were chosen. But if you had an athletic background as well, well you could hit a good cricket ball or bowl a good ball or hit a good tennis racket or good sporting background I think you automatically entered pilot stream. From what we could see of it.

What sort of skills were needed for the different roles in an air crew

23:00 **according to what you saw?**

Well we were classified as air crew G.D. - General Duty. Which meant I think you be prepared to try and do anything that you were told on the ground. And in the air well, I’d say - oh skills -

23:30 be alert. Observant. Quick to react. Reasonable intelligence and that sort of thing.

At Bradfield Park you said they broke you up and made some guys pilots and … what do you think they were looking for - you said with the pilots they liked athletic ability. In the observers they were looking for what?

Well it was pretty obvious

24:00 there in our course when we went through that everyone in the observers had matriculation standard education, that was one thing. With the pilot as I said, the educational standards - some pilots of course had metric standards but a lot of them didn’t. But they had good athletic backgrounds. And the wireless air gunners, I don’t know, they had

24:30 to be pretty smart too to learn that Morse and learn about radio theory and that sort of thing. And I think the selection committee, usually about three officers, you’d go in one by one to be interviewed - they had a pretty difficult job with the team that people put in front of them. And I suppose that a lot

25:00 of the time they said, “Well look we need X number of pilots, we need XY number of observers, and we need Z numbers of wireless air gunners. And probably a lot done just that way.

How did you feel about not becoming a pilot?

Oh depressed at first. But I got quite wrapped up in being trained as an observer because it was a pretty

25:30 interesting course. Bombing and gunnery and navigation, pretty comprehensive course when you think about it. And so there was no time to be bored with the course, as a matter of fact you were worried if you were going to pass and get through. And not everybody did. I recall one

26:00 member of our draft going through Cootamundra - that was our first course and he was scrubbed at Cootamundra and he was a pretty sharp character we thought. And I think they had a bit of a thing about him being a barber in peace time. And being a barber he could talk. But he talked a lot of sense at

26:30 times too. And he was pulled up by a nav [navigation] instructor one day. He said, “How did you get that

bearing when you passed Coonamble or whatever it was?" And he said, "You haven't got the compass bearing recorded." And he said, "Yes I have. I looked out along the wing and it was ninety degrees to the heading of the aeroplane. And it was just passing the wing tip so I had it at ninety degrees." And the instructor was horrified because he didn't use his hand-held compass.

27:00 But he made sense. It was what you call good pilot navigation. So he used to have little tricks like that and I think he got under the skin of the instructors and they scrubbed him there. And I thought that was a bit unfair because he - in my book and the other chaps there, he was good material.

What sort of things did you learn at Cootamundra?

Oh reconnaissance.

27:30 The first trip - well the very first trip was air experience. Like a lot of the characters hadn't flown on an aeroplane before. Of course I was big time, I'd been up with Kingsford-Smith and I'd also had another joy ride at Narrandera some years later on a Fox Moth, a single engine aeroplane. And anyway they would take us for a ride

28:00 around in an aeroplane, a De Havilland Rapide [Dh89A Dragon Rapide], because that could carry about eight or ten students on board. And the next thing was into an Avro Anson and the first trip was over Cowra, reconnaissance. The pilot would fly us up to Cowra, we'd have to do a sketch of the town as we went past. I've forgotten if we had to use a camera. But I know I used

28:30 my own camera. I've got a picture of Cowra from the air in my first sort of trip. Then we had to do wind finding with drifts, map reading. This is where my school teacher at Wagga helped. And of course my career in the bank helped. I spent so much time working around Riverina towns I more or less knew them like the back of my hand. So much

29:00 so - a funny incident. One day the pilot was flying past Coolamon I think it was - between Narrandera and Junee. And he said, "What's that place down there?" I said, "It's Coolamon." He said, "No it's not it's Ganmain." And I stuck to my guns because in my school days going backwards and forwards, Narrandera, Junee, change trains for Wagga - all the silos alternated. One north

29:30 one south, one north, one south along the line. So this particular town with his silos, I've forgotten which it was, but let's just call it Coolamon. And anyway I said, "That's Coolamon." He said, "I don't think so, we'll go down and have a good look." And we went down and flew past the station sign and there was Coolamon and he was quite impressed. So it was mainly

30:00 all day time flying in Coolamon. Another trip was to fly up the north west near Moree and find some tin pot place and half of us couldn't find it anyway. And things like that. Mainly map reading and wind finding and what they call dead reckoning navigation.

What aircraft were you thinking you would be deployed on at this stage?

30:30 Hadn't a clue really because for one reason we didn't know where we'd end up. Naturally most of us thought we'd end up Europe or the Middle East. And so knowing what they had in those days would be Wellington bombers and or flying boats. So it was difficult to say.

31:00 Completely out of our hands where we'd be ending up and what we'd be on. Some of them trained up and stayed back in Australia - joined squadrons back here of course. But that was very few of them but they were just starting to get going here with Avro Ansons I think mainly.

Where did you go from Cootamundra?

Up to

31:30 Evans Heads, that's where we did our bombing and gunnery course. Where the thing was not to shoot off the tail of your aeroplane because the guns were free - on a ring sort of thing. And you could quite easily go around and pepper your tail if you weren't watching it.

32:00 And bombing. That was a bit nerve wracking in a way in that in the Fairy Battle [Fairy Battle L5683 Terrigal fighter-bomber] the bomb aimer would lie prone. You'd have to pull back a screen where you were looking out at bare sky, ground underneath and you clip your bomb sight on over this hole in the aeroplane.

32:30 And then do a wind find. Set the wind on the sight and the speed you're going and hopefully hit the target. And we'd carry, I think about eight practice bombs, eight and a half pound practice bombs, something like that. And the last bomb was left for the pilot who would dive bomb. Well most of our bombing was done from about ten thousand

33:00 feet and you're starting to feel the lack of oxygen at that height too but we didn't wear oxygen masks. And that last bomb, the pilot he'd come down to six thousand feet and then from six thousand feet he'd dive bomb the target. Well that was pretty exciting to see the ground roaring up and of course you'd be on full throttle so it made the dickens of a noise. And then he'd pull out

33:30 and you'd get this great feeling. And they were pretty good these guys because well for one reason they

had plenty of practice flying the pupils around but also they'd come down low and they'd nail the target nine times out of ten with the little practice bomb.

How did you skills improve at bomb aiming over that time?

34:00 Not very good as a matter of fact. I had a - I was only looking at my log book the other day. I think a hundred and thirty eight yards was my average which meant that even at a hundred and thirty eight average there must've been a few really wild ones. One chappy there, he wasn't very good as his gunnery

34:30 and he wasn't very good at his bombing theory. But he could hit that target. And he was a number one bomb aimer, he got something like thirty eight yards average. And yes so, I must have a …

35:00 … so they'd been farmed out there. The Luftwaffe [German Air Force] were making mincemeat of them and they had a stack of them at Evans Head. But they were lucky to get about two or three serviceable any one day. They were cannibalizing them you know for lack of parts. But they were a solidly built aeroplane. They served a purpose, to train us as bomb aimers and

35:30 gunners. You also had to learn to arm the bombs there which is an exciting business. Those instructors I think they were blood thirsty characters because they were teaching how to arm the old hundred and twelve pound bomb which is from World War 1 vintage. It's a pear shaped bomb, you've probably seen them.

36:00 Well they were armed by putting, what they call a pistol, one on each end and the idea being, when the bomb hit the pistol behind would fracture the membrane there and start the explosion. Well we were arming up these old bombs one day and the instructor called out something like,

36:30 "You stupid so and so. Look out you're going to set it off." So two of us took off. We broke all records. Because we knew there was a ditch just up from this area where we were bombing up. And I flew into this ditch and looked back to see them all going, "Ha ha ha ha." Big joke.

37:00 Funny days.

And what were you using - how did you practise air gunnery?

The same aeroplane, the back seat and have this gun and they were dreadful guns, they used to jam half the time. And of course you'd be wrestling and trying to free it. You'd shoot at a drogue being towed.

37:30 Or a ground target, they'd fly past and try to pepper a ground target. Didn't spend as much time on gunnery as on the bombing side of it. Which brings me to a character in our course who said to the instructor one day, "I don't know why we have to bother with this gunnery business, it's a pain in the neck." And he said, "Well you might have

38:00 to one day take over the rear turret on a bomber if the gunner's killed." And he said, "Well that's no good to me, I might get killed too." With a straight face.

What were you bombing in those practise runs, what sort of target was it?

It was a circular sand pit.

38:30 Like a - you've seen these old golf greens way out west. Like a big golf green. With light coloured sand so there's no mistaking the target. And they'd have characters down there on the ground after the exercise in the aeroplane, they'd run out and measure the distances. But these

39:00 eight and a half pound practise bombs, I don't know how that expert got his score down because you could see them drop off the aeroplane and they used to wobble all over the place. And later in the war when I dropped a real bomb, five hundred pound, I had to spear down very accurately. The weight helped no doubt.

So from Evans Head where did you progress

39:30 **to?**

Back to the Riverina again. Parkes Navigation School. We were taught to navigate at night. And that was a month's course. We had to learn to recognise the stars at first. And that was amusing too. Our instructor was an old World War 1 guy, ex army.

40:00 He knew his stars. He took us out there one night and he said, "There's Arcturis [northern hemisphere star] and so on." Pointing here. And he said, "You've got your star tables, just remember those names." And they're mainly learnt by triangles where to locate them. So from after that first night we literally taught ourselves our star recognition. And it works, it still

40:30 works today. I still remember a lot of them but not all.

How helpful was that when you were flying in the Northern Hemisphere?

Well particular on the Mediterranean flying on Wellingtons yes, yes, used the stars a lot there.

Out of the three disciplines of navigation, bomb aiming and air gunnery which were you best at?

Oh I suppose navigation mainly because

41:00 there'd be more of it for one thing. Got more practice at it. Yes I'd say navigation.

Tape 3

00:33 **Okay Keith you travelled around Australia a lot doing this training. What were the conditions like that you lived in?**

They were all very much the same. Wooden huts, unlined. They were pretty hot in the warm weather such as Parkes in October. They were very cold particularly in Cootamundra

01:00 in the winter. We used to sleep in our inner flying suits. We'd get into our pyjamas and then we'd pull on these inner flying suits and then we'd get under the blankets, that's how cold it was. And that's, as I said, that's where I first had chill blains. Whereas up in Scotland I was there in a big freeze and didn't suffer from chill blains at all and it was a lot colder in Scotland.

01:30 But I don't know it just happened at Cootamundra. And the food was monotonous but no doubt it was healthy and we were probably as fit as we'd ever been in our life time. Plenty of P.T. [physical training] and good nutrition. But as soon as we got out of camp for a week you'd go away and have something different.

02:00 **What do you mean by something different?**

Well Bradfield Park for instance, I recollect as soon as we broke camp. If we had a weekend pass or a Friday night pass we'd be on that train at Lindfield and straight into the town hall where they had the church hut. And my favourite was

02:30 sausages and eggs. They were beautiful sausages, they were run by the ladies. And then we'd go down to the pub and have a few beers at usually the Australia before it closed at six o'clock. So we used to manage that, a quick meal and a couple of beers before six o'clock.

What were the rules about uniform in your spare time?

Oh we had to wear a uniform, yes. Yes I don't

03:00 recall anybody getting around in civvies [civilian clothes]. They were well and truly parked somewhere when you joined up.

How did people react to you in the street in your smart RAAF uniforms?

Oh I think they just accepted us as being part of the landscape so to speak.

03:30 **Did you feel a particular pride in what you were doing at that stage during training?**

Oh we were all proud to be part of the effort I suppose. Oh yes as far as it goes. I don't think we were running around waving the flag or anything like that. We were just part of the organisation.

What were your thoughts about Empire, King and country at this stage?

04:00 Oh as then and as now I swore on the bible to defend the King and his descendants until I die. So that's an oath. And oh yes I think we're all pretty loyal. A few of us might have joked about it. Oh there were always jokes about royalty

04:30 but I think basically we're all very loyal.

Can you explain or describe to me, not being much of a navigator myself what dead reckoning is?

Well it's debatable what dead reckoning means. The first word dead - one of the theories is that it's the shortened form of

05:00 deduced reckoning. In another words we think we are there sort of thing. Put a mark on the chart. Having gone on a certain heading, like east, draw a line east and the length of the line depends on the speed you're going through the air and then of course you have to make allowances for temperature and pressure and things like that and

05:30 the speed varies. And then that's what you call doing an air plot. In other words, no wind. And then you try and find what the wind has been blowing where you've been and then draw on a wind vector down about, and the end of that you put a spot. And so that's the dead reckoning spot where I reckon we were a few minutes ago. It's not instantaneous but we were a few minutes

06:00 ago. So that's dead reckoning. Does that make it clear?

It does, thank you. How did you work out wind up there?

Wind? Oh well have you ever heard of the parallelogram of forces?

I've heard of it but…

Well that's basically what we've worked on, the parallelogram of forces, excepted taking the four

06:30 corners, you only took three. So one of the lines in the triangle would be your heading I was talking about. And the distance along that heading at the air speed you're flowing. And the other one line is your length as determined by your ground speed. And then one joins to the other and that's what they call the wind vector and you measure that on your chart and say, "Oh the wind's coming from the north east and so

07:00 much over such a time." And so it's so many knots. So that's the basic principle, the parallelogram of forces. And to find that wind to determine where to put your deduced reckoning that was the main effort in those days, to find out what the wind was. Whether you were going forwards or backwards for instance. And that mightn't be as

07:30 silly as it sounds because there was an aeroplane over the Atlantic years ago, a commercial airliner where the navigator took his fix off Greenland somewhere and he flew for an hour and an hour later he found his second fix was right over the first one. In other words he'd be flying into a howling head wind the same speed as the aeroplane through the air. So he was getting nowhere.

That could be

08:00 **intensely dangerous.**

Yes it could be. But finding a wind there were several methods. The common one, the old postal command one was fire one heading and then sixty degrees off to one side, then one hundred and twenty degrees back and then on and that gave you, one drift, two drift, three drift. And you put them onto a little hand held computer with your air speed along it.

08:30 And well you've got the wind. And with the three drifts that was one way of doing it. Another one was a timed run between two points which you'd pick up on a chart. That'd give you your ground speed. Well you knew your air speed from your indicators on the aeroplane and the difference between your ground speed and your air speed would give you your wind. And the drift, you'd take a

09:00 drift too. But nowadays it's all done with these - gyroscopes - they work out how far the aeroplane has progressed across the earth and how fast it's going between those two points. So it's all done in the aeroplane itself, man is not required.

09:30 All he's got to do is read the instruments. "Oh we've got a nor-easter [north-easterly wind] at a hundred knots." Or something like that. Just a matter of pressing a button, it makes life easy.

… month's course in Parkes, where did you go?

We were posted to Bradfield Park, what they called personnel depot I think, No. 2 PD.

10:00 With people coming and going. They were still doing their initial training one part of it. But the depot part of it was sent there as a holding stage for - oh about a week. And that week we were given leave. Pre-embarkation leave. So I popped home to see the family. Waved them goodbye.

10:30 Came back and waited for the call and the buses turned up and took a big draft of us to join the ship in the harbour. Queen Elizabeth. And that was the situation then.

What were your thoughts at this stage about going to war?

11:00 One of wonder, what's going to happen. I didn't think I'd ever come back for one thing. Oh no I was prepared to be written off. Oh yes at some time or other. Not in a kamikaze sense or something like that but I thought, well the law of averages are that I won't survive. But it didn't get me down. I tried not to think of it.

11:30 Otherwise you'd go mad.

Have you read Catch 22?

No.

What was it like saying goodbye to your family?

Sad. I didn't see my father for instance. As I mentioned he was down working in a munitions factory at Warrnambool. I saw my

12:00 mother and my sister and waved them goodbye. They were both very tearful of course. And then away to sea. Which was rather gratifying really because going back to Parkes, one of the first things we had

to do when we arrived at Parkes as at all RAAF training establishments was fill our palliasses

12:30 with straw. Fresh straw. Fresh bed. And being spring time and the fresh straw I got an awful bout of hay fever. I sneezed my way through Parkes for a month and for a couple of weeks or whatever it was before I joined the ship. And two days at sea and no more hay fever. So

13:00 it was wonderful being at sea. But very boring at sea.

What did you do to pass the time?

Played a lot of cards for one thing.

Do you remember which games you played?

Played bridge. That's why I don't play now. Well I got to the stage - my wife wants me to take up bridge and I'd say, "No. I've sat on my tail too long at bridge." And I

13:30 played just after the war with the Qantas crews out at various stops along the route. And I'd got to the stage where I'd be dealing cards in my sleep. And I'd wake up with a start. "Double, three double." And this sort of thing. So yes we played a lot of cards. We read a lot. We yarned a lot amongst ourselves as we were

14:00 a pretty mixed grill of characters. I remember one and he really was a character in our cabin. He was a professor from Western Australia University. And as a matter of fact both he and I were selected to - as replacements on 2/16th Squadron. They even flew a Bristol Bombay [transport/bomber plane]

14:30 down to pick us up. So that started my flying career in the Middle East.

Can you describe for us the living conditions on the ship, the Queen Elizabeth.

In a sense yes. We were very well fed. We were living like kings really in those days on that ship compared to the American ship coming home which was

15:00 pretty ordinary. As one of the fellows jokingly remarked. He said, "When are we going to have a second meal twice?" Which was pretty true. Because the crew were still the Cunard [trans-Atlantic shipping line] crew and they were under charter for the Government. It was definitely a Cunard ship and not a Royal Navy ship but under charter I suppose.

15:30 What we used to call in Qantas a wet lease. They'd hire the aeroplane and the crew. And we were very well looked after. We had a character of a steward attached to our cabin. We were about only six in the cabin. It was a first class cabin too. We were in tiered bunks of course. And we used to graft this little character's palm with a silver coin so to speak

16:00 and he'd bring a beautiful ham up from the galley for us to have supper after our cards and that sort of thing. Whereas coming home on the USS America it was two meals a day and they were rather sketchy and pretty ordinary food to say the least. So yes we were well cared for on that trip.

How many per cabin?

We had six in this cabin. A12 I seem

16:30 to remember. And the contrast with the American ship was - it was a suite with a cabin and a sitting room attached. And we had twelve air force fellows in one room and twelve American infantry officers in the other cabin. And it was twenty four and one bathroom.

17:00 And we soon worked out - and the water would only stay on for a limited time in the morning to have a quick shower or whatever. So we soon organised these fellows with their big bulbous helmets. "Come on fellows first up fill them up with water." And they'd be lined up around the bathroom. So if the showers ran dry at least we had a bit of fresh water to at least have a sponge down.

17:30 **Did you take with you any trinkets for good luck?**

No no.

Were you a superstitious kind of person? Did you believe in taking a good luck trinket?

No the only thing that I had was what we called our maiden tickets hanging around - our identity tags. No nothing like that.

18:00 **Can you recreate the journey to the Middle East for us?**

Well yes with the Queen Elizabeth and the Queen Mary, they were the two big ships in the convoy. And one of the Australian cruisers as escort. Our first stop was Perth, not Perth, Fremantle.

18:30 And we took more troops on board there. Off to Trincomalee which is the north part of Ceylon. No doubt to refuel and take on fresh water.

How long did you stop there for?

A very short time I think. Only about twelve hours or even less maybe from memory. And we were off again. And

19:00 these ships really battle on to coin a phrase. Something like thirty knots they cruised at. And they used to alternate. The Elizabeth would lead the two of us one night and the next night or day, the Queen Mary would take over in front and they'd go like that. One after the other.

19:30 And the air force fellows on board were - or at least our group - we were designated fire crew. And we had certain stations on the ship to check there was no fire or sign of a fire about. And it was a big ship of course. What was it eighty three thousand tonnes or something like that. And not one of us on that trip found every fire station

20:00 when you were allocated duty on fire station. They'd come back and say, "Did you find number twelve?" "Oh yes no trouble at all. Number twelve was down on C Deck." "Darned if I could find it." But not one of us could find every fire station on our watch. We'd miss out somewhere. And I recall going past the engine room, many a time and the door came open

20:30 and it was like the hammers of hell. The heat coming out, it was like a blast of hot air. Terrific engines going down there. And shovelling I suppose oil into them, the heat was immense. And I believe the firemen down below only worked twenty minute shifts because it was so hot. And they'd come up

21:00 and they'd fill them up with beer. Good old flat English beer. Apparently that's how they survived. Well that's the story that went around. I also recall an Aboriginal AIF [Australian Imperial Force] soldier guarding one of these fire points near the engine room. And I said, "Can I have a look in there?" And he's out with his rifle and he said, "No." Just like that. "Nobody past here but crew member." So

21:30 fair enough no argument, he was doing his duty. As I said a lot of us went down with flu just as we approached the Red Sea. I didn't see much of Africa going past at all until we arrived at Port Tewfik [Suez Canal]. My first experience of the hospital system there where we all stretched out in bed

22:00 and it was the CO's inspection, the head doctor and the matron were coming around. And I was stretched out on the bed looking like death warmed up and they came along to me. And, "What's the matter with him? On your feet." And the matron said, "He can't get up Sir." "Oh alright." If you could stand you did.

How long were you out of action for?

22:30 I'd say only for about three or four days. But I was out like a light, I came good sort of thing. And unfunnily enough I caught flu again later in the East when I was up and about and I ended up in Palestine on sick leave at Tel Aviv and that was very pleasant.

23:00 **So you landed, you arrived near the Southern Suez Canal?**

At Port Tewfik yes.

What were your first impressions?

Well the first thing I saw was the first Wellington I'd laid eyes on and it was flying straight at the ship as we were coming in. And we were out on the bow looking at the port coming up and here's this aeroplane coming straight at us. And one of the fellows said and I

23:30 agreed, "It looks like a bi plane Wellington." Because it was the wing and another wing under it. But as it peeled past us it had this great big ring under it, what's called a wedding ring whimpy. For exploding any magnetic mines. It used to fly around the shipping coming in with this great big wedding ring under it. And that was the first impression.

24:00 And the next impression wasn't very pleasant because it was a pretty smelly place, Port Tewfik I can tell you, or it was in those days. And then we went on a train trip up to our camp at Aboukir Bay. That brings back a memory too because going along the train which crawled. Pretty rough accommodation on the train too. We passed

24:30 two prisoners of war camps. One was Italian and one lot of Germans. And they had quite a few collected there too. And the Italians were busy building beautiful monumental things in their camp out of sand

25:00 and they were very skilfully done. And then onto the German camp, well they were like a bunch of caged animals. They were hanging onto the wires and screaming abuse at us. And we were, hope we don't catch up with these characters. That was their purpose no doubt to frighten the daylights out of us. And they probably succeeded. And that brings us back to the Queen Elizabeth.

25:30 Talking to the crew, what the Elizabeth used to do and the Mary too no doubt, was pick up a load of these war prisoners and cart them off to Canada. And one of these crew members on the Queen Elizabeth was saying that these Germans were very - or could not be convinced that they were on the Queen

26:00 Elizabeth because it had been sunk by U-boats [Unterseeboot, German submarine]. So yes that's a

funny aside.

How close did you get to the prisoner of war camps?

Oh we were - the canal itself - you can imagine the canal going through Egypt there and the Sinai Peninsular. The railway is very close to the canal, you can look over and see the canal over there. And just over the other side of the canal were all these

26:30 characters behind barbed wire. So we were quite close to them.

What sort of physical condition did they appear to be in?

I would say pretty harsh because - oh they'd get them tent accommodation no doubt. But we didn't have time to study that much even though the train was crawling pretty slowly. Then we got to Aboukir

27:00 Bay. I've forgotten the name of the place where they had this reception camp for us. And we lived under canvas there for a week or so. And this was November '41. It was getting onto winter time and it was pretty cool living in a tent at that time around Alexandria. Just outside Alexandria.

27:30 But enabled us to go to town and see Alexandria. For a week that we were there, a week or two weeks on the canal, where they had, oh several thousand air crew waiting to be posted to operational training units down in Africa.

28:00 Like Kenya and Rhodesia. But that came to a halt with the state of the war in Russia because they'd flown all the training aeroplanes which were mainly Bristol Blenheims apparently, flown them over to Russia to help the Russians. They were running out of aircraft. So that was pretty soul destroying in that Middle East Pool because sitting on your tail

28:30 waiting for something to happen and nothing happened - that's when war became very boring. But we were assigned jobs there such as anti aircraft duty which meant sitting in a gun pit with a Vickers gun hoping to shoot down a German aeroplane if you're told to do so. But we were told not to do so because

29:00 if we fired on them the chances are they'd come back and drop a bomb on us. Which was probably true because one night I was on gun duty and this JU88 [German Junkers dive-bomber] floated over the landscape - I can still see him in the moonlight, it was definitely a JU88. But he was just a bit too far away to get a shot at anyway. But he was obviously on a reconnaissance job flying around seeing what was going on.

29:30 Because the canal area was a big concentration of everything that came off ships whether they were men or materials were planted around the desert there somewhere. So they were probably seeing what the supply situation was like on our side.

You mentioned that morale was pretty low. How did that impact on you? Can you describe the mood in the camp.

Oh sheer boredom.

30:00 But at least you had the opportunity if you had a bit of money you'd pop off to Cairo for a day or two. And that meant paying the rent of course and buying some food. Which was good you got away from camp food. You had your few laughs because at this camp they had Italian prisoners of war working

30:30 around the place, like keeping the place tidy. Keeping the road clear of rocks and obstructions sort of thing. And they'd be in the charge of one RAF guard. And the guard, the Italians would be told where to go and the guard'd marching along behind them and I've even seen him one day hand over his rifle to one of the Italians at the rear rank while he popped into a nearby

31:00 latrine. And came back and joined them and got his rifle back. So they were pretty friendly the Italian POW's [Prisoners of War]. We even had them on 458 Squadron working in the mess, our sergeant's mess as cooks. And that brings me back to the very first trip I did on 458. We got in about two o'clock in the morning I think from

31:30 our abortive sortie and pretty hungry. And we could smell this savoury smells coming from the cook house which was made up of aircraft packing cases and we could see chinks of light there, so there was a bit of activity going on. And we could hear voices. And somebody went over and pulled the door open and said, "How about some mungaria?" Which is Arabic for food. And they said, "Oh go away

32:00 go away." And they were POW's telling us to get lost. And they were having a nice supper.

How did your situation of inactivity at that stage change?

Well when we eventually got postings some fellows went off to reconnaissance flights which had

32:30 - oh long trips to do such as across to the other side of the African continent. So that was an interesting life for them. I used to occasionally meet up with them in Cairo and like the two of us, were picked up to go to 2/16 Squadron which was another reconnaissance flight. And that was a very interesting and short career.

33:00 In fact that's where I thought my career would end - did I record this earlier about the 24th July 1942 - that's burnt into the brain. Two of 2/16 Squadron aircraft were up behind the El Alamein lines at a field hospital. What we used to do was fly from our base just outside Cairo

33:30 up this forward landing. You couldn't call it an aerodrome but a flat ground. And a couple of tents and a field telephone. And the fellow on the field telephone would give us the all clear to fly at not height, up to this field hospital. Fortunately flat ground again, land and pick up severe wounded,

34:00 walking wounded or stretcher cases, half and half. Only did two trips. The first one - also it burnt into the brain. I looked in there after I'd loaded these characters and one who looked like a Gurkha [Nepali troops from the British Army] - this big black moustache and big pearly white teeth. And I smiled at him too but I realised that

34:30 he had his chin blown off and I was looking at all his teeth down into what was left of his jaw. And he's sitting up there and I gave him a nice big smile, the poor guy. And of course the thing was to get in and out of that area quickly and that's why the fellow on the field telephoned back at this advance base, get the all clear from the air force that it was safe to go up.

35:00 Well a couple of runs there and we were jumped just as we were coming into land. Two aeroplanes just coming into land. And the cannon shells, I can still hear them going through our aeroplane. And they don't go brrrrrr, like that. Not the twenty millimetres [cannons] used on the 109s [German Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter planes], they go boonk boonk boonk, like that. And it shot away our rudder

35:30 control and the pilot had not rudder control but he put it down safely. And then of course everybody out. And I was up in the nose of this Bristol Bombay trying to map read our way to this field hospital again. We used to map read on, oh there was a wrecked tank there, and there was a burnt out motor vehicle over there. And if you just come over this rise we should come to the hospital. Well we were jumped as I say. The whole squadron of

36:00 Messerschmitt 109-Gs which hadn't been seen before in Africa. The 109-F had a square wing tip and the 109-G had a rounded wing tip. And we were astonished not only to see the aeroplane but to see this marque of 109 plane that hadn't been seen before. It was a hot ship sort of thing. Anyway they sent down two aeroplanes.

36:30 Another eight were circling around up top in case of any trouble from our guys and they destroyed our two aircraft on the ground. And not a man was hurt in that operation. I got a gravel rash on my elbow which lasted for years. And I was booted out of the front hatch while the aeroplane was still rolling along the ground. I've still got a bad shoulder and a bad back.

37:00 There was a bit of humour to it because on the way down the previous afternoon with a load of - as I said we were on about our second trip of troops down to Cairo - we had this New Zealand medical orderly on board. And we'd made this trip deliberately late in the afternoon because the turbulence was down and some of these guys that were wounded you'd see the

37:30 blood running out of their midriff when there was a slight bump. And he was chatting to me and he said, "This is better than the life of the army. It's nice and smooth and nice and cool." And I said, "Yeah to get away from the dust and all that sort of thing." "Yeah this'll do me." And less than twenty four hours both of us were down one of the biggest bomb craters in North Africa where we'd

38:00 picked ourselves up, dived into the hole as this aeroplane was coming in to finish our aeroplane off. It was still ticking over, the crews had all scattered down holes here and there. How we missed landing in a hole I don't know but we did. And I said to this Kiwi medical orderly I said, "What do you think of the air force now?" And he said, "Oh I think I'll stay

38:30 with the army." And then over to the hospital itself and they - of course a lot of them were rushing out of the hospital to see if we were alright and they gave us a treat. Some tinned peaches on a plate. No pears, tinned pears, they were a luxury in those days. And just in time to witness

39:00 a burial party with the Padre standing there with his white surplice or whatever they call it around his neck. And his bible in hand and he was remonstrating with the soldiers for loading the deceased on a truck. And being deceased for some time it's like loading logs of wood.

39:30 They were picking them up and tossing them and buummp, and the Padre started crying. He said, "Oh boys, boys please show a little decorum." Or something like that. He was literally weeping. And these soldiers as they went around each body wrapped up in canvas they'd take off one of his identity tags. And one fellow said,

40:00 "Oh old Bill you got it did you?" He apparently knew the guy. And they became very hardened no doubt those fellows.

How did it affect you seeing a scene like that?

I was glad to get out of it, glad to get home. Then another 2/16 Squadron Bristol Bombay [plane] came up and picked up the two crews and flew us back. But unfortunately there were no customers for the

army, they had to wait. And a couple of days later we lost another aeroplane and some general staff were on board and they were clobbered and that ended 2/16th's venture up too close to the front line area.

Tape 4

00:32 **Keith at what point were you posted to 2/16 Squadron as far as date?**

Date, that would've been about March 1942.

Okay can I just ask you then, when you were sitting and waiting in that holding camp, how was morale affected by the news that Japan was rampaging through Asia

01:00 **and on its way to Australia?**

Very poorly particularly when we saw, I think it was the - a lot of the 8th Division going past to join ships to go to Australia. And yes that had a very depressing effect on the fellows. And there was a call - these guys going past on their way home. They'd say, "Hooroo

01:30 home for Easter." And things like that. So the morale wasn't - we weren't happy to say the least. One fellow we heard of even smuggled himself back to Australia and turned himself in. Well theoretically he could've been shot for desertion or something. And he got out of it saying, "No I'm here to fight the war, so send me off somewhere."

02:00 But I think they sent him back to the Middle East.

You must've wondered at times what you were doing sitting around twiddling your thumbs when Australia was under threat?

That's right. And of course we had - there's always a sad sack in any community and there was one guy there. He used to poke his head through the tent flap and say, "Guess what I've heard."

02:30 Or, "We've all going to be sent here." Or, "We're going to be here for another three months." Or whatever. And that wasn't very funny. And at that same camp, one of the bug bears was life in the camp was having a good bed. So those who could afford it would be off to Cairo and come home with a camp stretcher. Well the

03:00 jolly camp stretchers, they were fabulous, that's really living, to have a bed. But the jolly things would only last a few weeks. I got myself one but they just fell apart, poorly made. And it was a luxury if you could win a stretcher, like the ones they used to carry the troops on aeroplanes on 2/16 Squad. When I say there

03:30 was an expression, "Where'd you get that?" "Oh won it." If they could pick up a camp stretcher somewhere that was real luxury. Sleeping on the ground on your ground sheet and blanket, that was your bedding underneath and a blanket on top. The area was, oh more than enough of scorpions around the place.

04:00 You always had to shake your bedding before you got to bed that there wasn't a scorpion. They used to love our bedding so you wouldn't leave your bedding around during the day, you'd end up with a scorpion in it. So little unpleasantries like that.

How did you come to be posted to 2/16 Squadron?

I don't know. Can't answer that. One of the quirks of war. They probably needed a couple

04:30 of extra navigators and we were off. The professor and myself.

Where was that squadron based?

A place called [El] Khanka. Eighteen miles by road outside Cairo. Roughly north-west and I was taking some notes

05:00 about it recently. It was a bit of reasonably flat countryside with a palm plantation on one side and an asylum on another. And on the other part of the perimeter there was a sewerage outlet and the other one was fairly clear for just cultivation.

05:30 If you got down wind from that sewer system that wasn't very pleasant.

I'd like you to tell us your memories of the Bristol Bombay.

Oh very fond of it because it did the job for which it was built. You could land them practically anywhere where you had a bit of flat country. And they carried a hefty load. Very poor defences.

06:00 You had a gun in the front and you're supposed to have a gun in the turret at the back but you had a

couple of broomsticks put there for visual deterrent only. Because we were told if a man got in the turret of a Bombay it didn't fly too well. But landing on rough country you could look down the cabin and see the wheel struts pushing

06:30 the fuselage in and out and occasionally you'd hear ping of a rivet being popped. Against the metal sides of this. And we had a fitter armourer carried on board for this very reason. So when you pull up at a stop and if you had popped a few rivets, out he'd get and hammer away and you'd have repairs on the spot. And that reminds me of a trip out to

07:00 Siwa Oasis where we had to pick up a, I think he was a Royal New Zealand Air Force pilot who'd been shot down and he was wounded. We had to get him back home. And also fly in supplies to this Siwa Oasis which was also a base for LRDP [long range desert patrol]. Have you heard of them? Well

07:30 we came there and landed in amongst a heap of two hundred litre empty drums which they'd scattered around the landing area because they didn't know we were coming that day. And my first meet up with one of these LRDP fellows. He had a big slouch hat, flattened down. No shirt, brown as a berry. Bandolier

08:00 around him. And a couple of grenades down here and a tommy gun. And he said, "Oh g'day. I took a few shots at you, didn't know who you were at first." I said, "Well thank goodness you missed." So we spent the night there and had a swim in Cleopatra's pool which is an engineering feat in itself because the water level

08:30 is maintained automatically throughout the years. How they did it I don't know. Lovely moonlight night. And took off early in the morning with this poor guy who had a smashed up leg and it had gone gangrenous. Have you ever smelt gangrene? It's not a very pleasant smell. We had him all the way back to Cairo. That was that particularly trip. But the aeroplane as I said, even

09:00 the undercarriage was knocking aside - fortunately these fuel drums were empty. Just tossing them aside like that. And the props were reasonably high off the ground so they'd clear any obstruction such as that.

What problems did the desert provide as far as navigation and visibility?

Well visibility was generally good unless you

09:30 had a camp scene, that was a dust storm which you couldn't see anything. So nobody flew then anyway. And you even put your gas masks on to breathe. And when you'd take them off you'd have a black face all around - even though the desert looked brown when the dust got onto you it was black. So - but generally the visibility was good

10:00 but the ground features were pretty difficult to identify. And you got onto a bit of dead reckoning at times. And also known land marks as I was telling you earlier in a bit of low level navigation, there was a burnt out tank there and a burnt out weapons carrier over there. And keep between them and you'd arrive at the hospital sort of thing. But the Siwa Oasis itself, you'd see that coming up.

10:30 We went to a couple of Oases, one up near the border with Libya. And that was one of my earlier trips. And that was a funny one too. We were delivering supplies to this army unit there. Tommies they were [British soldiers] and apparently they'd just taken this fort from the Italians a short time before.

11:00 And they said, "Would you like a cup of tea." "Oh that'd go down well." So we were sitting in this tent while the other fellows were unloading the aeroplane. And you always carried your mug around and your knife and fork if you landed somewhere where we'd get a meal. And they said, "Would you like a cup of tea?" "Yes." So he poured this tea out and I looked at it and the flies

11:30 were all over the place. And they were dive bombing the milk and there's a soldier sitting like you opposite me, and he's got his rifle at the ready across his lap. And he's saying, "What's the matter are the flies worrying you?" And I said, "Oh they're not too good." And he said, "Oh you just pick them out and toss them out." And then I looked at this grey mess in my mug and he said, "Is something

12:00 wrong with your tea?" I said, "It's got a funny colour. Just doesn't look right to me." And he said, "Oh it's probably the water supply." And I said, "Oh yeah probably." And he said, "Well when we arrived here our only water supply was the well, a couple of wells out there. And the I-tais [Italians] to make it unpleasant for us, before they departed they chucked a few of their dead down the well.

12:30 And I said, "Well that's alright." He said, "We fixed that, we chucked a bag of lime down there." And I'm looking at this tea. Well I didn't finish my tea. I thought I'll have a drink of water out of my flask on board the aeroplane.

How many ops [operations] can you remember you did with 2/16?

Well I remember

13:00 the night we got lost of course. Standard patrol was either over around the heel of Italy or up through the Straits of Messina and north east towards Naples. And we'd fly a triangular course around there.

With what objective?

Locate a ship or shipping. Which we'd do occasionally.

13:30 We located one that shouldn't have been there and it was a hospital ship and it was going backwards and forwards. It was a listening post as we learnt later in the war. All brilliantly lit of course and Red Cross on its side. Well after a few of these triangular trips well time came to go home and turn left and head back to Malta down the Strait again. And there was no opening.

14:00 All we could see was land mass in the dark. So back again and have another look and around about the area until we actually got ourselves located on the western end of Sicily itself. By which time we were cutting it a bit fine fuel wise and time wise because we liked to get home to Malta in dark

14:30 before passing Pantelleria which was a little island just north of Tripoli [Libya] there between the end of Sicily and Malta. And with units of the Italian air force, fighters there. And as I say we'd stayed out a bit too long and it was just on dawn when we were passing Pantelleria and we could see it on our starboard.

15:00 Just see it and we were down right as low as we could get. And we got back from that trip with just enough fuel to taxi in. So that was one that comes to mind of course.

That must've been with 458 Squadron?

458.

Okay I was talking about 2/16. How did you come to leave 2/16 and go to 458.

Oh 458 Squadron was reforming on a base down the canal called Shallufa [Suez Canal]. When I say

15:30 reforming they'd gone out to the Middle East but they'd lost a lot of aeroplanes and they'd gone into oblivion there for a few months. Well they were reforming when I joined them. The idea was to - they'd come out from England, originally from Yorkshire and the idea was to get as many Australian air crew as possible on this reformed 458. And

16:00 in that case they picked the eyes out of 2/16 Squadron because we had quite a few Aussies there. We had Americans too strangely enough who'd joined up before the war. And yes, that's how - that would be about September '42 if I remember rightly.

And they were flying different aircraft?

16:30 Who 458? Wellingtons. Yes Wellington was the stable there.

What marque Wellington were they flying?

Oh 1C's I'd say but they went into various different marques depending on the job they did because, basically they were 1C's with Bristol Pegasus engines, the same as on the Bombays.

17:00 And they were given different marks depending on the jobs. The amount of radar gear like there was one they had just the two yagi [radar antennas on each wing of Wellington bombers]. And then there was another version where they had those and what we used to call the stickleback, they had a row of antennae along the top of the fuselage and that used to look out sideways.

17:30 And that was another mark. It didn't do much for our flying qualities. It really slowed them down with all this gear.

Were you happy to be flying on Wellingtons?

Oh yes, yes. They were - the beauty of the Wellington, it was very strongly made. In a prang you had a fair chance of survival. It wouldn't collapse or anything like that

18:00 readily. And you could also, I'd worked out very early in the piece, if the worse came to the worse you could punch a hole through the geodetics and I could just fit through. But I didn't have to do that. But I had to pop out the astrodome in a prang we had at Malta coming back from a trip.

Would you have got out the geodetic with your parachute on?

No. No. But you wouldn't need it if you were on the ground. It was mainly for ground evacuation.

18:30 **What was the comfort level like inside the plane in your position?**

It was better than a Catalina I can tell you. It was a nice comfortable swing seat. And chart table in front. Compass there in front where you could check the heading, the path it was flying sort of thing. And they had heaters running along

19:00 the floor. You could turn your heating up or down. Yeah it was reasonably comfortable. We didn't fly all that high except, oh a couple of trips down to Tripoli where we were mining from ten thousand feet. Well that was getting up a bit. And a bit stupid when I look back on it. But that was our briefing. Drop them from ten thousand feet to avoid the flak. But you can see flak

19:30 at ten thousand feet. They had some good guns there.

In that Wellington you were performing all three roles of navigator, bombardier and front gunner?

They had taken out the front gun turret in those Wellingtons we flew. Had rear gun turret only. But no I

20:00 would not have had to man the guns, getting back at history, unless our tail gunner was killed and I'd had to pull him out and I'd have to take a gun. Take over the turret. And the chances are if he were killed the turret wouldn't work anyway. At least the guns would fire backwards. It was mainly navigation, the bombing side of it was an

20:30 embarrassing business because, one night there was a big combined Navy and Air Force effort around the Gulf of Taranto [Italy]. The Navy or Air Force had located a convoy and it was like the 4th of July. With all the shot and shell going on. Our aeroplane had one torpedo and

21:00 the rest of the bomb bay was laden with mines. Well the idea was to, a thing called the Mickey Mouse was the bomb distributor. And the bomb aimer looked after that. So they'd called up on the radio that they wanted a stick of flares dropped which we obliged, across the sky while the Navy

21:30 were getting stuck into these ships down on the surface. And as I said, like the 4th of July, there were flares everywhere, the sky lit up. You could see the sea and the ships quite plainly. And then called, "More flares, more flares." And I flicked down these - being as it was quite urgent apparently - so I madly flicked all these switches down and of course the eight switch or whatever it was,

22:00 was hooked up to the torpedo. And I let flew some torpedo from six thousand feet. And I wasn't very popular. And there were only eighteen in the Mediterranean at the time, they were very short of torpedoes. So they were down to seventeen on that count straight away.

Your torpedo wouldn't have survived that drop?

Oh it probably wouldn't. But it'd probably go straight

22:30 into the bottom of the Mediterranean.

Describe to us those early days of 458 Squadron when it was forming up and what was being done to get the squadron knitted together?

Oh we did a bit of training. The pilots went down the Red Sea - there was a field down there and a ship they'd practise their torpedo dropping on, daylight and night time. But mainly night time dropping.

23:00 And then we did a bit of practise bombing on a bombing range over at Palestine which was next door. And on that particular occasion, on one day we had the excitement of flying down below sea level. We flew along the Dead Sea so we were down below sea level. So that was bombing.

23:30 And a bit of gunnery for the gunners.

What's the technique in lining up and deploying a torpedo against a ship, as far as height and speed and method.

This is where I need my old mate, Bill McFadden with me because he got a ship early in the piece. And that's where he got his DFM [Distinguished Flying Medal]. I think between eight and a hundred and twenty feet, something like that was the

24:00 ideal height. And they were trained to visually, even at night estimate their height above the sea, judging by the horizon. And then they'd have to lay off, depending on the speed and angle of the ship, how far ahead of the ship to aim. And our pilot

24:30 he missed his drop one night there. He'd lined up beautifully and, well you don't hit them all.

What sort of distance would you be dropping that torpedo, away from the ship?

Oh I'd say half a mile, half a mile or less. Yes half a mile or less. The closer the better I suppose.

25:00 Because once they hit water the little prop on the front would unwind and it was immediately armed. So yes the closer the better.

There must be quite some risk in bringing an aircraft the size of a Wellington down that low and flying directly towards an armed vessel?

In some respects yes, but if you're down low you've got to remember that the ship can't always depress its gun down if you're down really low. A big ship. A small ship yes,

25:30 they'd have a better chance I suppose of hitting you. But yes the ship we attacked we were in and gone before they were aware of it no doubt. Because nothing was fired at us. Except one night of course our radar operator homed us onto some units of the Italian fleet. And we thought we'd

26:00 go and have a look at them but he brought us right up stern of these ships. And they certainly let fly at us when we flew over them. I can still smell the smoke from their funnels. They were oil-fired ships.

In a torpedo attack what was your role in the crew?

Mainly to keep track of where the aeroplane was going and sort out how long could we

26:30 stay about and that sort of thing. Because once we'd dropped our torpedoes and we could carry up to two, was to let them know back at base the best position as we could estimate at where the ships were or ship.

So the weapon was released by the pilot was it?

Yes he had a button on his control column.

So it wasn't sighted

27:00 **in from a bomb aimer's position or anything?**

No, no you couldn't because the nose, as I said, they'd taken the turret out. You couldn't see forward anyway once you were in the nose.

So you had a faring that covered the nose?

Yes, yes.

When you were forming up 458 Squadron, any accidents or anything in training?

27:30 Can't recall any really. No I think we were pretty accident free. But our pilot at the time he finished his tour of ops on Malta by landing about ceiling height. He stalled there and we came in with a great thump. Again my back. And the wings of the aeroplane went

28:00 forward like that. And the prop on the port side was slowly but surely still churning through the radio operator's position. And he was getting out like that. He had a couple of nicks in his Irving jacket [the famed 'bomber jacket', designed for the US Air Force by Irving Schott]. But he was unharmed. We got out of that one alright.

28:30 No fire. And that's when I think I popped out the astrodome.

The Wellington had a bit of a reputation for catching on fire in some ways. Did you ever experience that?

I don't know where that came from. I'd say there were plenty of other aeroplanes had a worse reputation such as the Lockheed and Loadstar.

29:00 Getting back to 2/16 Squadron they were running short of aeroplanes so they had this flight of Lockheed's and they wrote them off left, right and centre. 'Cause they used to swing on take off a bit. And if they lose one wheel and cartwheel in they burnt beautifully and very quickly.

29:30 More so than a Wellington.

Can you recall your first operational sortie with 458 to go out ship hunting?

Yes I can. That was the one where we came back and we couldn't get supper from these Italian cooks. The Battle of El Alamein was in full swing at the time and our

30:00 brief was to try and locate a ship or ships heading for Tobruk from Italy. The enemy had retaken Tobruk at this stage and so away we went and the first operation was to spear out north west of Alexandria to try and intercept this ship or

30:30 shipping heading for Tobruk. Well the first impression I had was looking out the side of the starboard side of the aeroplane which was easiest for me and I was astonished for me how red the cylinders of a Wellington were at night time. 'Cause most of my flying before that had been at day time when doing training and bombing and a bit of gunnery and that sort of thing. And

31:00 yes a soft red glow and I drew the pilot's attention to it and he said, "Oh no that's quite normal." I said, "Okay well look out the port side." And it's the fireworks going on at El Alamein, they were still laying down their heavy barrage. And guns, I've never seen anything like it. So we left those behind and up in the area and looking for these ships. And the first

31:30 disaster was our radar packed up. So we were literally searching in the dark. And the next thing we were into an active cold front, pouring rain and aeroplane bucketing around. And looking back on it you can see why the enemy chose to get their ships into Tobruk that night under bad weather. Bad

32:00 for us searching for them. So there wasn't a strike that night. So we just released our bombs and just scattered them around the sea in the general area and came back home. And as I say, it was an aborted sortie, couldn't do much about it.

What radar capability were you carrying then on the aircraft. What could it

32:30 **do?**

The ones that were, just looking ahead with these Yagi antennas as they call them, it had a range of a hundred and twenty nautical miles from memory. And that's as far as the scope went up. Probably had a further range but that was all it was designed for. And likewise on the

33:00 ones that had the side looking radars they were much the same. But it was only a land mass would come up as just a shimmer on the screen. And a ship would come up as we used to call it, as a blip on the screen. Depending on the size of the ship, the size of the blip. You would measure. And you could tell whether it was off to the left or off to the

33:30 right and hone in on the ship.

Who looked after that equipment?

We had a radar man on board yes. His job was to look at the radar. He used to wear - our man used to wear blue coloured goggles. Because looking at a green radar screen hour after hour could be a bit wearing on the eye sight no doubt.

34:00 **Whereabouts did he sit in the aircraft?**

He sat, oh mid ships. He was behind - there was the radio operator behind the pilots. Then the navigator, then the radar operator. Three in a row sort of thing on the port side of the aeroplane.

How would you be able to identify whether it was a friendly or an enemy ship?

You couldn't.

34:30 But if - you usually were briefed where your own shipping was. If any doubt you'd shoot off a challenge with your 'very' cartridges [illuminated tracer], red-green or a green-green, or a green-red. You had different times of the day for a challenge and a reply. So if you wanted to challenge, really

35:00 challenge a ship if in doubt you fired off a 'very' cartridge. But we didn't have to do that at any time. Or our crew didn't anyway.

And on a mission like that what sort of pay load would you be carrying?

Well either two torpedoes or one torpedo and a stack of

35:30 flares on that particular operation I was telling you about. But usually two torpedoes or if you were on an extended range job they'd put in an extra fuel tank. And you'd have one torpedo plus the fuel tank. And sometimes just all fuel if you were just search alone. The idea being that the search aircraft would go out and

36:00 if they located enemy shipping they'd whistle up the troops from Malta sort of thing. And up they'd come. You'd give them a position to fly to and they'd be most likely equipped with two torpedoes.

How did the Wellington handle the weight of two torpedoes?

We used to say, "The Wellington gets airborne with the curvature

36:30 of the earth." If you keep taxing far enough you'd take off. That was the Wellington 1Cs. But just towards the end of our career, a couple of trips we did back to Egypt we picked up these new Wellingtons with Hercules engines in them. And taking off was like taking off in a fighter relatively compared to the old ones. And of course a lot of them were down in power

37:00 too. The sand and dust in the Middle East didn't do those engines much good at all. I think it was a tribute to the ground crews, the engineers who kept the engines going anyway. The gyros on the aeroplanes, they got to the stage of being hopeless too, for steering purposes. So the dust of Malta - Malta was a very

37:30 dry place. And taxing along the runways there - although they're just about solid rock but there's still a lot of dust around. And you used to suck them up into the aeroplanes.

Must've been dusty inside the aircraft in that case as well?

Well a bit yes. Obviously when it gets into the pilot's panel, the gyro's there, there's dust in the aeroplane.

38:00 **Did the Wellington have a toilet aboard?**

Oh yes, yes it had a toilet.

Did you guys bother using it or did you have other methods?

Well we had a funnel and a tube but if we used it for other reasons, you weren't very popular.

What are the pros and cons of the Wellington in your memory?

38:30 Well I'd say there are basically more pros than cons. It was a very versatile aeroplane. I mean they bombed Berlin with them in the early stages of the war. And before they started becoming casualties. They were a strongly built aeroplane. They'd take a lot of punishment. You could shoot holes through a Wellington because there was a lot of air in a Wellington with

39:00 the geodetic construction whereas with an all metal aeroplane once you had a hole in it, well that took a bit of repairing and riveting and sheet metal cutters to work. The Wellington, if you had a bullet or shell went through, it'd go right through and all they had to do was snip out a bit of fabric with scissors and slap it on with Bostick glue. And that happened to us

39:30 a couple of nights at Malta. You'd go out and say, "Oh look at the big hole in this one. Back to bed boys." And the ground crew'd say, "No just hang on a minute, we'll fix that." And they'd get out the scissors and fabric and glue it on and, you're right and away you'd go. So they were very effective on quick repairs in that respect. They were slow, the CO's at Malta they ground all Wellingtons that

40:00 couldn't do a hundred and twenty knots. Well in the space of no time they had no Wellingtons in their air force.

Any other drawbacks to the plane?

I can't think of any off hand. Most of our fellows are still very attached to Wellingtons. Though later days when the

40:30 Lancaster bombers and things like that came on stream they got to be very pro-Lancasters and Halifaxes and so on. But the Wellington had a much safer record than the Halifax for instance. They lost many a man in the development of the Halifax.

Tape 5

00:31 **Okay Keith can you describe for us the thoughts going through your heads prior to going into a combat operation.**

Oh you always had to make sure you left a trail behind. By that I meant you tidied up your things. Because people might have to go through them and if you didn't arrive

01:00 home. That was one thing. And also wondering what one was going to be next. For instance at Malta, as I've mentioned before the system was - there were two squadrons in the group. 221 RAF Squadron and 458 Squadron and we used to alternate on nights. And as luck would have it

01:30 221 would always strike it rich the nights they'd go out. The enemy apparently alternated their shipping on alternate nights. So they used to clobber more than we did. But anyway you'd send out two search aircraft or maybe three, the western end of the Mediterranean and the eastern end, around the toe of Italy sort of thing or the heel. And the

02:00 rest of the crews who were rostered for duty that night would be out at the aerodrome. The aeroplanes would be primed up with torpedoes and fuel ready to go. A bit like a fighter operation and you would wait in this holding building with tiered bunks to get the call if required.

02:30 And to bring out the wolves to chase the fox sort of thing. And the call was a 491 coming through on the radio. And we had this aircraft receiver set up in the hut and everybody knew their Morse code pretty well. They knew the 491 pretty well too. And you'd hear all this Morse chattering away. And if a 491

03:00 came through in amongst all the hash everyone'd be awake like that. And the next thing would be the call from the operations room - J or L to take off and go to such and such a point. Or Q and B, the aircraft letters sort of thing to take off. And that's the way the system worked. So some of the fellows'd play cards but

03:30 I always elected for a sleep because if you had to go out on a call, it was a long night for sure. But you still sort of had a half ear cocked to that radio in the hut. And if you heard this 491 signal coming through you knew that was the call. It was on in other words. And you always had the odd character who'd leap out of his bunk and say, "There it is!"

04:00 And it wasn't. And just disturb our sleep. And so that was the system we operated under. And, oh well as to feeling, you were primed and ready to go sort of thing.

How were the crews formed?

You formed up as a crew at Shallufa when 458

04:30 reformed. You just sorted yourselves out around the mess. A captain would sort of round up a team and say, "Do you feel like flying with me?" Some of them knew each other sort of thing. So that worked out well. So your crews were basically formed back at our main base at Shallufa. Then when we got to

05:00 it wasn't as rigid as that. You had to be prepared to fly with anybody because if your crew weren't rostered to fly one night and you actually flew. But if second pilot or the radio man was sick they'd have to grab someone from elsewhere. But basically you flew as a fixed crew.

05:30 At our particular I suppose the radio operator alternated a bit more than anybody else. Our radar man was with us from woe to go. Our tail gunner was with us from go to woe. Our co-pilot was with us from whoa to go. But we had the odd change of radio operator and that was mainly I suppose

06:00 because of sickness. Might have had a bad cold or something like that. Yes that's the way it worked. Except when a crew member finished his operation. When I look back our captain had been over with 458 in the UK and he'd flown several operations there. So naturally he finished his tour first. And from then on

06:30 you were anybody's pigeon after that. They'd say, "We want you to fly with so and so tonight." And that was alright. At this stage we had quite a few Canadians in the squadron and I flew with one Canadian crew I remember. Well a Canadian captain anyway which was a bit startling because

07:00 before he took off and this is night time - he pulled his spectacles out and put them on and he was the first pilot I'd flown with who used spectacles. But anyway he was quite a competent man. He subsequently sunk a ship shortly after I finished my tour. And I flew with another Canadian captain. And his very next trip they bought it [got killed]. They didn't come home. And

07:30 I flew with another captain. Oh yes he was a character and still about. He used to be General Blamey's pilot [General Sir Thomas Blamey, 1884-1951, C-in-C Australian Military Forces, South West Pacific Area] down in Abyssinia [Ethiopia] flying Vickers Wellesleys - one engine. And he'd lost his engine one day. It wouldn't work so he had to put down in the middle of Abyssinia somewhere. And General Blamey gave him a bit of his tongue for

08:00 not getting him back home on time. And he was quite a character. And I remember one night saying to him, "Are you not steering the heading I gave you for some reason." He said, "Yes I am." He was looking at his gyro. And I told you about the gyros not working very well. They're inclined to trip up. And he had a packet of Sao biscuits over the compass and I took them away and said, "Have a look at the compass." He said,

08:30 "Oh yeah."

I can't imagine what it's like to put your life in the hands of somebody like that. How did that affect your nerves?

Oh we coped. I'm not shaking now am I? Or am I? No we - you've got realise that the air crew fellows were selected on probably pretty good parameters

09:00 that things we didn't know about. About from looking in our ears and eyes and down our throat, they probably looked into our brains too. Are they emotionally stable sort of thing? But yes. No we just took it as it came sort of thing.

Flying over the Middle East you talked about flying below sea level over the Dead Sea,

09:30 **what about what you'd see from the air. Did you see the pyramids?**

Oh we saw the Pyramids ever time you took off from Cairo. You'd look down south and see the pyramids there unless there was a dust storm blowing. They were unmistakable. And the trip down south in 2/16 Squadron. When we went down on the search, I don't think I told you about that. That was a bit of a disaster.

10:00 You'd see pyramids on the way down. We had to fly down to Wadi Halfa. That's well down south of Cairo. And wait orders to head out west to a spot in the desert. My God it was horrible country. Featureless virtually. To look for three South African Blenheims that were down in the desert. They'd got themselves lost on a navigational exercise.

10:30 And on the way down on this particular trip the pilot said, "I'm going to take this aeroplane up to see just how high it can fly." Which he did. And he took it up to about eighteen thousand feet indicated so that'd be probably more than eighteen thousand feet. And we were gasping on board. And he was a big healthy fellow. He was

11:00 standing up to it all right. And I remember the wireless operator he was wrapped up in a blanket like this and he was turning blue in the face. And I must've been turning blue too. And the next day we ere in Wadi Halfa. Went for a quick walk around the local streets and very very hot down there on the border

11:30 the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. You realise why those Nubians people are jet black. They have to be otherwise they'd be sunburnt. And I just spun in. Boomph like that in the street. And they carted me off to hospital. I spent a day and a half there. Obviously heat exhaustion. Probably the combination of the day before, flying at eighteen thousand feet.

12:00 And they just cooled me down and poured some water into me and I was up and about. And we went off on our search. We couldn't find these guys for about another day. And by the time, a Wellington from another squadron came down and they found them in twenty minutes and they were all dead. They'd landed successfully but they'd all

12:30 shot themselves. Gone mad with the heat. That was a terrible episode that. And then another thing with the pilot of our expedition, when we got to this outpost, there was a shot up hangar there and a few units of the army, again the long range desert patrol there using it as a way out base to come in behind the enemy lines. And I said,

13:00 "I suppose we'll do a square search." Which was a fundamental thing where you start off from where you know you are and you go around like that in ever increasing tracks of a square. Worked out on a visibility distance and eventually you must find what you're looking for. And he said, "I think we'll head up north east for about half an hour then we'll start a square search there."

13:30 And then the next day he said, "I think we'll head down south about half an hour and start our square search." The Wellington came down, started his square search from the aerodrome and he found the poor characters in twenty minutes. You know I still dream about that. And I think they lost about - oh three, four maybe at least a dozen

14:00 South African air force fellows they were. And they'd gone mad with the heat and some of them had drunk the liquid out of the compasses and of course it's got alcohol in it and that didn't help. And what else went wrong? Oh it was supposed to be a navigational exercise and none of them kept a plot of where they'd been so no wonder they got lost.

14:30 Anyway I'm diverting from your question.

What sort of operations did you do with 458 Squadron?

Mainly search. Search and - more search than attack as it turned out to be. And a couple of mine-laying operations.

Can you describe a mine laying operation for us?

Well the ones I think

15:00 would be unproductive are the ones on Tripoli [Libya] where we were briefed to drop our mines from ten thousand feet and they were dropped with parachutes. Well you can imagine how accurate the drop would be. Ten thousand feet up there and the wind drifting them off. Where on earth would they land? Somewhere in the Mediterranean that was it. But later on we did some - you had to do what you were told in other words.

15:30 So later on we laid some mines off a little landing point between Tripoli and Benghazi where we came in low, quite low. More like the Catalina mining and dropped them opposite the pier. And that was a bit exciting because they fired at us and they went pretty close. They had guns there for obvious reasons.

16:00 Yes that was another side show, the mining as well as the torpedoes.

What exactly was involved with the mining - laying the mines?

Shipping, they're trying to see – Rommel [Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, 1891-1944, Commander German Afrika Korps] badly needed armour. He got a convoy load of armour. I only saw that last night, the first episode of Rommel on the ABC television. I think he got in over fifty tanks

16:30 and weapon carriers in one convoy. And that had a big impact on the desert campaign. He was back again towards Cairo. And of course Tobruk was an important port too. We didn't mine Tobruk. It was a bit of a hot bed Tobruk, very heavily defended. But this is where

17:00 the torpedo operation came in. I seem to recall that they got about one ship in a month into Tobruk there at one stage. This is when the enemy held it. And that ship was subsequently sunk by aerial bombing. So the whole operation of mining and torpedoing was to get those ships bringing in the supplies to the Africa Corp.

17:30 And it was pretty effective as it turned out. I can't say about the mines, didn't hear about the mines.

What did the mines look like?

Rather uninteresting really. They were like the big long overload fuel tanks we used to put in the Wellington at times. About as long as that table and

18:00 about that diameter. And they weren't streamlined at all. They were just a big long tank looking thing. And the tail had a parachute in it so that when it dropped from the aeroplane they didn't drop into the water and smash up, they dropped in and they slowly but surely and certainly sunk to the bottom. They're not like the ones I thought they'd be like

18:30 globes with horns sticking out of them. But they were more for the Navy and they'd be anchored to the

bottom. But we had these big long things. Magnetic or acoustic mines. They're a crafty thing because they could work them so that they would become active straight away. Or they'd lie inactive for as long as they liked. So the mine sweepers would come in

19:00 and sweep around perhaps and say to their friends, "Okay the channel's clear, you can bring your ships in." But they'd been set for three days or something like that and the ship would come in and bang. So they could do all sorts of things with them. And likewise they become inert after a certain time and this is what they did with mining at Manila [Philippines] with the Catalinas. They mined the approach to Manila Bay and

19:30 they bottled up the Japanese there and then when the Americans wanted to go in with their shipping the mines had deactivated. They worked out how long it'd take to isolate the enemy shipping there and then the mines were inactive. All done with salt I believe. Little ring of - like a counter you see on a roulette table

20:00 would fit in over the detonator or the activator of the mine. Not the detonator so much, the activator. And depending on the depth of the salt would determine how long before the mine became active. And I've forgotten how they deactivated but no doubt some other similar simple device like

20:30 salt dissolving in water.

What did you most enjoy about the work you were doing?

I'm joking now, I'm thinking about the pay. Because the first thing that the RAF did to us when we arrived at Egypt was took away our RAAF pay books, which

21:00 were very good because it was like a bank book. It told you, your name, your rank and your pay rate. And when you were last paid and that was that. And if you had a credit balance you could borrow on it at times if you were in dire straits and that was that. So they took these pay books away from us and gave us the RAF paybook which said, name, rank and number. Paid x number of Egyptian pounds for instance

21:30 or Maltese pounds on such and such a date. And that could be anything, anything. Sometimes the fellow's line up in a pay parade and you wouldn't get any. So it was borrowing around amongst your friends. Why they did it I don't know. And we didn't get it sorted in the RAAF until after the war. I must say that they had some pretty good auditors because I got a pay cheque

22:00 oh a couple of years after the war had ended. About a hundred pounds in it or something that they'd eventually worked out I'd been short paid. But yes pay day was always a good day because you were once more liquid and you could go out and buy something if there was anything to buy. Wasn't much to buy in Malta for instance. But around the Egyptian it was always

22:30 handy to have money. These Americans were funny on 2/16 Squadron because they taught us how to play craps [a dice game] for instance. And we had some pretty good gamblers in our team. And I remember one fellow stroking his chin there one day in the sergeant's mess and he said, "Show us how to play that game." And he ended up every pay day he'd be having some American come up to him and say,

23:00 "Hey Ces could you lend us a few bucks till next pay day?"

How long did you serve with 458 Squadron for?

Not long. It seemed a long time. I joined them in September and I left them towards - that's '42 and I went through to about May, sometime in May '43. And that's when

23:30 we, my tail gunner and myself hitch hiked to the UK on a DC3.

Do you remember how many sorties you flew in that time?

I've got my log book there but I'd have to get it out and look up. We were supposed to fly thirty. Now if you remember rightly 2/16 Squadron was supposed to be a non operational squadron. But after being shot down and

24:00 two of our aircraft and right behind El Alamein and they lost General Gotton, his general staff and another, they decided to credit us with a few hours towards our thirty operations. And that's how I finished my tour with having got a bit of credit from 2/16 Squadron. So that was the way it worked there. With Catalinas

24:30 it was a six months tour in the north.

You said that it felt like a long time. Why did it feel like a long time in 458 Squadron?

Well I suppose you weren't flying every day for one thing. And when you weren't flying there wasn't much to do in Malta. You could go to the picture show and see - and read the local paper which was about two pages.

25:00 The Times of Malta and see where Clark Gable and Dorothy Lamore [American film stars] or somebody

like that - they'd have to cut down on the printing. There was a show on tonight so you'd troop off to the local picture show. That was about the only other entertainment other than playing cards or playing darts and that sort of thing.

What were the living conditions

25:30 **like on Malta?**

They were surprisingly better than back on the Suez Canal. We had beds there. But the food was pretty basic. You could buy an egg occasionally. A little old lady used to come around to the mess kitchen with a basket of eggs and she'd sell them to us at a shilling a time. And

26:00 you'd hand them to the cook and stand over and say, "For goodness sake don't drop it on the floor." Because she wasn't around there every day. But it was mainly bully beef, rice and a bit of stuff like that. Goldfish. Tinned fish. But not much of it. We were pretty stretched. But as I said the luxury was beds because we

26:30 were billeted in a big stone building which I called Anthony Hordern's because it reminded me of the old Anthony Hordern's Store in Sydney. It was quite a big building. Apparently it was the poor house. It was about - ground floor - it was about three floors and quite a long building. Very substantially built out of stone. And terrazzo floors and real beds that you could

27:00 sleep in. That was luxury. And furthermore we had little Maltese ladies come around and make our beds for us. And one - I remember - Tessie was our room girl and she'd say to me, "Keith are you flying tonight?" And I'd say, "I don't know." She said, "If you do I hope you come back, I pray for you." And I'd say, "You keep praying Tessie."

27:30 So she must've kept praying. And they were funny girls, they were so naïve. Talking about the movies reminded me - this lass said, "I went to the movies last night Keith and I saw The Rains Came." I said, "What's that Tess?" She said, "The Rains Came." I said, "Oh you mean the Rains Came." "Oh yes that's it, The Rains Came."

28:00 "Did you like it?" "Yes." And then we saw another movie which was all about New York. She said, "They haven't big buildings like that. That's all Hollywood nonsense isn't it?" I said, "No, no Tessie they are there alright, those big buildings." That's how naïve they were.

Apart from Tessie and other girls like her, how much contact did you have with the local people in Malta?

Very little.

28:30 We used to frequent, our crew, a little bar just around the corner from this establishment run by George somebody who was a dyed in the wool middle aged Maltese and he'd pass the message around to us when he had a bit of beer to sell. He'd keep it for us. It wasn't much chop this beer but it was beer, brewed locally out of

29:00 a straw we used to say. But it was drinkable that was about all. And Maltese wine. And we said, "Come on George we've run out of beer. How about some of that wine?" And he said, "Oh no I wouldn't sell that to my best friend." And I said, "Why not?" And he said, "Look at this." And he poured a small glass onto the terrazzo titles behind his bar. And we went on chatting away there for a while and after a while

29:30 he said, "Now look at this." And he wiped it off with a mop and the colour had gone out of the tiles. Yeah.

How long were you living in Malta for?

Went there - flew in January '43, was it '43? Yes.

30:00 With as much food on board as we could carry. And as soon as the ground staff came on board we had to put our boots off and said, "No off." Because we wanted the food to go to the right quarters. They weren't there to unload they were only there to unload what they could get their hands on as quickly as possible. So we flew in there in January, there'd just been an air raid too. Ships burning in the harbour.

30:30 And as I say I finished in May '43. So what's that? Four months.

What was your social life like?

Not much. One of the most pleasant parts was a walk along the sea front in the evening hours. And chat to a few of your mates and we used to have

31:00 a friendly rivalry with the fighter fellows. They reckoned we were made to fly at night and we reckoned well owls fly at night. We'd call them the home guard because they didn't get far away from Malta with their range. They didn't like that either. So we'd chat and joke amongst ourselves. And we had a good rapport with the Royal Navy characters because we tied

31:30 in very much with the navy with this anti-shipping business. And there was one character I remember meeting on an evening walk along the water front near our billets. And he was carrying a little briefcase

and of course we were all sticky beaks. “Where’d you get the briefcase from?” “Oh I’ve always had this briefcase.” “What have you got in it?” You know because a bit of black marketing

32:00 went on. For those that didn’t smoke, flogged off their cigarette or tobacco ration at the local black market. And he said, “I’ve got some coal from the ship’s bunker.” “Coal?” And it was a bag not much, oh about that size anyway. He wouldn’t have much coal in it. And he said, “I’m going around to see my girlfriend.” And he said, “We’re going to have a nice little fire, a little coal fire.”

32:30 It got pretty chilly there in Malta in the winter months at night time. Yes.

Did many of the guys have girlfriends?

Some of them did. The army fellows who were there, they married a few of the girls. The army chaps we met up with were

33:00 British Army. Durham Light Infantry [DLI]. We became good friends with those. And these fellows had been pulled out of Tobruk to go to Malta for a rest, after you know hanging onto Tobruk for so long with the Aussies and so on. And so the Aussies and the DLI got on very well and they took to us as RAAF Australians. And they were telling me

33:30 they were infantrymen but when they got to Malta they were straight away put on the anti-aircraft guns. Well half of them didn’t know how to fire an anti-aircraft gun but they did their best. And I remember one fellow saying that the guns in the end, before they got that famous convoy through with a load of new guns, he said the barrels were so worn that you could actually see a shell

34:00 going up and spiralling through the sky like that. So if you hit anything it was a purely fluke. So infantrymen onto anti-aircraft and I suppose a rest because it’s a nice sea side climate for them. They thought it was a bit of a bad joke, being half starved in the process.

How much did you know about the progress of the war elsewhere while you were in Malta?

34:30 Oh we listened on the radio of course and we used to listen to Richard Dimbleby telling us how well we were doing in the Middle East. And we thought, oh yeah oh yeah? And we’d listen to what’s that German girl? Oh I’m thinking of the singer, Lilli Marlene. We’d listen to her [‘Axis Sally’ Radio Berlin propaganda radio host]on the German radio and a bit of German

35:00 propaganda came through about how they were winning the war too. And as a matter of fact they even communicated the names of one of our crew that was shot down over Sicily. Remember I told you how they were - patrols were on a triangle thing up to Naples and around like that and back home. Well they stayed out a bit too late one night and they had to short cut across Sicily but unfortunately they were shot

35:30 down. Most of the them survived. In the space of twenty four hours the Germans had put their names over the radio so we knew they were alive at least.

Do you know what became of them after the war, did you hear from them again?

No not a clue.

When planes were shot down how did that affect the general morale of the squadron?

If we were shot down?

If other planes were shot down, didn’t return?

36:00 Well we used to lose, on average about one a week. And we’d put it down mainly to night fighters. And we saw them of course. They’d come behind us and they had these - I think they were these infra- red devices, they’d glow like the old single bar radiator and you could see them sort of glow redder and redder then they’d fade down. And the tail gunner

36:30 would have them in his sights but not quite sort of thing. And so much so that - there were so many of these red winking lights seen that they thought we were seeing things and they doubled our Vitamin D intake. We used to get these little orange pills to pop down with our meal to keep our night vision up to scratch.

37:00 And they sent down Air Chief Marshall Sholto Douglas [British Coastal Command, Fighter Command and later AOC Mediterranean] from London to investigate this business of lights. And were they really fighters. Well the upshot of that was they put out a couple of Mosquitos to accompany a few crews and we had one night. And wherever we went this Mosquito would be on our

37:30 starboard wing tip. And he called up and said, “I’ve got to go home now boys.” He was on the limits of his endurance so he peeled off and back to Malta and we continued with our patrol. And in the space of ten minutes we had another bloke on our wing tip but it wasn’t a Mosquito. We could barely outline it in the murk. It was a very dark

38:00 night but we could see the nobby nose on it which had distinguished a German Junkers 88 straight away. So the pilot just peeled off and got down to the - as close to the sea as he possibly could and we

lost him. Because the other enemy probably wouldn't be trained as well to fly close to the sea, particularly at night without going in.

38:30 We subsequently learned from the Mosquito boys that the best evasive action if we had one on our tail was just to porpoise, you know up and down like that. As they found it very difficult to get a bead on an aeroplane doing that and make sure they got him. But then the next thing was they jammed our radar and that dates back to the

39:00 aeroplane that was shot down over Sicily because we were briefed on no account to fly over land in case we were shot down and that's just what happened. Because this radar we had at the time, ASV they called it, anti-surface vessel radar , although it was primitive it was still in the secret stage. But in a space of a couple of days after this aeroplane went down we found all our radar was jammed around the

39:30 Mediterranean. You'd turn on the scram and all you'd see was grass, couldn't see anything through it. And then counter measures were thought up no doubt and different frequencies were plugged into our gear and then we were back in business again. So that was another part of the war, the electronic side of it. Radio, all sorts of funny things went on.

40:00 **What was your greatest fear?**

Greatest fear? Oh I don't know. I suppose not returning to base. That night I mentioned about staying out too long I thought we might end up in the drink and have to try and get into a dingy. That was a bit nail biting. It was always

40:30 nice to get home. And of course it wasn't very nice to have one of those winking lights on your tail, wondering if you're going to be subjected to a hail of bullets any tick of the clock. I'd be up in the astrodome and between the tail gunner and myself directing the pilot which way to turn. And that was a bit nail biting of course.

How far above the surface of the water were you flying that night?

Oh we'd be

41:00 about I suppose five thousand feet roughly, yeah, about a mile up. But losing this character next door to us we got down as low as we could. As I said the water would probably be coming through the pitot tube [pitot static system, airspeed indicator for aircraft] on the aeroplane if we got down any lower.

Tape 6

00:33 **Now Keith I think we've left a couple of things out because you served with 458 in a couple of places in Africa before you actually went to Malta as far as I know. I could be wrong. But you were up near Benghazi at one stage or Berka.**

Berka that's right. That's where we did a couple of mining trips along the Libyan coast there. And

01:00 the day we flew in, that was fairly shortly after the army had moved on. And we pitched camp in the middle of an orchid and that was rather unamusing because next morning we could hear this zzzzz zzzzzz going on outside our tent. And we looked out side and here a couple of sappers [engineers] with phones on they

01:30 were delousing the ground just outside our tent for land mines. And it was in fact mined because they were letting off. Bang and off'd go a great heap of red earth. But no casualties but that was a bit unnerving. And the other thing was we had our Wellington armed with two torpedoes

02:00 at one stage with twenty two foot depth settings on them. Well twenty two feet is a fair depth so we'd worked out that's got to be - we're looking for battleships. And they were in fact - we were on stand by because they had a feeling that the Italian fleet might venture out from Taranto and there were a couple of battle wagons in them and so our target would be battle ships.

02:30 So you know biting the nails again you know a bit. But it didn't happen. That was one of the boring periods where nothing was happening but you had to be prepared to get up and go.

I believe you also had a visit from Air Vice Marshall Tedder [Air Vice Marshall Arthur Tedder, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander under Field Marshall B. L. Montgomery] at one point?

Oh yes that was down at - on the canal at our headquarters I called it, at Shallufa.

03:00 And the group there of quite a number of other squadrons. Air Vice Marshall Tedder and Cunningham, he was the chief of the Mediterranean Fleet [either Admiral of the Fleet A. B. Cunningham or Admiral J. H. D. Cunningham - both were C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet]. And I've forgotten who the army chap was. And there was a big hangar we were in and oh, hundreds of fellows had been requested to attend and listen to his pep talk, or their pep talk.

03:30 And I always remember one character getting up and he said, “Excuse me Sir how far are we going to push them this time?” And Air Marshall Tedder took his pipe out of his mouth and said, “I don’t know how far we’re going to push them but I can tell you this. As far as we push them they won’t get back from there ever again.” The crowd erupted. Hooray.

04:00 **What did you think of him as a leader then?**

Oh well obviously he was good for morale and he was a cool, calm and collected gentleman by the sound of him. What little we saw of him. And the planners back in the UK must’ve thought a lot of him because they made him head of the expeditionary

04:30 force in the evasion of Europe - of the air force side of it anyway if I remember rightly.

When you got leave to go up to Cairo, what did you get up to?

First priority was usually a bath. Book into a pension, a bed and breakfast private place. And have a good bath. That was a luxury.

05:00 And a few good meals - there was always a bit of food around Cairo, locally grown stuff. Chicken. Beef wasn’t much chop. We used to call it camel. But they always made a good omelette in Cairo. We used to frequent the New Zealand Club - that was a popular watering hole and good place to have a meal.

05:30 And possibly a hair cut too, that sort of thing. And a movie. They were air conditioned I seem to remember the movies in Cairo. And leave was - that was a bonus of course to get away somewhere from the camp and see a bit of the other world.

06:00 Particularly those - I was just thinking those lovely South African army girls. I’d forgotten what they call them. Swaddies I think [“swaddy” or “squaddy” is a general term for soldier, not particular to South African forces or to females therein]. And they were lovely. I’m not kidding. And we met up one trip with a bunch of them and they were very friendly and we decided the next day to meet and go to Cairo - to see the

06:30 pyramids. Which we did and we were getting along famously with those girls and took a few photographs. And we had made a date to see them after our next leave. This was 2/16 Squadron days because that’s where my camera went the day we were shot down. Here I am looking at the aeroplane burning with my camera there and the only shots I ever took of the pyramids.

07:00 Going up in smoke and we never saw those girls again or I didn’t anyway.

Why do you particularly remember the South African girls, were they particularly beautiful or something?

They were lovely. Yes. And also they spoke English. We used to - you mightn’t believe this - but we used to - if we saw a couple of them in the street, we’d just walk behind at a discreet distance just to hear them talk.

07:30 All the other females were talking in Greek or Arabic or something like that. And it’s just nice to hear a bit of English spoken particularly from an attractive female. I don’t know if they were looking over their shoulders to see if they were being pursued.

Weren’t the South African males protective of the girls?

They didn’t seem to - oh well they probably were

08:00 but I don’t particularly notice that. I will say this about the South African males, they seemed to keep very much to themselves. If you went into say the New Zealand Club that I was talking about or a little bar or a coffee shop, you’d see a few South Africans and a few British or a few Poles. They could’ve even

08:30 been Germans half the time, there were so many different uniforms around the place. But they kept very much to themselves. But funnily enough we ended up with a flight commander on 458 Squadron who was a South African. But he was quite a guy and he was the only South African on the squadron at the time. He ended up commanding officer after I’d left 458.

09:00 Major McKenzie with his big mutton chop whiskers.

Was there any rivalry between the nationalities all mixing together there?

I don’t think so. As I said if you were by yourself and you walked into a little bar or a little club and there’d be a fellow sitting at the bar, you would in no time -

09:30 if he was by himself, chatting by himself and they could be anybody. In the early days we used to frequent - this is before we’d joined a squadron, the Fleet Club in Alexandria was a popular meeting ground and you’d meet quite a lot of the navy characters there. Got on well with them. There was a funny incident there. A couple of us were sitting up at the bar. There was an old sweat

10:00 chief petty officer sitting next door to me and we got chatting away there and he’s got all these World War 1 ribbons across his chest. And after he’d got a few across his chest he turned around to me and he

said, “Well why weren’t you in the last lot?” And I don’t think I was - no I wasn’t, I was twenty at the time.

10:30 **When you arrived in Malta what sort of condition was the place in after the bombing raids?**

It had been tidied up quite a bit like up the streets but there was rubble everywhere. One thing about Malta it was not like England or other European cities and so on.

11:00 It was mainly stone. Even though rooves were tiled and that sort of thing. So about the only thing that caught fire in Malta as far as I could see would be shipping in the harbour or a fuel dump around the aerodrome or something like that. But the housing, well it took a hammering of course but it was pretty jolly fire proof because of all the stone that was carved from, that’s my

11:30 memory of Malta.

You mentioned before that you had a couple of crew members that were with you from start to finish. Who were they?

Names? Harry Marks was one. He was our tail gunner. We ended up in Scotland together. I attended his wedding there as best man. He married an American lass who was in the

12:00 WAAFs [Women’s Auxiliary Air Force]. And that was some family. The father had joined the Canadian Army and he was in North Africa. Her brother had joined the US air force and he’d lost his life over North Africa. But he was fighting with the Americans. And she’d joined the - having those members - oh I think she’d probably lost her mother

12:30 because I vaguely remember her saying, “Well Dad’s gone overseas and my brother’s gone overseas so I’ll go overseas too. I’ll join the WAAF.” Which she did. And I attended their wedding, very simple ceremony in Inverness. And she’s living in Australia, down Cooma way I believe. I haven’t seen her for ages but

13:00 Harry’s gone upstairs. They were the only - oh and Bruce Dean the captain of the crew. Well he finished his tour and went off to England, back to England before we went. So I met up with him during the war out here and he’d - he was down at Sale training on

13:30 Beauforts when I was down at Bairnsdale which was next door, training on Ansons on this general reconnaissance course. So he went off to New Guinea, finished the war flying Beauforts. And I finished the war flying on Catalinas. But we both eventually joined the 458 Squadron Association and yes, he was a long time friend but he’s no long with us.

14:00 **Did you generally fly on the same aircraft?**

Oh no, no you took whatever cab on the rank sort of thing.

And you only had that once incident you mentioned earlier when you actually found a ship that the torpedoes missed? Were there other attacks that you were engaged in where there was a definite target?

Not as such.

14:30 Most of the time was spent - ninety percent of the time in search and locating the ship for the rest to hone in on.

How did 458 Squadron in general go operating out of Malta? Were they very successful?

No as I’ve mentioned, we used to operate alternate nights with 221 Squadron.

15:00 And I suspect the shipping roster for the enemy was on alternate nights. 221 would go out and they’d have a turkey shoot where we’d be lucky to find one ship. Later days after they went to North Africa and reading their history, they had a bit more luck with shipping. Not so much torpedo work but with bombing.

15:30 And with shipping hugging the coast of Italy and around Sardinia and so on and as far north as Nice on the French side. And they were occupied with those duties and anti-submarine work where you carried depth charges. But they also had some of the pilots trained for torpedo work. But

16:00 basically the shipping successes they had were with bombs. And if they didn’t find a ship in the night they were out they were always given an alternate target such as the railway station at - somewhere in Italy - bomb the railway yards.

Did you ever encounter any incidences of pilots or

16:30 **crews losing their nerve?**

Can’t say that I did really. No.

Okay let’s go through then again and tell the story in a bit more detail about how you left

Malta and wound up back in the UK.

Oh well we'd successfully - Harry and I had successfully evaded the

17:00 Red Caps of Cairo and got out to this landing ground which was a busy communications port of call. And we hitch hiked a ride out there. It was no trouble hitch hiking around the Nile Delta area because there was so much military traffic about. And I suppose were only there about an

17:30 hour and this DC3 lobbed up and we walked over and said to the pilot, "Are you heading west?" And he said, "Yes." "Malta." He said, "Yes." "Any room?" "Yes." So we were on. And we got back to Malta and that's where we reported to the operations office

18:00 out at Luqa - that was the air field there. Looking for transport to our quarters back at Selema Airfield in Malta. And they said, "Oh 458's gone." And the question was, "Where?" "Can't tell you where, don't you know there's a war on." So that's when we had our little confab outside the room with Harry. And we decided we'd head

18:30 west on the next aeroplane coming through if there was one going that way.

How is it possible that you were just kind of left to your own devices like that?

Things were pretty - I don't know what to call it - there was no great - see these last two flights in the squadron - to get aeroplanes almost

19:00 worn out back to the main maintenance aerodrome at Fayid Air Base and Egypt. The fact they've hung together long enough to get there and pick up a new aeroplane and fly it back. And there was never any paper work to say, "Take J or W or whatever aeroplane. Pick it up tomorrow morning and off to Fayid." So off we'd go.

19:30 Hand it over there, they knew what they were there for. And find your own way home. So no ticket or anything like that. So you used your own initiative. So this aerodrome I was telling you on the Cairo-Alex Road it was like, well it was a very busy transit port with communications aircraft. It wasn't sort of an operational field. And you just sort of

20:00 hung around there which we did about an hour. And we were back on an aeroplane to Malta.

And nobody in the squadron had thought to tell you beforehand that they were going to be moving?

No. Not even a rumour. Well it may have been around the officer's mess but you must realise that we were sergeants at the time, flight sergeants. We'd just got our crowns on our arms. And that was a big thing. Pay.

20:30 And so not being officers we were not privy to any operational information. It was a different story later on when I was commissioned I was on 43 Squadron. You really fought the war at lunch time in the officer's mess about what was going to be happening next. You knew before your NCO [non commissioned officer]

21:00 knew what might be in the wind. But whether the officers on 458 knew of their impending move, I know not.

So you were at a loose end in Malta then?

For a very short time. We were on this final trip, we were there I would say, no longer than an hour and a half before - looking back on it it was this regular DC3

21:30 service that was coming through from Cairo through to London. And it just so happened we were on it and we got as far as Gibraltar and we had to get off there because possibly they thought they had a full aeroplane. And that's when this transport sergeant sort of poked his head around the door of the sergeant's mess in Malta and said, "Have you guys unpacked yet? There's room for two on the

22:00 aeroplane heading for England tonight." So we were out there quick smart.

Were you not at this stage technically absent without leave?

Technically yes. And that's a funny story too. Oh incidentally at Gibraltar, when we arrived we met up with a bunch of tour-expired 458 Squadron fellows and they said, "Oh welcome to Malta, you're going to be here for a month."

22:30 And I said, "Oh so?" They said, "Yes all flying to England to tour expired crew is now out, we've been told. You have to wait for a convoy. And the convoys come through only once a month for the UK and we're joining that convoy out in the harbour now. " There was an armada of ships out there at the time. "And we're going out there this afternoon and we're going to set sail for England." And we said, "Oh bully for you."

23:00 Well we were out of Gibraltar that some night about nine o'clock in the evening I think we took off. And purely as I say, technically AWL [absent without leave] and we arrived in England and were driven up to

RAF headquarters in London. And went in and made ourselves known. Well they had Harry

23:30 Marks on their list of customers there because he'd been to England before. As I said he'd flown on the first thousand-bomber raid among other things. And they had no record of me in the air force. And they said to Harry, "Do you know this guy?" And he said, "Yeah should do, we've been sleeping together for the last

24:00 year almost." It was a bit of a joke because we used to share the tents. They said, "What's your name, what's your rank, number?" And the reason being I heard later that when Rommel made his last push down the desert, the RAF headquarters in Cairo packed up all the records and shoved them down to Kenya or somewhere way south and it took them quite a while

24:30 to get all those records back. And my records would have been on - in that bunch of paper. And the only thing I had to identify me was this silly looking RAF paper which said, name, rank and paid five pounds or something, on such and such a date. So they accepted my name, rank and number and on Harry's word I was back in the air force legally

25:00 again and then I had an official posting with him up to - I think the place was West Kirby outside Liverpool where we were kitted up in more suitable clothing at the time.

What was the reaction like when you arrived back at headquarters there and said oh we lost our squadron so we flew ourselves back to England?

One of astonishment. "A lot of our

25:30 friends are struggling across the Bay of Biscay now and we are here whereas some of them might not arrive." And he said, "Oh yeah that is so. And it so happened that after we'd been to West Kirby and been kitted up and sent - oh they gave us a week's disembarkation leave I think. So back to the flesh pots of London and around to

26:00 Australia House and who should we meet up with but some of these guys from the convoy. They said, "How did you get here?" And we said, "Oh by air, it's the only way of course." And they'd had a terrible time coming across the Bay of Biscay - not only was the weather rough but they survived several attacks by U-boats and Junkers Ju88 bombers and things. But they managed to scramble

26:30 back to England.

It's quite an extraordinary story. So what were you doing up in West Kirby then?

Oh just being kitted up basically. We weren't there long. They fed us and gave us what clothing they could on the station and we were pretty well, well kitted up there, new kit bag, new

27:00 shoes. Because we were in boots. And oh the lot. Even air force blue uniform 'cause we were in Western Desert khakis and battle dress and that sort of thing. So we were pretty well equipped from West Kirby and went back to London lumping quite a bit of gear with us. We didn't have to go back to London but everybody seemed to migrate

27:30 to London when they leave.

How did you spend that leave?

Well again, this was truthful - Harry and I really slept together because accommodation was pretty tight. And we got into the - oh what was the name of the hole? The Regent's Palace. He knew the hotels like the back of his hand. He said, "That's about the best

28:00 bet." So we got a room there but unfortunately in a way it was a double bed so we really had to sleep together, share the bed. I wasn't too keen on that because he was a good snorer particularly when he had a few beers.

So you had a few beers in London that time?

I had a few beers and we had a few air raids too. And you'd hear the sirens going but they were sporadic raids fortunately.

28:30 Far enough away not to want to get out of bed, go for the cellars.

And after the leave where did you progress to?

Well that's when they posted both of us to - from the extremes of Malta and sunshine we went up the north of Scotland to Alness which is

29:00 on Cromarty Firth north of Inverness. And no - Invergordon was north that's right. Invergordon was the headquarters of the port there. Convoys used to form up there coming and going across the Atlantic from the east side coming up from Hull and so on. You can see a whole firth full of shipping

29:30 and flying boats. So he went in as a gunnery instructor and I went in as a navigations instructor. And

the first job was to teach them star recognition which was a bit of joke because Scotland, even in the middle of summer if you saw a star at night that was really something. But it was all good fun.

How did you feel about instructing new recruits?

30:00 Rather embarrassed. But you got used to it after a while. And the course we did down at Catfoss in Yorkshire. It was number one ground instructors course. That did us a lot of good I think. It sorted us out about the instructors idiosyncrasies and that sort of thing. Not to scratch your nose or pull faces in front of your class. And everybody

30:30 has some sort of idiosyncrasy and they start fastening on it. And saying, "What a peculiar ear he has" or something like that they forget what he's saying. Little things like that we had to deal with.

I've heard from other people that air force personnel who had been serving in Europe regarded the North African air force personnel as a little bit of a ragged and undisciplined bunch.

31:00 **Did you encounter anything like that?**

Oh it was probably true in a way because they wore practically anything in the desert. As long as you had something to identify you as an allied serviceman. You would even see the odd felt hat around the desert. Because they were more comfortable. Where they got them from I don't know. But no they were pretty slip shot as far as dress went.

31:30 Until you got to Cairo in the big city. You had to be reasonably smartly dressed or you'd be pulled up and spoken to in no uncertain terms if you were regimentally undressed. There was a standard of dress in the cities sort of thing but out in the desert anything went.

And up in Scotland what sort of aircraft were you being converted

32:00 **to?**

Well we had the choice of Catalinas or Sunderlands but I stuck to the Sunderlands. Much more robust looking than Catalinas. And I didn't fly on a Catalina till I came out to Australia.

What's it like landing an aircraft on choppy water up in Scotland when the wind's blowing?

Noisy. And that's another thing.

32:30 The Sunderland has a bigger hull under it. The Catalina, I wouldn't care to land on a choppy sea in a Catalina. They used to of course out here. They'd have to at times. Yeah so it made a racket the waves smacking the hull on take off.

Why were you going to be put onto flying boats as opposed to going

33:00 **back to a Wellington squadron?**

Goodness only knows that's all I can say. Possibly because we were a maritime squadron in the Mediterranean basically. We were involved with shipping. And anti shipping. And the Sunderlands were very much - and the Catalinas were very much occupied with anti shipping and anti submarine work so that's the only reason I could think of.

33:30 **So you were basically still under the auspices of coastal command?**

We were definitely coastal command and when we went to Scotland there was No. 4 Coastal Command Operational Training Unit, yes.

How do you think your flight career in Europe might have been different if you'd been in a bomber command unit?

I probably mightn't have been here.

34:00 Today. The casualty rate was enormous of course. But at one stage I thought I might get on a Lancaster squadron but no, I was wanted back here so they said.

So how long did you spend up in Scotland?

34:30 What did I say? May, June - June '43 through to early March or late February 1944, something like that.

Did you fly operationally?

No, no. No we were definitely training crews on photography and navigation and that sort of thing.

35:00 **What did you think of the quality of the crews that you were training?**

Well particularly the captains of the crews, they were pretty experienced guys. They were often on their second tour themselves in flying boats. And the crews were - some of them - I remember one guy was terrified. I was showing him how to take a photograph with an hand held camera

35:30 on this Sunderland. They're pretty big cameras too, there's no baby brownies about them. How to keep them on the edge of the window of the hatch which you'd pull out. And try and hold it steady at the same time keep it out of the slipstream otherwise it would wobble around. Then focus and take the shot. And some of these guys they'd get up with the big camera there and they'd be like this when the window was open.

36:00 A bit like the first time looking out the hatch of a Fairy Battle - nothing between you and the ground. And - but generally they got it alright. Had a bit of fun with some of them. They used to - we had a Norwegian crew there and we had a free French air force crew. And I flew with both of them as an instructor. The Free French

36:30 crew was amusing because the captain of the crew he was a French naval captain in his own right which is a pretty big rank but he didn't fly the aeroplane. But he was the captain of it and he used to have his telescope under his arm and he'd tap the pilots up front on the shoulder or something and tell some order or other. And his telescope on an aeroplane is useless. Because the

37:00 magnification of the slightest movement if you're looking at something out to sea. No good. Anyway it was a good pointy stick for him and we had troubles with that crew because with their gunnery practice we'd have an aeroplane fly up from the base along the coast towing the drove. And we had a call at the base there one day about this crew - to get them out of the

37:30 air because they're trying to shoot our aeroplane down and not the drove. The Norwegians they were a pretty good crew. One was Jonson, Janson and Johanson. They were three 'Js'. And you'd hear them on the intercom. "Are you there Jonson?" "Oh yeah. Where's Janson?" A bit of a job at times

38:00 remembering who was who with the three J's in the crew.

So how did you get informed that you were required back here in Australia?

Oh I think just through the normal mail system or signal system in the orderly room. I was required back in Australia and at that time,

38:30 in that period I was commissioned. I went down to Edinburgh for my commissioning interview and they apparently agreed I was suitable material. And then I had to go down to London to be kitted up as an officer, which was a financial bonanza because I was a warrant officer at the time. And all it meant was

39:00 taking off my warrant office badges on my arm and getting a new cap badge and the rest was money in hand. Get the tailor to sew one small stripe around my arms and got a new cap badge. So that was a good leave that one down to London where I was kitted up. And then of course shortly after

39:30 that came the call back to Australia. And my section head - squadron leader he said, "We'd like you to stay but we don't want to stop you from going home. Would you like to stay?" And I said, "Well yes I feel I'm grinding in here." He said, "We've just had you trained up as an instructor, now we're losing you." Which made sense. And he said, "I'll see what I can do."

40:00 But he couldn't do enough. So no I had to go, so I went. Down south again on the old train the length of the UK. Down to Brighton. Then back up again to Scotland to catch the Aquitania. And I saw my first - witnessed an enemy aircraft shot down when I was at Brighton. And I saw several that night. There was a big raid on

40:30 London. And flying up the Thames estuary - I was up on the roof of a hotel. Shouldn't have been, that was forbidden but I got up there and dodged the old wing commander running the place. He came into the room to see if anyone was there. Swung the door open. "Anyone there?" "No." And I'm leaning back there with my head behind the door and my toes sticking out. If he'd look down.

What aircraft did you see shot down?

41:00 They were mainly Heinkel 177s I think they were. A big bomber, four engine bomber with only two props. But one engine behind the other and they were carrying big bomb loads. And they'd had them on the radar apparently over Belgium getting up as high as they could and they'd put their nose down and head up the Thames estuary for London itself and release their bombs. And

41:30 the anti aircraft display was fabulous to see them. You could see the burst going one, two, three, bang. And if they got one there'd be an almighty explosion in the air. That'd be an anti-aircraft hit. And then later on all the guns'd quiet and you soon got the message the night fighters were up. And they got one between London and Brighton.

42:00 And when it hit…

Tape 7

00:40 **You were telling us about watching the fire fight over London?**

Oh just as the other - when the anti aircraft guns stopped firing you got the message that the night fighters were up there. And as a matter of fact some of the closer ones you could actually

01:00 see the tracers from the fighters. And one particular aeroplane they got - it'd be about halfway between Brighton and London. And when he hit the deck there was the most God awful explosion and it shook the old hotel like that. It really did, it was like a small earthquake going off. So they carry some pretty big explosions on board those aeroplanes.

01:30 And it so happened that when I got home, one of the places I used to stay with some friends outside London - oh this was during - yes just before the flying bombs started - they got a bomb from a - one of these Heinkels on the house where I used to play bridge with the family. And they were no more, just completely

02:00 flattened. And another family just across the street I used to stay with, they had their air raid shelter in the back garden and they survived. Their house was knocked over but they survived in the air raid shelter.

What did London look like at that time that you were there?

Grimy is the first impression and even after the war,

02:30 as sort of black and grimy with soot and water. But over the years, after the war of course they cleaned it up and there's some lovely stone buildings around London as you probably know. But it was pretty grimy during the war. But surprisingly the transport ran well, the buses ran well. The underground ran well. Bit of a job to see where you were

03:00 in the underground. You had to peer through a little hole in the black out stuff in the windows to make sure where you were. Didn't overshoot your station sort of thing. But everything moved that was the important thing.

Tell us about your journey back to Australia. I understand you went via America? How did you get to New York?

On the Aquitania.

What was the trip like out over the Atlantic?

03:30 Surprisingly very calm. It was astonishing and this was as I said about late February or early March. Mind you the Aquitania was no small ship, it was a forty five thousand tonner I think. And it had quite a - it was run at that stage by the Americans.

04:00 And I think sort of half - probably had the original Cunard crew. Probably a lot of naval fellows on board. And we had a good crowd on board. I've forgotten how many were on the ship. Coming out of the north of Ireland I was leaning over the

04:30 rail looking at the sea going by one day. And there was an American fellow on my right and his leather jacket with the US air corps thing on him. And he had the RAF DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] - and the 1939-45 Star. And I said, "Oh in the RAF were you?" He said, "Eagle Squadron." "Oh yes, oh that's great."

05:00 I said, "You must have a few more medals than that." He said, "Oh yes I carry them in here." And he pulled out this rack of medal ribbons. But he said, "These I think I earned." And he was very scathing about his ally or his own countrymen in a way because we were still in range of aircraft from

05:30 Ireland and a Thunderbolt flew past the ship. And a Thunderbolt was this big heavy American fighter which hopefully they thought would accompany the American Superfortress heavy bombers over Europe but it didn't have the range. It was too heavy for one thing. And this guy said, "There goes seven and a half tonnes of Yankee bull dust." And we had

06:00 some entertaining people in the lounge on the Aquitania. There were a lot of high ranking officers going over to Washington for conferences. And the high ranking officers got the seats. There weren't enough seats to go around so the junior officers used to, after they'd dine, have to sit around their walls with their back against the wall. On the carpet.

06:30 And I was sitting there one evening and this Royal Navy captain came up to me and he said, "Do you play bridge laddie?" And I said, "Oh I try Sir." He said, "Come on we'll give these army characters a bit of what for." Well that was rather amusing and a bit nerve wracking in a way because we won two out of three nights in a row I think.

07:00 And we were playing - what was he? I think he was a lieutenant general - I've forgotten the rank. But he was a junior general and his aid was a captain in the army. Red ribbons on their caps and he'd say, "Come on." And this poor partner of the general, he couldn't do the right thing any game. And we used to stitch them as it so

07:30 happened the naval captain and myself. And about the third night he said, "Will we give them another go laddie?" I said, "I'm not feeling too well tonight captain." I couldn't stand the strain.

What were your first impressions of New York in war time?

It - I can remember seeing a photograph recently. It was very misty and miserable. And the

08:00 Normandy was in the port at the time. That was a big ship. And we sailed in there and the skyscrapers were up among the clouds. You couldn't see the skyscrapers, it was such a murky day. And they put us on a - when we disembarked - put us on a train and out to a reception centre. Some island I've forgotten the name of it.

08:30 And - where we were processed.

Statten Island?

Don't think so. Fort Hamilton seems to ring a bell. And then we were advised to - when you get into the city, Manhattan, go down to the air force club on West

09:00 44th Street I seem to remember, and they'll look after you there. Well they certainly did. My mate and I, we always went in pairs for safety reasons and others. And these two lasses on the desk there they certainly looked after us. "Now what would you like to see today or tonight?" And I can remember one night we saw a -

09:30 met Dinah Shore at a Dinah Shore show. We saw tennis at Madison Square Garden. We saw Donald Budge play Lieutenant J.G. Kramer [American tennis players]. And they were top liners in those days. And one wasn't playing too well so the crowd

10:00 booed him. I've forgotten which one it was. I think it was Budge who was superior in some ways to Kramer. I remember that. And a few cocktail parties. One in particular I recall at a lady's apartment on 5th

10:30 Avenue. She was a widow of a wealthy American New York lawyer and she used to insist - we spent a weekend at her place. She invited a friend and I to spend a weekend at this beautiful apartment, two storey apartment on 5th Avenue. And she insisted before we went into town each town she'd call it, come and have a chat to her.

11:00 And she'd be sitting up in bed with her breakfast tray and she'd have a pile of letters around her, her correspondence. And about the second morning she said, "I'll have to terminate this conversation because I'm expecting my tutor." And we said, "Oh your tutor." "I'm learning Russian." We said, "Oh why Russian?" She said, "Well I think we're going to have trouble with those people in later

11:30 years." And she was very farsighted wasn't she? So her Russian tutor was coming around. And she also rapped her own countrymen. She said, "You know we American people we are very bad in diplomacy." I said, "Oh." She said, "Oh yes somebody always twists us around their fingers and we come off the wrong way."

12:00 Again she was pretty foreseeing. So yes we had a lot of fun in New York but we were glad to get on that train and across the USA. And you realise how big the country is when you're on a train for about five days. And one of the first sights

12:30 I recall was one of the chaps tapping us on the shoulder, saying, "Have a look out here fellows. Here's little Elmer." And in those days Esquire magazine had a cartoon of these hay seeds of Elmer and somebody or other. And there was always a couple of them sitting under a tree on their bottoms with their legs stretched out and smoking

13:00 a corn cob pipe or something. And there'd be some catch to the cartoon. "Hey look out there, there's little Elmer and his mates." So we looked out and honestly it was just like a picture out of one of these cartoons, under the big elm tree and these fellows in the noon day sun stretched out. And so onto Kansas City and what's

13:30 the other big city in there? Where they - we saw our first cowboys with their chaps on and these things in their spurs. I don't think they were wearing six shooters. And then over the Rocky Mountains. Went over there at night. Just as well because you see the Rocky's are pretty high. And you run out of oxygen and you get a headache

14:00 without any trouble at all. And the locomotives run out of air too and we could hear them puff, puff, puff, you know struggling up over the hill to get over the mountains. And woke up the next morning and we were hurtling down the slope into the Sacramento Valley and it was like spring time whereas the day before we were in snow country. So that was a memory that trip across the States.

14:30 And Easter in San Francisco. We had to wait about, oh it must've been ten days there before they found a ship for us to put us aboard.

San Francisco must've been a colourful city then?

It was, it still is I think. I always liked San Francisco. Nice clean city. New York's a bit of a filthy place. Too many motor cars and rubbish around the streets

15:00 and that sort of thing. Maybe they've cleaned it up these years I don't know. So yes we're out on another island, Angel Island I think it was just down stream a bit from Alcatraz. I know the ferry used to call in at Alcatraz on the way into the city. So we'd go in there and trammed around and had

15:30 a look at things. And that was the staging point for the RAAF - Angel Island among others. And it was interesting to detect the difference in the accents. The chaps that had been over in the UK and the chaps who were going over to the UK or up to Canada to train. And

16:00 you could hear them coming home late at night if you were lying in bed and you could hear them stumbling around the steps and you could definitely pick the fellows from home straight away. And the fellows from England, slightly rounded in the accent. And they had a lot of scrubbed air crew as we used to say from Canada. Picked up there to transport back to Australia.

16:30 **What does scrubbed air crew mean?**

They failed to make the grade in their training. Their flying or the navigation or the wireless air gunnery or whatever. And quite a bunch of those on board.

What was the trip back to Australia like from San Francisco?

It was like a - as the call the Pacific, the Pacific Ocean and it was like a mill pond. We

17:00 were very lucky. 'Cause the Atlantic - we just had an occasional swell, no wild weather. The Pacific was the same, even the Tasman Sea coming across was so calm it was unbelievable. And of course the first day at sea the Aussies were out up on deck with their shirts off and stretched out. And then the US Navy got in the act and said, "Come on shirts on, shirts on. No stripping off and no sunbaking.

17:30 They wouldn't let us sunbath. And only two meals a day. The ship was vastly overcrowded. We had more on that ship about a thirty three thousand tonner than we had on the Queen Elizabeth. And the food was on twice a day - the meal queue only stopped for about one hour. Give them time

18:00 to swab down the tables I suppose. And then another meal queue would start. In between times you wouldn't spend hours over a meal naturally but being at sea you develop a bit of an appetite. Always on the edge of an - appetite wise - say we'd frequent the PX [canteen] to try and buy a packet of biscuits or a

18:30 packet to munch in between time. And as luck would have it there'd always be a long queue at the PX and most of you'd get there just in time to see them bring the shutters down and say, "PX closed." And that'd be that. Yes they were very anti us sunbathing. We got on alright with the crew otherwise. But spent a lot of time on deck yarning to the

19:00 troops particularly the female troops. There were a lot of American WACs [Women's Army Corps] on board. They of course were intrigued with us and our accent and we used to pull their legs. I remember one lass who came from Kansas and we'd say, "Where's Kansas?" And everyone knew where Kansas was. "Don't you know?" "No you tell us love." And then they'd say,

19:30 "How do you spell that again?" We used to pull their leg so hard. And they were a great crew. The army fellows I felt sorry for them because we were - did I tell you about our accommodation before on this ship. The USS America it - we were ensconced in what I'd say were a first class suite

20:00 where there was a big bedroom and a big sitting room next door. And a bathroom in between. And the Americans were American infantry officer and on the other room was the RAAF officers. Tour expired crew. And we soon found out that the water, fresh water for showering cut out very early in the piece in the morning. We got these

20:30 Americans with their big helmets. They held quite a quantity of water. So first up had to line up the helmets and fill them with water while the other guy was showering sort of thing because you wouldn't have enough water to shower every day because they'd switch it off. But you'd have enough water left over for some of you. You rostered the water in other words. So you could have at least a sponge bath from an American helmet.

21:00 So that worked out quite well. And the other amusing thing is these - I was saying these poor guys. They were infantry officers and I knew their destination. They were going to Milne Bay in New Guinea to fight the war there but they didn't know their rifle drill. But they had their books, field service or something they called them. So we had quite a lot of

21:30 air gunners amongst us and they'd say, "Come on get your books out and we'll sort you out with this armourment." And I think they had more tuition from our guys on that ship than they had back in their basic training in the USA.

Do you think that this was a universal problem with American armed forces?

Oh I couldn't say that. I think they were probably just impressed into their

22:00 army quickly and sent underway. And perhaps they had plans for them back here in Sydney. And of course when they arrived in Sydney I'd never seen so many Americans lining the deck. "Oh but this is

beautiful. We had no idea it was like this. And look at those funny little motor cars over there."

What kind of emotions were stirred up in you arriving back in Australia?

22:30 Well it was going to be wonderful to see the family again. Mum and Dad. And wondering what they had in store for us.

And bearing in mind that you had been keen to stay in the UK, were you disappointed that you were sent back to Australia?

In a sense I was because I'd grounded in there and I'd got to like these Sunderland flying boat. And I thought, "Well if I've got to go home

23:00 I'll try and get on a Sunderland squadron out here." And I knew there was one here. But I didn't. It was disappointing. I got on a Catalina squadron. As a matter of fact, at Bairnsdale when we did this general reconnaissance course they sorted us out on our preferences. Such as - well the Sunderlands, the

23:30 Catalinas, Liberators and Beauforts. And the Beauforts had a bad name in those days. There was a bit of sabotage going on and they were spearing in. They eventually tracked down the character who was sabotaging them. My choice was Sunderlands first, Liberators then

24:00 anything with four engines had a priority. Then Catalinas and then Beauforts. But I got my third choice, the Catalinas. And although I'd been on this unit up in Scotland with them I didn't step on board a Catalina until I arrived back in Australia. Because we went from Bairnsdale up to Rathmines to do an operational training unit. And that was the first OTU [operational training unit] I attended

24:30 during the war. We'd missed out in the Middle East.

What was involved there?

Oh how to - well first of all to crew up, learn your duties on a Catalina and such things that the on switches go up and not down on a Catalina, a la American. And generally to

25:00 meld in the crew and know your various duties. And different guns of course. I could handle that .30 gun in the nose of a Catalina. I liked that because I could hit things with it when I aimed at. But I certainly couldn't hit anything with those big .5's which they had in the blisters of the Catalinas. They

25:30 were so heavy and I being a pretty light sort of character, when the guns went off they shook all over the place like that and it took me all my time to hang onto them. Didn't like those. We did again our bombing practise and no torpedoes but we had a bit of bombing practise. And a bit of navigation practise

26:00 at night. And then we were briefed on mine laying and the pilots did a lot of low level flying around the Lake Macquarie [NSW] area and that's when I learned they had very big sharks down there. Because you could look over flying down low. "That's a whale." "No it isn't, it's a big shark." They've got some sharks there, probably still have.

In Lake Macquarie?

Yeah.

26:30 Around Rathmines. And then when we finished our training there we were sent over to Adelaide to do a toughening up jungle training course. And in the beginning I thought I was back in the army because we were being trained by army people how to

27:00 shoot a tommy gun which you didn't carry on an aeroplane. How to shoot a tommy gun and not waste your ammunition like our American friends. How to just pick off one shot at a time sort of thing. How to strangle a man with a piece of wire. Oh all sorts of nice things like that. How to climb trees. You've seen these training films with virtually commando stuff. And then

27:30 - by God it was hot I remember that. Adelaide - hot and dry. And we were only halfway through the course when we were called over to Lake Boga in Victoria to pick up a Catalina and fly it out to Darwin. Lake Boga is the place where they took the undercarriage out of the Cats. They flew them out as amphibians and when they got out

28:00 to Australia they removed the undercarriage from them and sealed the hull up and it gave them another fifteen hundred pound of pay load. So we picked up this modified aeroplane and flew it up to Darwin. Through Rose Bay, Bowen and Queensland where we night stopped. And so on to Darwin. I don't know why we didn't

28:30 take off from Lake Boga and go straight to Darwin. We would have had the range but maybe the lake wasn't long enough. We were only on it the once, was when we took off. And I arrived in Darwin. I found on the way that the seats on a Catalina weren't conducive to my air frame because we'd been kitted out over in Adelaide with the

29:00 army jungle greens. And they were like wearing canvas trousers, very heavy. And heavy shirts, oh God

they were uncomfortable. And I used to get prickly heat. And on the Catalina the seats were sort of vinyl stuff like that. And of course in these heavy trousers we wore and getting hotter and hotter on the way up to

29:30 Darwin I stood up in the end the last leg of the trip. Which was foolish because about an hour out of Darwin I could hardly stand. I looked down at my ankles and my ankles had swollen up like this. And I was carted off to hospital. They took me off, stretched me out because I couldn't walk. So that's two things I learnt on Catalinas - you can't sit down at the navigator's seat too long or you get prickly heat.

30:00 You can't stand up too long or you go in the ankles. So that's how I arrived in Darwin. And out to hospital at Berrimah. Again in charge of the army and they'd have their CO's parade there. "Come on your feet." So I was a walking patient at that stage so I could stand up. And they'd have all these sick characters lined up by the beds and there was another officer in the

30:30 group who was a patient. I think this fellow might have been a bit troppo because he'd have them lining up the beds perfectly. He said, "No that one's a bit… in a bit … out a bit." And measuring the distance between the beds. I thought, "Oh God I'm glad I'm not in the army." Anyway I survived there and we got our crew together and away we went on operations again.

From Darwin?

From Darwin.

Where were

31:00 **you living in Darwin?**

In an area called Doctor's Gully, not far from the centre of the town. And that's where our base was, our main base.

What evidence could you see of the Japanese attack?

Well the first evidence was a walk up to the town because it had been bashed about pretty severely. Not many buildings had escaped any damage there. And there was not much

31:30 repair work going on there at the time or rebuilding I should say, or repair anything about the place. It was mainly being cleared up so that they could get at it again properly. The wharves were working, that was the main thing. You could see the sunken ships in the harbour and yes, very, that was in

32:00 January '45. No desire to go to Darwin in the middle of summer again. It's prickly heat country. As a matter of fact on the Cats when we used to fly out of Darwin, we'd have to wear our gear on board of course and we'd strip down to our underpants. Because we'd fly out pretty low and being low it was still pretty warm even if you're

32:30 up about two thousand feet. Until the night fell and the temperature dropped a bit and then you started getting dressed again.

What operations did you fly from Darwin?

We used to mine the approaches to Surabaya [Java, Indonesia] then we sent aircraft on detachment to

33:00 Ormoc in Leyte Gulf [Philippines]. It was a US naval base. And there we'd sow the mines where the Americans wanted them. They weren't too keen on flying at night the Americans. But it suited us down to the ground. I'd rather fly at night time war time than in the day time, any time. But from there we operated to, along the China

33:30 Coast as far north as Amoy [now Xiamen], that's as far north as we got. And as far south, with a further staging point at Labuan on the Borneo coast down to Bangka Strait which is on the approaches to Surabaya and that was an important shipping channel. So we - I did two trips down there

34:00 to Bangka Strait. And Hainan Island, we dropped mines off the south western, south eastern tip of Hainan Island and in Hainan Strait the operation was interesting because we think we flew over a Japanese prisoner of war camp so there were a lot of Aussies down there. So we were quite

34:30 low. Low enough at night you could see the tops of the palm trees. And you could also see a few blue flashes which I put down to being rifle fire. They were probably taking a few pot shots at us. And then onto Hong Kong - we put the lights out at Hong Kong a few nights. Because we'd come in low and by the time we were just about dropping our mines all the lights around

35:00 Hong Kong would go off. They were aware that there was somebody who shouldn't be there sort of thing. Flew to Hong Kong. And Amoy - Amoy was perhaps a frightening trip really because it's a very rocky coastline along that China coast

35:30 and Amoy in particular had a few nasty peaks around it. Well we had to get in low to drop our mines. And on an exact bearing and an exact timing to put them in the holes as we used to say. And arriving at Amoy you could see this peak which was our reference point, sticking up out of a thick cloud base and it was a moon light night and it was like flying

36:00 over a bucket of milk. But we knew we had to go down through that cloud to get our mines sewn. And the peak, it worked out conveniently for us as it turned out. It gave us a good reference point. Once we'd passed the peak and headed out a bit towards the sea we knew we were getting into safer country for an aeroplane. We were able to do that then. But one of the other squadrons

36:30 lost an aeroplane that night coming back through the Formosa Strait. As we had to too because there were a lot of little islands between the mainland and Formosa or Taiwan as it's now called. And we think perhaps he clobbered one of the islands. I never heard what really happened. Back to Lingayen Gulf where we used to refuel in the morning and then - it's

37:00 on the northern part of Luzon and then over Manila to Leyte Gulf to the isle of Ormoc where we were ensconced. We did a few of those operations out of Darwin. And back to Darwin eventually and the first trip then was an air sea rescue operation. Had to go and look for a Liberator crew which

37:30 had gone in on a daylight raid up along the coast there somewhere. Found a little bit of wreckage around the sea in the area but that's all we could see. Then I think another raid or two on Surabaya - I'd have to look up my log book. And that's when I had my little accident just a month before the war ended.

38:00 So that ended my operational career.

Going back a bit before we talk about the end of the war for you, can you describe a mine dropping operation from Darwin. How long would it take you to reach your destination?

I've got my log book there. No it'll waste time

38:30 a bit. It'd take - well to Surabaya I'd say about eight hours. What we used to do from Darwin, we'd fly down in a south westerly heading to an inlet along the Kimberley's coast there where we'd top up with fuel. That gave us a bit of extra range. Then off up to the Indonesian Islands and went our way through them to Surabaya past Bali

39:00 and Lombok Strait and places like that. And I'd say that'd be about eight hours that way, about eight hours back. Another two hours to Darwin doubled. Eight, sixteen, that's twenty hours I'd say of flying.

How many mines would you lay in one operation?

Two to - oh depending on the size of the mine. You could lay up to four mines.

39:30 But we tended to carry big mines when we could. You might carry a one thousand pounder and a five hundred pounder sort of thing as against four, five hundred pounders which you're capable of doing. But probably availability of the mines too. They weren't always the same load every trip. I think that's possibly one reason why they

40:00 had different shapes of weights in the mines.

What sort of shape were you in after a twenty hour trip?

Pretty frazzled. Well coming back, say to West Bay was this place on the Kimberley's. We'd refuel and work out a rough old flight plan for Darwin and

40:30 then I'd hit the hay so to speak. We'd turn on the radio compass on the homer thing to Darwin, it'd just point there and all the pilots had to do was keep that thing hovering around the nose and we'd be home. And in that period I'd get a bit of a rest. And coming back say from a trip on Hong Kong or Amoy we'd land at Lingayen Gulf

41:00 refuel and likewise the pilots - it'd be day time and they just wing their way down the Luzon peninsular and over Manila and spear off a bit to Leyte Gulf. Easy enough to find if the weather was good. In that period that's when I got my rest.

Tape 8

00:31 **You mentioned some quite long missions up to Hainan and Hong Kong that you did.**

Yes they would be the longest.

How were they staged?

Well for starters it was about a sixteen and a half hour trip from Darwin to Ormoc, this little island about as big as your thumb sort of in the middle of Leyte Gulf just off the main

01:00 shore. That's where the Americans had their flying boat base and we'd pick up the mines and that'd be sixteen and a half hours. So we'd spend a day and a night there and the following night we'd take off for our target and say, Hong Kong. There'd be a couple of hours at least up to

01:30 - well two and a half hours up Lingayen and top up with fuel then. Then it'd be about six hours over to the Hong Kong area. I'm just talking off the back of my head now. So it'd be eight and a half hours plus an hour to refuel, that'd be nine and a half hours.

When

02:00 **you refuelled were you doing it from shore facilities or from ships?**

No from barges normally. Refuelling barge. They'd have to pump it up sort of thing. And that was in Lingayen Gulf. I was trying to think the other day, at Labuan, we used to go through Labuan down to Bangka Straits so the refuelling at Labuan - for the life of me I couldn't remember how we refuelled there. Perhaps because I

02:30 didn't see it. We'd go ashore and the refuelling would be done while we were away. But most likely I'd say through barges. And that's how we refuelled. So Hong Kong and back would be about six, twelve, it was a very long trip. I know eighteen, twenty hours. The first trip I did in that area was over to Hainan Island and

03:00 I came back absolutely stonkered. Went to bed, had a couple of beers, went to bed, that assured me going to sleep straight away which I did. And I slept for eighteen hours. I'd been on an eighteen hour trip and I - there was an air raid going on that night and I can remember one of the Americans saying, "Come on buddy there's an air raid on." And shaking me. "Better get up." And I said, "Oh let it be."

03:30 And anyway it was a lone aeroplane I think by the sound of it. A few bang bangs going on. I just rolled over and finished my sleep and that took eighteen hours that sleep. That's the longest sleep I've ever had in one hit. And later on be much the same - have say a few hours - possibly get up and have a meal and a walk around and go back and sleep again.

04:00 So catching up with sleep was always in the cards. And anything up to - oh flying time wise'd be eighteen to twenty two hours. That's what you logged in your log book. But your lapse time from the moment you stepped on board the flying boat and the moment you stepped ashore again, that'd be, oh a day and a half. Well and truly

04:30 into the next day.

And how often would you have to do an extreme trip like that?

Well we did those - you'd have a couple of days off and then you'd be back at it again. And then a couple of days off. And we'd do those trips and then we'd fly back to Darwin and then we'd have a - maybe a week off there. And then you'd do

05:00 a trip or two out of Darwin. And there was quite a lot of flying involved.

How do you keep yourself awake and alert over that many hours in the air?

Well there was always something to do for one thing. You were constantly doing something that was what kept one awake. You'd catch yourself nodding off at times and got to get up

05:30 and take a drift, and take a star shot or something like that. Have a look at the radar or go up and have a look out of the aeroplane. And talk to the pilots and so on.

It must've been very hard on the pilots as well?

Oh yes yes. Very boring thing piloting an aeroplane I think. Even though the automatic pilot's flying it most of the time

06:00 they've got to be there to take over in an instant you know. They've got to monitor the fuel supply, that the engineer isn't falling down in the job. That tanks are changed at the appropriate time. There was always something to do for them and also maintain a look out in case there were any night fighters around or they're going to fly into an island which the navigator had unfortunately steered them into.

06:30 One of the traps with the radar of course thinking about that, in latter part of the war we got a very good radar. You've probably heard of H2S, I suppose it was a type of H2S that the screen was beautifully clear and you'd be looking at an island coming up and you'd say, "Oh that's

07:00 - must be an island." That was so clearly illustrated on the screen. Then it'd decide to change shape. "Oh it's got to be a cloud." And sometimes you'd get a cloud over the island so you had to watch it. You'd think, "Oh that blip there is only a cloud." Well it could be a cloud over an island and if you're down low you'll fly into it. And this is

07:30 one of the theories that was mooted amongst the chaps about this aeroplane that was lost in the Straits of Formosa on the raid on Amoy. He just didn't come back, nor did we hear from him. It's quite possible he flew into an island. I don't think - there was no flak as such over Japanese targets we found.

08:00 They apparently worked on the principle, if you didn't drop anything that went off with a bang, we won't

let off anything that goes a bang at you, because it might show up our gun position and you'd come and bomb us. On the other hand they might've been short of ammunition. I think this was the case around down Borneo and Sumatra. So the only shot

08:30 I could remember seeing fired at our aeroplanes was possibly rifle fire over Hainan. See those little blue flashes as we were - you could see the tents down below in the faint night light. And no that was one good thing about fighting the Japanese war from the air, for us anyway.

09:00 **On these missions were you flying in formation or just as individual aircraft?**

No individual aircraft.

How lonely was that?

Oh you were on your own, you knew you were on your own. You were timed not to arrive over the target at the same time and get tangled up with each other. But we must've been close on one of those Bangka

09:30 Strait trips down to Sumatra. And I was up front and I happened to look out and the moon was coming up. And low and behold about a mile away I could see a Catalina silhouetted perfectly in the moon path over the sea. And I thought, "Goodness me he's in a dangerous situation." To see him so readily. And then I thought, "Well if we can see him somebody

10:00 can see us." If they're on the other side of us. So that's as close as I've been to another Catalina in flight that I can recall. Normally we spread out a bit.

What conversions were done to the aircraft to save weight on these long missions?

The only one I know of is that business of removing the

10:30 undercarriage from the amphibians which was done down in Lake Boga in Victoria at the time. That saved about fifteen hundred pounds and that's about one and a half mines for a start.

It's quite an incredible feat of logistics and endurance just to lay a couple of mines.

It is. But if you

11:00 get one ship. Harking back to that newsreel I saw last night of Rommel with the ship arriving in Tripoli and about fifty tanks aboard. And that turned the tide of the war there for quite some time. And if you sunk just one ship like that you'd do a lot of damage. And thinking back one

11:30 episode. I was not involved in this. It might've been a sister squadron. 42 Squadron were in the Darwin area at the time too. We were on the Balikpapan campaign. Very shallow water around Balikpapan and it had been mined and there was a Japanese convoy

12:00 of reinforcements had arrived. A number of ships, I don't know how many. But the story goes, that the first ship blew up with a mine and all the other ships immediately dropped anchor. And they probably thought, well we're so close we'll put our men ashore in boats or something. But what they didn't know was lying off shore was an American submarine. And it just picked them off one by one apparently.

12:30 So the one mine sunk one ship but the sub got the rest of them, so the story goes. But I often wonder how the submarine didn't detonate a mine itself. It must've been well back out of the way I guess.

How many crew were about a Cat on a mission like this?

We had two pilots, observer. We had two radio men. Two,

13:00 three, five, engineer, six. I think we had about eight, a couple of fitter armourers on board too from memory.

That must've been fairly cramped on a Catalina?

Oh no scattered around a bit. There'd usually be a couple in the bunk resting. And the radio men

13:30 would change around. And so he'd get a bunk and you'd have two in the blisters maintaining look out watch behind the big .5 Browning guns. And the pilots, well they'd oscillate from one side to the other and nod off beside his mate. Usually the two of them'd be up front on our crew anyway.

14:00 **What sort of rations did you get to eat on these long trips?**

They were variable. Usually a bit better than what we got on the ground at Darwin for instance. But basically it was something out of a tin and you got tired of that.

Were you always carrying mines or were you carrying other pay loads sometimes?

14:30 Oh the last trip I did with 43 Squadron was a bombing mission as the first one was. The first and last. The last one we had to bomb Mikasa[?] air strip. So the briefing was to bomb from eight or nine thousand feet I think it was. And that's when I learned that a

15:00 five hundred pound bomb went down a lot more accurately than an eight and a half pound practice bomb which they used to wobble. And the idea was to bomb the strip and the area around the strip one at a time. Because at the time the army were trying to take Balikpapan or had taken it. Or were trying to finish them

15:30 off up in the north of Borneo. And to keep their air fields down. The Liberators used to go over these air fields in daylight and the Catalinas at night. So it kept them pinned down so the saying goes. And this particular operation was quite successful because, with the first bomb, I hit the runway. There was a cross

16:00 runway like that. And the runway stood out very clearly because it was made out of crushed coral. And on a dark night the coral has certain luminosity in it. And so no trouble getting the runway in the sight. So I hit the runway with my first bomb and around we went and came in and had a go at the other runway.

16:30 And we went very close to that. And then - we had eight bombs. And having discovered there was no flak around, I discussed it with the pilot. I said, “Let’s go down a bit lower, say about four thousand feet and I’ll see if I can put one in the centre.” The two runways. And I did. Got it

17:00 bang dead centre and I had it confirmed by an army mate after the war. He said, “Yeah I know we had to go and fill it, that hole.” And then to add insult to injury at another discussion I said, “We’ve got two bombs left. Why waste it on the runways, we’ve made a mess of them. There’s something over in the palm trees there. I think I can see something like a shed or some

17:30 construction. We’ll plant one in there and see what happens.” Well jackpot we started a great fire. And that took care of that. And then we thought, well they’ve got to have fuel stored somewhere around this. Where would you put the fuel. Maybe over, not near that other dump. We’ll try another clump of palm trees. Maybe there’s something in there, on the perimeter of the field. So we

18:00 put one in there and I think we got the fuel supply. Or one or the other, we started another fire anyway. So it was nice to see a bit of reward for our efforts.

That’s an incredibly successful mission for one aircraft.

That’s so. And I thought back to that first abortive mission where we were beaten by the weather and an unserviceable radar.

And you had had barely any practise bombing

18:30 **since your training?**

Oh well we did a bit of practise bombing on the Wellington. That was daylight bombing. We did a bit of practise bombing at OTU at Rathmines. Not much. We had to go out and find Middleton Reef and that took a bit of doing finding the reef

19:00 particularly if the tide was out. So half the time you dropped the bomb where you thought the reef was. You saw some white caps or more white caps on the sea below and thought, “Well that’s got to be the reef.” And you dropped a bomb or two there and usually they were explosive bombs. You could see the flash if you got a hit on the land. That - we only had one lot of bombs to do on that exercise.

19:30 **When you went to 43 squadron where had all the other crews come from, what were their backgrounds?**

Well on 43 Squadron I met up with some ex 458 Squadron fellows who were wireless operators. At least two. Some fellows it was their first squadron. Younger chaps.

20:00 And others were - particularly the captains, they’d been flying on Catalinas before and they’d been retrained as captains. So they’d had Catalina experience on other squadrons. They were fairly scattered. I can’t recall any ex bomber command crews like we met up with

20:30 at Bairnsdale. Probably they went to Liberators or something like that which I think they did.

You’d had a bit of mine laying and torpedo experience before with 458 Squadron. What experience did the crews at 43 squadron had with torpedoes and mines?

I don’t know if they had any work with torpedoes. Some of them did in the

21:00 early days I believe. But they were mainly, in the early days with the Cats on bombing - Rabaul was a favourite target and up around the New Guinea area. So - and they mined of course before my time, just before we got up to the Philippines they mined

21:30 Manila Harbour or the approaches to Manila. And that’s when they worked this cunning business of having the mines active there to tie the Japanese in there that might want to come out or go in. So if they were losing a ship at the entrance they knew they’d lose one way or the other if they were trying to come in or go out. So we had them pinned down with mines. And then a few days later

22:00 those mines deactivated and the Americans could go in with safety. But they were laid by Australian

Cats.

How as the mine laying you did in the Pacific different from that you did in the Mediterranean?

Well it was much more precise in the Pacific. The Mediterranean as I said, dropping mines from ten thousand

22:30 feet opposite the port of Tripoli was a pretty haphazard operation but we were told that was our height. And later on at this little place along the coast, well we were down to just above the ceiling height sort of thing to drop the mines because we had to get them right opposite this little jetty. And that's the one way we could do it, was get down see the jetty

23:00 coming up and drop, one, two like that. And - but there wasn't time as such whereas in the Pacific you had a definite reference point to pick up before you got there and if you didn't pick up that reference point, such as a small protrusion in the land or in the case of Amoy there was a peak that stood up above the landscape.

23:30 And then having determined that reference point. Oh Hainan was interesting the first trip because the charts were out there and we weren't sure of a reference point until we went around and had a good look at it. And having got that reference point you'd fly over it and the navigator'd be up in the nose of the Catalina with the hatch open

24:00 with a torch so he could look at his target map, usually an Admiralty chart to pick up this reference point by map reading up to the target area point. And he'd call out, you had your headphones on and you also had to keep your head down a bit because if you got your head up a bit too much behind a little windscreen it'd just about get under

24:30 your headphones things and lift you out of the hole in the nose. So then you'd say, "Over datum." And then the pilots would've had a set bearing to fly out on. They'd already have that on a nominated bearing. And one of the - and before we went up there, just before you got to the target,

25:00 as close to the target as you could, the navigator would find the wind, the local wind for the area and that gave you the time interval from your reference point to your first mine drop and your second and your third. So you'd find your wind, scuttle back to your desk, do a bit of arithmetic. And hand the slip of paper to - usually a radio man with a stop watch.

25:30 And having identified your datum you'd fly out on your bearing and they'd know. You'd call them up on your microphone. Then they would, they would call - I'm trying to remember. Oh no and the pilot would press the button that would release the mine. One two three maybe four at the set intervals.

26:00 That's why it was a lot more precise and they had the saying, "We put them in the holes."

Was there ever any danger of the weapons exploding as they hit the water underneath the aircraft?

We thought not. And that question was raised at the GR School, General Reconnaissance School at Bairnsdale. And they said,

26:30 "Oh no they're perfectly safe." And somebody said, "What about if we're struck by lightning?" "No problem. They're designed to be struck by lightning and not go off." "What about if you drop one accidentally?" And they said, "No, no problem. They've got to definitely in the water and be armed by these salt plugs dissolving and then be primed and ready to go off bang if anything metallic near them. So no no problem

27:00 even if you crash land with them, no problem." Well we had this particular aeroplane out the same night we were out doing a raid on approaches to Hong Kong. And they must've been out in their arithmetic a bit because they overshot the datum a bit and the last mine hit the coast of China.

27:30 And being down load and there's very steep cliffs and high ground around Hong Kong, it went off with a God awful bang having hit the land and not the water and the pilots were able to execute a quick turn to the right and not hit the coast of China. And

28:00 getting back to this refuelling point at Lingayen Gulf, that aeroplane eventually came in and landed after us. And I looked out and the starboard wing was a mess. The aleuron on the starboard side was all bent up and of course they were covered with fabric, they weren't metal. And the

28:30 metal framework of the aleuron had all bent up and was poked through this aileron. So it must've been very difficult to fly back that aeroplane. As a matter of fact I think they left it there and they had to send off a crew with a new aileron to patch it up. But they obviously went off with a bang if you lobbed one on the ground. Not supposed to.

29:00 **Where did the Catalina carry these mines?**

Under the wing. Out in the open under the wings.

Outboard or inboard from the motors?

Oh the motors were up high of course so they were - I'd have to look at a picture to refresh my memory. But they were out of the way in other words. Out of the way of the struts which went up.

29:30 **And how were they loaded on if the Catalina was floating on the water?**

They took them out in barges and wound them up on pulleys and attached them. And attached the electrical wiring to a release mechanism. They actually dropped one in Darwin Harbour when they were loading up there

30:00 one day and it went straight through the scow, bomb scows we used to call them. And ended up down in the bottom. And there was a certain amount of nail biting went on there being under the water. Would it be active? But of course it hadn't been wired up to the arming in the aeroplane itself. So they were able to fish it out eventually. I wonder what they did with the aeroplane. I think they probably

30:30 towed it away in a hurry.

Did it sink the scow that was loading it if it went through the bottom?

I've forgotten the story but I think it did. But it was fairly shallow water.

We're now getting towards the end of the war and you had a bit of an accident?

That's right.

What happened?

I tripped and fell whilst

31:00 running around doing a bit of horse play around the mess and it was a concrete floor. And I tripped and I hit the concrete on my chin. Just running and a one point landing on my chin and my jaw just went click and I was out like a light. And next thing I woke up and a doctor was standing over me with a needle and thread. And I said, "Get away from me

31:30 you old so and so. I know you've been drinking." And he said, "Keep still or I'll jab this into you." He sewed me up and the sister down at the hospital down Concord later on said, "Who sewed your jaw up?" And I said, "The squadron doctor." "Oh he did a very neat job." "Oh that's good."

So

32:00 **you were flown back to Sydney with that injury were you?**

Yes we had an aeroplane with walking wounded on board. And night stopped at Alice Springs, it was July. Very, very cool in Alice Springs I discovered at that time of the year. And then onto Richmond and then back to Concord Repatriation Hospital. And that was the end of the war within a few weeks

32:30 there.

Was that a bit of an anti-climax for you?

It was really. I would've liked to have finished my tour. I only had a couple of weeks to go. It was a six month's tour. So starting in January I had to go to I think the end of July to finish my tour and that was a sore point too when I got out from hospital. I had

33:00 to go to Bradfield Park and I had a job lined up with Qantas then and they said, "Oh no you're going to another squadron." And I said, "Well I know 43 Squadron has been disbanded." And they said, "You're going to 34 Squadron." And I thought, "Some smart so and so has got his numbers crossed." But I ended going to 34.

33:30 And I spent another - I tried to talk my way out of it and I said, "What about some leave, some operational leave." Like two weeks you're entitled to after a tour. And the guy said, "Because you haven't finished your tour…" these were his very words. "You're entitled to half an airman's

34:00 leave which - they have to be there eighteen months and you only served not quite six months so - to cut a long story short he got it down to two days. So I got two days leave and I was off to 34 Squadron up at Richmond.

Flying what?

DC3s. And

34:30 as I said, "This is a terrible mistake. The war is over. You don't need me." He said, "They need you at Richmond on 34 Squadron." And I said, "No no there's something wrong somewhere." But no that's where I went for the next - oh he said, "Oh but you must recall you signed up for the duration of the war and six months thereafter." I said, "Oh I vaguely remember that." That's how

35:00 me had me pinned to my contract you could say. And I got out at the end of May and that was almost my

six months. What's that? Five months, four and one makes five I guess. And that finished my career in the air force. And 34 Squadron folded up

35:30 when I left because there was only two officers left, was the commanding officer and myself. And we signed each for our discharges so 34 Squadron was gone. But they're back in business I believe, 34 Squadron as a communication squadron.

It's an odd question but which part of the war, or your war service

36:00 **did you prefer? The Mediterranean or the Pacific?**

I've never given it much thought really. As a preference. I suppose the best part of it was the OTU up in Scotland because I was in a civilised areas. And people who spoke the language.

36:30 The climate was pretty dreadful but I mean I was amongst our own type of people. And civilisation in other words whereas Darwin was pretty rough in those days as was the Philippines. They'd been invaded by the Americans only a few months before. And the Japanese had possession of them for several years

37:00 before that, or something like that, four years. And they were in a recovery mode. So I guess the few months I had up in Scotland would be the better part of the war. Certainly more peaceful.

What was your favourite military aircraft that you flew on?

Oh … I suppose the Sunderland.

37:30 But then unfortunately for me I didn't fly them operationally. But it was a wonderful aeroplane no doubt about that.

What did you like about it?

The robustness, the armourment, if you were attacked and that sort of thing. If on operations of course. And the spaciousness of them. You could stand up and move around.

38:00 **Were you able to celebrate the end of the war in any way?**

I don't think so. As I said I was out at hospital at Concord and my father at the time was in very poor health and I was a bit concerned for his welfare. And the end of the

38:30 war came as a sort of an anti-climax. I was glad to see it all over naturally but I don't recall having any whoopee de doo sort of thing out at Concord. No. It's nice that it was over.

When you broke your jaw had you been drinking?

Of course.

39:00 Unfortunately we'd been down to - we were very short of alcohol in those days and we went down to - my pilot and I went down to a nearby naval mess. He had a mate in the RAN [Royal Australian Navy] at the time.

39:30 And we'd been invited down - he'd manufactured or distilled some coconut juice and I'd heard about this dreadful stuff. And he'd invited us down to have a taste. So we had a taste alright. It was fire water and that's where the cookie crumbled I think, where I missed my footing when I came home to our own mess. And it was just

40:00 one of those unfortunate accidents.

I guess it's a sad way to end your military flying career like that?

A bit of a let down for sure yes. Be carted home on a stretcher sort of thing, relatively.

Tape 9

00:32 **Alright Keith, tell us how you got involved in Qantas.**

I wrote to them when I was still in the hospital out at Concord. Seeing this was about December '45. I wrote them and asked if there was any possibilities of ex-navigators and they wrote back, yes come and see us as soon as you get out of the air force. So

01:00 that was the first contact. And that's when I was a bit peeved so to speak when I was posted to 34 Squadron. I didn't even get to the interview stage. And then having got out of the air force eventually, just about a week before, my old Catalina pilot happened to pass the

01:30 chief navigator of Qantas in Martin Place [Sydney] one day and he knew him from way back and they said g'day to each other naturally. And the chief navigator of Qantas said, "You know of any ex-air force

fellows that are looking for a job as navigators. We're finding it rather difficult to get some." And he said, "Have you contacted Keith Cousins?" And he said,

02:00 "The name seems familiar." And of course that was back in January I'd been - or before December or early December I'd contacted them by letter. And he said, "Yeah I vaguely remember the name." And he said, "Well when you go home tell him to come and see me." Because we were living together at the time the pilot and

02:30 I, we'd hired a flat at Pott's Point and batching. So I scuttled into have my interview with Qantas on a Friday, after I'd just got out of the air force and on the Monday I was on my way to Karachi [Pakistan]. It was rather funny too because I tried to get my breath back and

03:00 the Qantas pilot looked at me and he said, "Where did you get that cap?" And I said, "Oh they gave it to me in the uniform store in Qantas." And he said, "You're wearing a bus driver's cap." I said, "Am I?" He said, "When you get to Karachi they make some very good Qantas cap badges up there. Get one." So I did.

How did you find the difference in the work?

Well I found the Lancastrian

03:30 very noisy to start off with. The Catalina was noisy enough but I think the old Lancastrian was a lot noisier. That was one thing. Again there was a lot of night flying involved. And it was nice not to be subjected or - that's a wrong word

04:00 I suppose. Not to have to be ever mindful of air force regulations and that sort of thing. Not that we didn't have regulations in Qantas but there wasn't that military air about it. That was one thing. And most of the fellows were ex air force chaps anyway. So we fitted in well together. And naturally we fought the war again

04:30 together when we were on the ground. And where we'd been and what we'd done and so on. No it - I had this first trip with Qantas and in the meantime I'd had an interview with the air force for permanent commission. And I had been interviewed back in about February and I said,

05:00 "Well if the offer comes it's on one condition I have. That I be trained as a pilot." And they said, "Oh no we can't have that. We might consider it." And apparently they considered it because the offer came back the week after I'd - no sooner got home from my first trip to Karachi and back with Qantas, from the air force to come and see them. And apparently they were going to extend the

05:30 invitation to join them. But I had done this trip, just the one trip and I thought, "No this is for me." So I wrote a thank you note and stayed on with Qantas for the next thirty years as it turned out.

What changes did you see over that time?

Oh different aeroplanes of course and different ports. And a lot more of the world. South Africa. Like

06:00 Johannesburg, Mauritius, that route. And the USA of course with the advent of Constellations and 707s. And a couple of trips to South America flying a load of sheep among other things. And horses to Mexico. As well as people. Monkeys to out of India for the

06:30 Salk Program [Jonas Salk, manufacture of a polio vaccine] and back to Australia. Just thought, my God they used to smell and so did we when we got off the aeroplane. It was so bad that you'd get on the train going home and you'd see everybody sort of, "Ooh where's that awful smell coming from?" In the end we daren't go home in our uniform. We'd fold up our uniform and put it in a bag and

07:00 carry it home. And I'm glad when they found something better than monkeys to manufacture that Salk, I think it was Salk wasn't it for polio vaccine. And that was on the Constellation freighter. Went over to freight a load of monkeys. And they apparently still flew them on the 707's but they were down in the

07:30 hold below and it was a different air system down there so it didn't permeate amongst the customers fortunately. Or the crew. And yes so, quite a number of different types of aeroplanes. Even had the old flying boat to start off with. The short flying boat which was the fore runner of the Sunderland.

08:00 And I still say one of the most pleasant aeroplanes to fly on as a passenger or a crew member was the short flying boats out of Rose Bay [Sydney]. And the Catalinas, they had a few Catalinas. They used to fly over to Lord Howe Island and Noumea and Fiji. And the Electras, they took over from the Constellations on the South African run.

08:30 And New Zealand, Wellington, Auckland and so on. To Japan on the Lancastrians to start off with and then later on the DC4's and later on the 707's. And where else have I been? Oh Vancouver, Canada, few trips there. And

09:00 posting to England of course and we used to fly Constellation freighters out of England and 707's. So we certainly had a variety of aircraft over the years.

What sort of changes have occurred in navigation in your job?

Well the first big change was the advent of Doppler

09:30 on the aeroplane which was a device which read off the ground speed when you were passing over the sea or the land. And the drift. And having got the drift and the ground speed you could work out the wind so you had a very quick device for your dead reckoning where you'd be. And you could program the auto pilot to

10:00 tie in with the Doppler and it would take care of the drift and keep you on the appropriate track. The main thing you had to find was the deviation, the compass on that particular heading. And that was the first job as soon as you got up and away and on the general heading to your destination. That was Doppler and that was a very handy device. It worked in as a good

10:30 relief for the navigator to go and get his head down for at least an hour or so. And then came the advent of the 747 and that had inertial navigators on board. And they have three of them, they probably still have, two for driving and navigating the aeroplane and the instrumentation all tied in

11:00 with the inertial system. And one on permanent standby so if one of the first two toppled out, the third one would snap in. That was the system when I left it and I dare say it probably hasn't changed since that. That was a big change. And the first thing that hit us as navigators was mainly on the logistic support. And by that I mean

11:30 an inertial navigator navigates as good as the information fed into it like any computer. And the more precise the starting point you could feed into that computer the better the aeroplane would navigate. So out at Mascot we did a survey, this is in our navigation section, of various

12:00 reference points. Like there's a church steeple out at Summer Hill way and we had the exact co-ordinates of that and somewhere else. So out on the tarmac we'd be able to tell exactly where that aeroplane as far as we could ascertain, its position on the earth. And from there, from the various parking lots around the aprons, not only at Mascot but throughout the world

12:30 to feed into the pilot's handbook. So that no matter where they are they'd look up their handbook and say, "We're on stand three at Rome" or something like that. And … latitude and longitude. And if they got their numbers right that aeroplane would navigate very accurately. So that kept the navigation section very busy there for some years.

You seem to have

13:00 **expressed an interest when you left the war about wanting to be a pilot? Did you follow that up in Qantas at all?**

I did. Before I got my posting to England I took a loan out from a bank and in between my trips out to Mascot. And I was taught - the chief pilot incidentally happened to be an ex-Luftwaffe pilot from a Hungarian air force. So

13:30 I did quite a few hours there. And then the opportunity came to go to England on a posting and we were there for four and a half years and that was perhaps the busiest time in my life because it was quite an area to supervise navigation as far west as Mexico and as far east as Tehran. And also a lot of

14:00 flight planning around Europe. There's a lot of immigrant flights going on in those days. And one of my jobs was to manufacture pre-determined flight plans for the pilots to go from London to Hamburg and pick up a load or London to Malta and pick up a load, that sort of thing. The paperwork that they carried on board the aeroplane because at that stage navigators were being phased out and we only

14:30 carried on the London and New York run. And London to Bermuda, Nassau down to Mexico. So there was quite a lot of flight planning involved and a lot of shall I say, dummy flight plans. Because over in London they have a thing called the Baltic exchange. And Qantas among others would put their hands up to supply an aircraft and

15:00 crew to - there was a lot of picking up of ship's crews at various ports around the world. If a ship was hung up for a day or two or a week or so with mechanical problems as they sometimes were, they'd fly the crews back home. A lot of that went on and with supplying the office in London, what we could do in the way of a pay load out of Suez

15:30 or anywhere around the world. So there was a lot of theoretical following went on there. It was a bit like a stock exchange in a way. The bids'd go in and - so that was interesting work too.

Earlier today we touched on the topic of LMF, 'lack of moral fibre' in the air force. What were your attitudes towards it?

16:00 I found it hard to believe quite frankly that people could be like that. And on this ship coming - well I didn't come across it until - in Scotland and we had a character on the station there who was being trained as a - what they call a tradesman, air gunner. He was in the RAF.

16:30 And he used to turn up for his morning parade - he'd leave a tie off or something like that. Or he'd come without a jacket if the weather was warm. They were supposed to wear a jacket or something. He was

always in trouble one way through being regimentally undressed. And he wasn't particular attentive in a lecture room as a pupil.

17:00 So we had a meeting about this character one day and they decided to send him down to a place called - from memory Squire's Gate which was a toughening up place for people who wouldn't toe the line. So off he went with an accompanying signal saying see what you can do with this fellow. Well they got him there and they sort of thing they had to do

17:30 was gallop around a perimeter of a camp with a full field pack on his back and do a couple of laps like that till he dropped. And they'd think up some dreadful exercise and so that went on. He was supposed to go away for two weeks and after ten days he was back at Alness in Scotland and an accompanying signal through said, "We've done all we can with this man. But he's too obliging."

18:00 So if they said, "Gallop around the field three times" he'd do it. And then he came back to Alness and we got the message he did just not want to fly. So I remember the section commander when he was being interviewed on his way back. He said, "What do you want to be when peace comes if you survive the war?" He said, "Oh I want to be an actor."

18:30 And when he went out the squadron leader said, "Well he's one of the best actors I've ever come across, that fellow." So he was the humorous variety and the other one was the chap I think I mentioned about, used to fly under railway bridges and that was his favourite thing. And we were talking about him on the Aquitania with a few who knew of him. And they told me, oh he'd been LMF'd. Because everytime

19:00 he was posted to an operational squadron he'd fly under another railway bridge or some flying dismeanour. And so he did it once too often apparently. And the third time was on the ship coming home from the USA. We had this draft from Canada with quite a number of fellows who'd failed their training over there.

19:30 No matter what category. And some of them were genuine failures. But according to the officer in charge of the draft, his opinion was that some of them were not genuine failures. They'd joined the air force to go overseas in his opinion just to get an RSL badge. He may be right I don't know. But some of them were

20:00 a pretty scathing sort of character. You'd pass them and you'd hear some nasty aside about you being for some reason or other. I don't know. So it was evident but fortunately not in large numbers.

20:30 **Since your involvement in the Second World War have you watched many films based around the subject?**

Around the war. Oh yes my wife says I look at too many but a lot of them I don't look at. You get your quota of course. But I was quite interested in this Rommel program on the ABC television last night because we were very close to

21:00 Mr Rommel in those days over in the Middle East and he used to cause us to go up the desert one year and back the desert the other way the next year. And we used to dig out each other's slit trenches. The first thing you did when you got to a new aerodrome was after the sappers had been in to delouse any mines that might be around the place, have a look in the slip trenches and see if they weren't filled with

21:30 mines or whatever. And that was the first priority and the next thing of course was to erect your tent and hopefully - we used to dig our tents in about - oh a convenient slip trench depth so that if somebody dropped a bomb nearby you'd be safe. The only reason you'd be unsafe was if they dropped a bomb right on you. That was our thing that went on

22:00 both sides. You'd go up and down the desert and clear out each other's slit trenches and tent replacements.

You told us about the South Africans dying in the desert earlier today and that was something that's stayed with you since the war. Were there other incidents that have remained with you that you've found difficult to shake from your memory?

Yeah in the early days I remember

22:30 waving goodbye - this is on a Bristol Bombay 216 Squadron detachment up along the Egyptian coast somewhere, in the early days. And this Bristol Blenheim - we saw the crew first of all going out. They were a bunch of Greeks. The first Greek Air Force fellows I'd seen.

23:00 Possibly before or since. And they were very happy jolly fellows. Gave us a big wave and off they went and got in their aeroplane. It was a Bristol Blenheim. We retired to our tent to get out of the sun and we heard the aeroplane taking off then it dawned on us that it was trying to take off because it was going full bore and you could tell it

23:30 was getting nowhere. And we rushed outside the tent to see it just disappear over this escarpment heading towards the Mediterranean, just down a bit. And it disappeared out of sight and then the next moment there was a God almighty explosion and this great cloud of black smoke went up. So all the poor Greeks in that crew they were done. They wouldn't pull anybody alive out of that. And he'd obviously taken

24:00 off with the propeller set on coarse pitch instead of fine pitch. That's one that sticks in my mind. And there's another one in Scotland on a Sunderland, where this particular night, one caught fire coming into land at Cromarty Firth. But it was unsuccessful, it went in.

24:30 That was that. And I got into my hut about half past one in the morning to see one of my RAF - I switched the light on and one of my RAF mates stood bolt upright in bed and went as white as a sheet because he thought I'd been on that aeroplane. He said, "Oh!" He thought he was looking at a ghost. And the memory part of that was - oh it was rather horrible.

25:00 I think I might upset you Kirsty [interviewer], was the burial party. There were two RAAF officers in that crew and naturally they were deceased. The adjutant and another officer as was the case always had to go through a deceased's person's belongings and sift out what to send back

25:30 home and that sort of thing. And the first upset was they found these two very smart looking young fellows. They were writing a very lurid obscene book and I looked at it and they said it was very well written too, very good prose. They said, "Home to Mum? No." And they put it in the pot belly stove

26:00 in the hut. That was one thing and the next thing was to see the burial party - it was a Saturday and a few of us were catching the train into Inverness to have a walk around the town, a few beers and maybe a dance at the local dance hall sort of thing. And this burial party were coming onto the

26:30 station bearing the coffins to take on the train to take down to the cemetery at Inverness. And one fellow in his RAF greys was bearing this coffin and I was looking there and there was green water dripping down his beautiful jacket from this coffin. And that really turned me off. I still can't get that out of my mind.

27:00 I don't want to think of it any more.

That's quite fair enough.

I don't know why I'm laughing.

I suppose that's how you deal with things that trouble you though, sometimes you try to find the lightness maybe. We don't have many minutes left on this tape Keith. I wonder if you

27:30 **- for Australians in the future watching this tape, it might be in five years or one hundred years. Would you have a message for them about serving one's country?**

Oh I hadn't given that any thought but I had thought, well my wife asked me, "Why was I doing it?" And I thought, perhaps our little grandson in years to come might look at it and say, "Oh that's what Grandad looked like

28:00 and that's what he was up to." That might be nice. But as for any messages, as I say I haven't given it any thought. But one thing, you've got ti give your service to your country. I think it's elementary. And they'll find a place for you to fill in a military force somewhere no matter who you are.

28:30 Or even if you've got one leg they'll find something for you to do, something useful. Which they found with the girls in the last war, the First War. Women put an awful lot into the war effort. And I think those WAAFs, some of them got to know the pilots by their voices when they were coming back from an operation.

29:00 They wouldn't have to worry about a call sign. They'd say, "Okay Charlie glad to see you home." That sort of thing. Yes the WAAF communicators. Everyone's got something they can contribute to in a war.

Any regrets?

29:30 Only the pain I carry around with me from jumping out of that Bristol Bombay. It hasn't left me and I've tried all sorts of treatments and I'm down now only to one which - I'm allergic to some of these so called wonder drugs and I'm up to here with cortisone.

30:00 Any more would become dangerous. But I'm eighty three and still here so what's a few aches and pains. Even if you didn't crash in a few aircraft sort of thing, you'd still have a few aches and pains. Most people do anyway.

Do you have anything else you'd like to tell us today?

I get

30:30 a bit of a kick lately attending the Lady Davidson Hospital as a - as I call myself a pink laddie, not a pink lady. And just having a chat to people and the idea being to bring in a few magazines and particularly ex service people. You can relate with ex service people.

31:00 And they like to see people other than their own families and of course some of them don't have families. And this started off through our 458 Association. The Department of Veterans' Affairs wrote to us and said they were looking for volunteers to go to Lady Davidson Hospital. And they looked around

the table and they said, “Well the obvious member is you Keith because you live practically next door.” And I said, “Oh yeah.

31:30 Okay.” So that was that. And I’ve only been there a short time but it is rewarding. It’s nice to find somebody who appreciates you. Although I had my first upset there last week. I only go one day a week, I was there yesterday. And I said to the nurse there, the ward nurse, “Is Mrs so and so still here?” And he said,

32:00 “Oh no, she’s gone home.” And I said, “Oh good.” Because when I went into see Mrs so and so, she sat up in her chair and she said, “Get out! Get out!” I couldn’t believe it. So I got out. I thought, “Hello I’ve struck a rough one here.” And they knew of her. I told them before I went home. You’ve got to report how you get on with the patients and they like a feedback too the staff.

32:30 And they appreciate it. And - because the patients get sick of the staff and no doubt the staff get sick of the patients. So there’s a bit of to and froing going on. But they’re all generally happy there. But when this lady’s name came up he said, “Oh no she went home during the week.” And I just left it at that.