Australians at War Film Archive

Robert Walder - Transcript of interview

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http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1929

Tape 1

00:41 **About growing up in Sydney?**

Well we lived at, at Bellevue Hill in Sydney, and that was close to Scots College. In fact, one of them, we had

01:00 three different houses in Victoria Road, and the first house was adjacent to Scots College Preparatory School. So when I went to school at Scots, I climbed over the fence and entered that way. So I stayed at the preparatory school, and

01:30 during that time, I was very interested in athletics and gymnastics, and while my schooling was you know, over emphasised on sporting, my ability apparently was very good, and I won the sports prize for the school in that time.

What was your father like, what did he do?

Dad was a very interesting character,

02:00 he, he had a manufacturing business in York Street and he made clothes and had lots of machines making these clothes. And he was a good sportsman, he, he had the idea then that he wanted to break the world speed record in a motor boat, speed boat. And he never quite achieved that, but he did race

02:30 Sir Charles Kingsford Smith around Rose Bay, Sir Charles was in a bi-plane, and he was in his speedboat. And I think it was more a publicity stunt, than anything else, but it certainly attracted plenty of publicity.

Were you were there on the day?

No I wasn't, actually.

But you remember him racing in the boat?

Now actually, I remember, because I was at Scots, I remember the race, but I wasn't quite sure

03:00 who won. And Dad owned a few racehorses, which were, one racehorse was quite successful, Penthouse. Not the Penthouse, Penthius. And Penthius won quite a few races, and he had a dismal sort of finality, because Dad leased the horse out to these two or three

03:30 people, and the horse ran in Brisbane, and apparently the race had been fixed by these people. And the horse, the horse was disqualified for life, so Dad couldn't use the horse at all. I mean that sort of penalty doesn't happen in these days, but in the old days it did.

What did he do?

Hmm?

What did, what was his work?

Well he was manufacturing clothing most of the time,

04:00 he was, he was also a chairman of Tattersal's Club in Sydney. He was in the Royal Motor Yacht Club in Sydney, and when, I think it was when he wasn't elected president he formed his own club, and he went to the Spit and formed the Australian Motor Yacht Squadron, Yacht Club. And the clubhouse was a ferry,

04:30 so he had a ferry anchored in the Spit, and they raced boats around that area.

So what type of person was he?

Oh, he was, he was a pretty happy sort of bloke, I guess. He was also, he was in the hotel business, he had the Grand Hotel in Sydney, and the Exchange Hotel,

05:00 I don't think the Exchange Hotel is still there, but the Grand Hotel's there. And he owned the Royal Hotel in Orange. He didn't own these hotels, he leased them because in those days, you leased things from the brewery. And unfortunately when Dad passed away, all the leases were cancelled. And that, and the manufacturing business was sort of taken over by

05:30 his brother, Sir Samuel Walder. And I think when Dad died in Orange and Mum was with him of course, and Samuel came up to get the keys to the safe, which Mum gave to him, and in the process of doing that, he helped himself to the titles and the property.

06:00 We tried to sue him afterward, but you know, it was too long afterwards to, to get a result.

What?

I, I was pretty good at sport.

What sort of sport did you play?

Well I was in the first 15 team in 1941, and in that particular year,

06:30 I think I had the, I was selected to the second combined GPS [Greater Public School] team. And if I can remember rightly, I scored 11 tries in eight matches, which was pretty good. But it was only, not only my ability but the people that fed me the ball. And then I was in 1942,

07:00 I also was in the first 15 and was selected for the second combined 15 team from all schools. There were in war years, and I know that we were sort of practising at school to go to the war, and we formed, formed the team that

07:30 was intending to go into the air force. And we used to march around the quadrangle and you know, pretend, the cadet corps always had, sort of imitation rifles anyway, so we utilised those. And when the time came and we finished in 1942, everybody

08:00 was in that team, was supposed to join the air force. So I applied for the air force, and I had some problems with colour blindness and the medical staff of the air force couldn't make up their minds whether I was suitable or not. And after a couple of months, I just got tired of that, and I joined the air force [navy], and I had no trouble there. And went down to Flinders,

08:30 which was the training base for sailors, in those days.

Before we go to Flinders, do you remember the day when war broke out?

Well I was at school, and it was in 1939, and well I, I was certainly

09:00 was shocked by it, and I think you know, the headmaster sort of lectured us about the, you know, how terrible it was, and important it was probably, to defeat Germany. And we were all thoroughly aware of the war during the last two years at school, or three years, 1939 to 1942.

09:30 **What sort of things were you aware of?**

Well, I think we were mostly aware of the fact that if it lasted a long time, we'd probably be in the war ourselves, and there was lots of discussions about, you know. And you know, we were, we had the facilities of reading the paper every day, and I think in my class,

10:00 most of the people joined, joined up in 1942. And I think most schoolboys before that, in 1939 and 1940, also joined up. Because I've been to a few returned soldiers meeting at school, and they are quite prolific even in these days. And I'd say that, you know, 75 percent of the

10:30 people in my class, would have joined up for the war.

What about in the harbour area, you lived near the harbour, didn't you?

Yes.

What sort of marine activity were you seeing?

Well you know, I obviously was interested in speedboats because my father had speedboats, and I've, I was mainly a surfer.

11:00 My parents were often too busy to look after children, so I spent a lot of time with my grandmother in Bondi. And she had two sons, and one of them was killed in Gallipoli, that was Keith. And Ken came back from the war in not a very good condition, and he was sort of a second father to me.

11:30 Dad and Mum were really too busy to look after children all the time, but I enjoyed myself down there, and I did a lot of surfing, and Ken was a good companion, we played cricket in the backyard.

Did he tell you about his war experience?

No, he wouldn't talk about it, wouldn't talk about it. And because, you know, he definitely came back

with, you know,

12:00 some mental disability from it.

Did you know that was what was the case at that time?

Did I know what?

Did you know that was why he was like that?

Oh yes, yes. Mum, grandmother never mentioned it, but my mother did.

What sort of person was your mum?

Oh, that's a good question.

12:30 Mum came from a pretty poor family and the Walders at that time were, you know, fairly good and respected business people. My uncle was the Lord Mayor when the Sydney Harbour Bridge was open, I was a participant of that, so I must have been about four years of age, or, and I can remember some

13:00 details, I can remember [Captain Francis] De Groote coming along and cutting the ribbon. I know it seemed to be pretty, and my mother was there, obviously. And Dad was racing this speedboat around Sydney Harbour as part of the celebrations. And oh it was an enormous day. And so,

13:30 oh that was, you know, and the bridge was, you know, changed Sydney forever.

And, and your mum was from a very different background them to your father?

Oh well, Mum's younger sister I used to stay with her

14:00 in Melbourne, because, you know, it was the place I used to go to for the weekends off that we had from training. And after a while, of course Jean became very friendly with me, she was married to Dudley McDougall who was a war correspondent in London. And Dudley was a, a strange, fun

14:30 loving person, didn't take life too seriously. And Dudley had actually, actually won the lottery in Sydney, and at that particular time, there was a, a newspaper strike on, and the papers weren't being published. And with his winnings, he somehow gave enough money to the strikers, that they went back to work,

15:00 which was, you know, his wife wasn't very impressed with that, she would have rather had the money herself. So I met Dudley in London a few times, and of course, that was the ideal job for him because he was a man about town, he liked a drink, and just had a great time in London during the war.

What else was happening in, in Sydney around that

15:30 **time, do you remember when the raids came in?**

Well, yes, actually from Scots College, I remember the submarine, I remember this sort of explosion and lots of sort of lightning happening, which you could actually see from Scots if you looked slightly to the right. And that was the submarine at sea,

16:00 and then there was another episode I remember, I was, I think at that time I was with my mother in Martins' Hall, which is a semi high-rise building where Mum was living at the time. And there was a tremendous amount of activity in the harbour, and that's when the two submarines, midget submarines came into the harbour, and sunk the HMAS Kuttabul, was it,

16:30 the ferry with lots of sailors on it. So that certainly brought the war to Sydney in a pretty forcible manner.

How did your family react to that, do you remember?

Oh by that time, Dad had died, Dad died in Orange, actually, in the Orange Royal Hotel which he had the lease on. He had

17:00 the lease on two other hotels, the Grand and the Exchange in Sydney. And that particular time, I know my uncle, Sir Samuel Walder drove up to Orange and got the keys from my mother for Dad's safe, and that had enormous repercussions afterwards, because he was supposed to have stolen the property, the title of a property. And I can remember,

17:30 I think, I remember coming back from the war and we were briefing solicitors. I tried to brief the top barrister in Sydney at the time, who had already been briefed by my uncle. Anyway, we eventually just had to let it lapse, for reasons that I didn't quite know.

18:00 **So you were quite young when your father died?**

Yes, I was 14 years of age I think, when Dad died. And that was pretty young, very young, most of the Walders died young, except both Sam, Sir Samuel Walder and Arthur Walder,

18:30 lived at Point Piper. And at one time we were living in a unit, you know, close to them. And Sam had a

very good, beautiful house, which suited his position. And Arthur Walder used to work in Sam Walder, these, their main activity in the olden days was tents, they made

19:00 most, you know, in the First World War they made a fortune, because most of the soldiers were in tents in Gallipoli, and the canvas business was just enormous, Walders' tents were quite famous around Australia. But Sam Walder was the head of, the head of the organization and he was a pretty ruthless businessman. He fought with his younger brother, he sacked his younger brother, Arthur, and they lived in the same street.

19:30 And he, he pinched some titles from my mother.

Did you have brothers and sisters as well?

Yes, I had a brother who was a doctor, Brian Walder, he was a good doctor, he was a dermatologist and was head of the Dermatologist Association for 20 years. So, he was a top man in his trade, and a fun loving person.

20:00 I think the story goes at one stage there, we all used to go to the Tivoli in those days, I think it was the Tivoli and they used to have artists on. And there was a famous American comedian was talking, and they stopped the show and they said, "Is

20:30 Mr Brewer there?" And Mr Brewer was a bachelor, and he said, "Oh Mr Brewer, your wife is sick in hospital and you're asked to go to this particular hospital." And Johnny Brewer just laughed and sat down, and then all the crowd in the Tivoli booed him, and he had to leave. Because you know, they thought he had a wife, and he didn't have a wife, and he knew it was a practical

21:00 joke, but anyway he had to leave the Tivoli.

So did your brother want to join the war effort as well, or?

Oh well, he was younger than me so.

Oh we was younger.

See I didn't, I didn't join until 1942, and by the time he was ready, the war was over. But he didn't, he did go to the Vietnam War as a doctor, he volunteered to go there.

So how did the death of your

21:30 **father, must have had a big impact on your family?**

Yes, it was quite dramatic financially and I wasn't thoroughly aware that until after the war, with my mother. The income had just disappeared because all Sam Walder did, was to, you know, take all the books, and he had a manufacturing business for tents anyway, and probably

22:00 took the customers too. And I don't quite know how Mum survived during that period. But she did have a friend in Western Stores, and that was Bill Stiff, who later on married Mum. And he was head of Western Stores and when he retired, or even before he retired, he was very friendly, and then they lived together, and it was a

22:30 very happy arrangement for quite a few years.

So did you feel any impact of the Depression growing up?

Well I was still, somebody was paying the school fees, and my brother was also at Scots and somebody was paying his fees, I'm not quite sure how that happened. My mother eventually married, or didn't marry,

23:00 but lived together with Bill Stiff, who was a wonderful person. And he was extremely generous to my brother, and he also was, he lent me money to go into, after the war I went into the washing machine business. And I heard about,

23:30 I was going out with a red-headed girl, and her name was Helene and I eventually married her. And she had a cousin, Bob Spike and they were over in North Sydney and they were making washing machines. And at that time, nobody in the country was making any washing machine, the only washing machines that were available were Bendix washing machines, which were imported from the

24:00 States. And so Bill Stiff lent some money to me, and I can't remember the amount but it was 10 or 12,000, I think, and I became a partner in the washing machine business. And we produced these washing machines to sell them, and we were producing up to

24:30 30 or 40 a week, and we were selling to. There was no washing machines about, so there was no problem about selling them. And we used to instruct the, David Jones would ring up and say, you know, "Three sailors, deliver these washing machines." And when you deliver them, instruct the buyers that if they had any complaint, always to ring us. And the washing machines weren't too good when they started off,

25:00 gradually got better. We had lots of complaints, we had about four servicemen on the road doing service calls. But the stores never heard about that, so they thought our machines were terrific, and they, they certainly improved and got much better. And so we had quite a few servicemen, we had about 20 or 30 people making washing machines,

25:30 we'd make, we got up to about 100 a week, and we almost had orders for 2-300 a week. And then I got concerned after a few years, that you know, other companies had come along and we were a 10-20,000-dollar company and all the other manufacturers of refrigerators were million-dollar companies. And I

26:00 just thought, "Well, this situation won't last." So I, and during this time, I bought the other partners out, so I controlled the washing machine company, and this gentleman came along and heard about it, about us making them and offered to buy us out. And

26:30 I readily sold and he took over the washing machine company, and then made the fatal mistake of trying to sell the washing machines direct to the public. And as soon as he did that, all the retailers just wouldn't buy them anymore, and I think he went broke, and deservedly so, too.

So you were really in there at a good time?

Yes, I was in there. So I decided I'd go away for a

27:00 holiday, so I. And by that time, we had a child, in my marriage.

Before we move onto that part of your life, we might just go back to when you joined the navy. Can you tell us a little bit about joining up?

Yes, sure. Well I, yes, we went down to Flinders and I got

27:30 selected for the officers training course, which is, you know, you just stepped across the road and you were in that section. So, so we were in a slightly different uniform, which we were sort of apprentice officers. And we used to go to dances in Melbourne on holidays, and,

28:00 and I just noticed the difference that as soon as I had this officers' uniform on, it was, I sort of got better girls.

How did you get selected to be an officer?

Well you, oh you do all this training and marching about and firing guns,

28:30 and then they look at your history, which you've got to give before you go in, and you went to a great public school, and you passed with reasonable sort of marks, and then they put you in this officers training thing. Which is really like a prison camp, because when you go to sleep at night, they'd listen to what you were talking about, and see what sort of person, you were. You know, it was really.

29:00 And then they'd take you on these route marches, and you'd be marching for about four or five hours to test your stability. And then you'd have to pass, you know, certain tests in navigation particularly, and that was always a bit difficult for me, because I wasn't very good at maths. But I really studied to make sure that I was good enough

29:30 to do the navigation. And the navigation was, rifle shooting and then you had to train squads of people in marching, then you had to pass tests in navigation, which I found difficult initially. And then when you

30:00 got through it, you, I volunteered to go overseas.

What did your mum think of you joining the navy?

I think most mothers had sort of read the paper and everything, and realised that you know, they had an 80 percent chance that their sons were going to join up, and most of them did. I'd say most of the people that left school

30:30 from Scots, we had this officer training school at Scots, all training for the, for the air force. I wanted to join, everybody wanted to join the air force, it was more glamorous. But I had problems with, I had some problems with, I forget what it was now.

31:00 They wouldn't, the air force, oh yes, they, I had some potential, oh it was colour blindness, and the air force was keeping me waiting and I was going and seeing doctors in the air force, and that became so tedious that I just gave it up and joined the navy.

Do you remember seeing other soldiers around town in Sydney in that, at that time?

31:30 Well, I don't particularly remember that, but I know that everybody, the main focus of all conversation was the war. And every, you know, I think the papers, the newspapers circulation went up about 20 percent, because you know, people were interested, because, particularly family people, because their sons were going to join up. And most people from my school, joined,

32:00 joined the forces. And most of them tried to join the air force I think, because it was more glamorous.

So as a boy, what was your concept of war, at that point?

Well I, I learnt mostly about the war from my uncle, and you know, when you have. My grandmother really had, she had two sons,

32:30 and she really lost two sons, I mean, the one that came back, was in bad condition, and the other one was killed at Gallipoli. I think I was quite aware, very aware of the liabilities of war, and you know. And also the, you know, reading history, you read about the,

33:00 the frightening number of people that got killed in Gallipoli. And the Australians that got killed in France, was, in one battle, something like 50,000 people, soldiers died. So the aspect of war was quite horrendous, as far as I was concerned.

So at school, would the boys, what sort of things

33:30 **would the boys talk about? You all wanted to join up, I mean, did you consider that aspect of it?**

Oh I think they discussed the war and its current aspects, which came out in the paper on a daily, or you listened to, we'd listen to the radios at night. And you know, which weren't really allowed at school, but we sort of got away with it. I remember, I mean I'm

34:00 fairly senior now, but I can remember going to the preparatory school and listening to a crystal radio in the dormitory at night, of the test matches in, in England, cricket test matches, and that was supposed to be very naught, but we all did it.

Do you think you were a good student, or a bit rebellious?

Oh yes I think I was a reasonable student, I was a prefect, so I

34:30 had to have some sort of standing. I wasn't a particularly brilliant student, but I was a good, I was a good athlete. I was in the athletic team and I was in the football team. And after I was in the cricket team in the junior school, and for some reason I didn't join the cricket association, so that, the summer period was pretty barren. I did a little

35:00 bit of rowing, but not, not a great deal. And I can remember that I tried out the rowing and never actually entered into any teams, so I was never selected. So when I was Flinders naval base, the navy wanted a, an eight to row against the air force, and the army.

35:30 And I told them, you know, that I'd done a little rowing but I wasn't very good, so we were in this eight, and we were in the Yarra River and we were, the navy was leading and I was the bowman and I cramped, and this is the stroke and we came a bad second, so I wasn't very popular after that.

But Scots was your second school, wasn't it,

36:00 **there was another school that you went to, when you were very young? A little one?**

I went to a school at Bowral. How did you know about that?

We have our ways.

I went to Bowral and I was at the age of five years of age, so I went to Bowral, it was a boarding school. And I certainly wasn't very happy there. Anyway the school headmistress rang up my mother and said,

36:30 "This pupil, your son is too young to be at boarding school, will you pick him up," which she did.

And what didn't you like about it?

Oh I think I was just, I think I was terribly lonely, I was the youngest pupil there, and I can't remember exactly my feelings, it was a long time ago. But I know that I was terribly unhappy. So,

37:00 and that wasn't a very bright thing of my mother to do, anyway.

So you can you tell us a little bit more Bob about your first few weeks at Flinders. What you thought of the training and the people that you met in the navy, when you first got there?

Well we seemed to do too much marching, you know. We'd be on route marches, you know, you'd march for two hours or something, which is obviously to test your stamina. And then

37:30 you had rifle training and there was a lot of drill, and the, there was a, there was a very autocratic officer there, who used to, and everybody was a bit sort of frightened of him. And it just seemed to be pretty tedious, really. And I don't know,

38:00 if it really made us very fit to go to war. But then again, you know, you went out on, you do gun training, which was quite exciting. They had a ship out there, a small ship they used to take you out with a four-inch gun on it, and you'd load that up and fire it into, into the sea, where there's no ship.

38:30 That part of the training was good. The other part of the training with rifles and things like that, that

was pretty tedious. The only good part about it was getting off every second weekend, and I used to nick off nearly every weekend.

Really, you'd go away without being allowed to?

Yes, yes.

Well did you ever get caught?

Yes, I think I got caught once.

39:00 I had my leave stopped for a month. And during that month, they definitely checked that I was there. So then.

What were, can you tell us a little bit about going into Melbourne, I imagine you went into Melbourne on leave, and the dances that you went to?

I can't, I can't remember where they were, they were in a big park, and

39:30 you know the only activity you had, only way you could meet a girl, was to go dancing. And they were, you know, extremely popular. And they were much more successful for me, as soon as I got an officer's uniform. But you just took girls out, and you probably cuddled them and kissed them, and then on, you know,

40:00 I never stayed out at night all the time. And I stayed with my mother's sister. But they were, it was great, they were great fun. And that was, you know, you used to look forward to that, all the week.

I might just stop you there, that's the end of our.

Tape 2

00:31 **Prior to being in the navy, had you had much of a sex education, growing up?**

A what?

A sex education.

No, none.

What did you know about it?

Well I mean I left from school and, and sex was a, the only thing I can remember, that stuck in my mind

01:00 about sex at school, related to us from the minister, related to us from the masters. Was some, we were all called to a meeting, and apparently two boys were supposed to be doing something related to sex, which I couldn't quite

01:30 understand I think. They were fully dressed and they were on top of each [other] and they were moving about, and some master caught them doing that, and made a federal case about it, which seemed to be absolutely ridiculous to me, even at that time. I mean, as far as sex was concerned with boys at school, they just, some of them used to masturbate. And I presume

02:00 nearly all of them did at one time or another, because they were very healthy, and definitely had sexual thoughts and read books about sex and had girlfriends, which I did.

So you had a girlfriend before going into the navy?

Yes, I think it was before going into the navy.

02:30 Yes, it was. There was no sexual activity there.

Was it, what sort of people did you meet going into the navy, because you came from a private school background, quite an affluent family. Did you meet all sorts of other people for the first time or, what was your experience of the other people?

Oh I think there were all,

03:00 all types of people. You're really so intent, I think, on making a success of what you are doing, that this is the main occupation. I mean, they, they sent you on route marches, you know, you'd march for six miles or seven miles a day, you know. And I think they deliberately, they did this,

03:30 to keep the sexual activity down and to make you tired, continually tired. So that when you did you go to sleep at nine o'clock and the lights went out, you were, you know, exhausted. And I think that was probably a deliberate intention, and quite a successful one.

How did you feel about it, at the time?

About what?

About the initial training that you were doing?

I think it was time,

04:00 I just wanted to be successful, that's all. The main intention was if you there in an officers training course, to make sure, the main intention was for everybody to pass their exams and to, their navigational exams, which I sometimes found difficult, because I wasn't very good at maths, but I really put a lot of work into them. And I think the sense of achievement, and to be an

04:30 officer, was the main stimulating fact.

And who did you team up with? Who were your mates?

Oh gee, it's a long time ago. I think, you know, when you went on leave and you went to a dance, you usually went with three or four people. And if you were lucky enough to take a, walk a girl home, well you did, otherwise, you just,

05:00 what did we do, well we all had places to stay if we got weekend leave. And you know, there was a fair bit of drinking. And I think obviously some of them drank too much at times. But it was, I think it was, apart from the hard work in the officers training school, we

05:30 all had a good time and plenty of fun.

How long were you at the officers' training school?

Oh, I think about four or five months. And then, and then when you passed out, they posted you to different places. So I

06:00 got posted to, to England.

You said you nominated to go overseas, why did you want to go overseas?

Well that's where the main war was, at that time. So I went on a, on a fast freighter, small passenger ship, mainly freight, the Pryan,

06:30 and we sailed from, I think it was from Sydney and we went through, across the Pacific to the Suez Canal, up through the Mediterranean, because the war was on then, we were unescorted. And then through the Mediterranean up to,

07:00 up to Liverpool, where I. So in the reflection afterwards, that was probably 1943, that was a time when, you know, there was plenty of U-Boat [Unterseeboot – German submarine] activity. And most, most merchant ships normally all travel in convoy, but we didn't,

07:30 and probably the reason for that was that it was quite a fast boat, you know. It was a freighter, I'm not sure what speed it could do, but probably about 17 or 18 knots which is pretty fast for a, oh it wouldn't have done that, 12 or 13 knots. And we landed in Liverpool, and then I reported, had to report to Portsmouth.

Before you go there, can you describe a bit about that trip,

08:00 **what the ship was like and what you did on board during that trip?**

Well there wasn't much on board, there was a few, quite a few ladies on board, who were all going to England to join their husbands. And they were untouchable. It was just, you know, it was pretty, it was boring, boring. If you didn't have good books to read, I mean you can look at the ocean for so long, and if you,

08:30 if you pass land that was interesting. And we must have stopped somewhere, we, to refuel. I think probably the first refuelling station would have been the Suez. And then, then we just went through the Med [Mediterranean], past Malta,

09:00 up to Liverpool, which is on the west coast. And a big, a big shipping area. And then we caught the, the train down to Admiralty House, and then they asked you, what ship you wanted to go on.

09:30 And if you were a junior sub-lieutenant on probation, you're really not a very senior officer, so you've got to get on something small, to have any effect at all. So I wanted motor torpedo boats, destroyers, frigates things and they were all fully taken.

10:00 And then he said, "How about submarines?" and I thought that would be OK. That was probably the best move I ever made in my life. So I went up to Bluff, which is outside Newcastle on Tyne, do you know Bluff? So it was a, a submarine naval base.

10:30 And so then they train you to be the submarine officer, which took, probably took about three or four months. And then I was, then they, they pass you out, they put you in charge of the submarine and you're actually at sea.

Can you tell us a little bit

11:00 **about the training, what you actually did in that three or four months?**

The training was mostly navigation, and going out on, on the sub [submarine] and watching, you know, how it worked and then, other tests were navigation tests while you were out there, take control of the boat. Well they are boats, they were called ships. And,

11:30 and you know, testing your sight, ships in the distance, and we did a lot of, a lot of patrols in the north sea, in the subs. And we had a few gun actions with, with small German boats off the coast, and some were successful and some weren't, but they were only small ships.

12:00 And anything that was dangerous in a submarine, you never fought on the surface, you always took it down, which was the only way that you got any strength at all. We fired dummy torpedos, we had to learn about the, the way to attack ships if you were in charge. And you

12:30 could see the ships in the distance that you, if you saw a merchant ship, which many of them were ours, you pretended to attack it, and you had to get in a position well ahead of it, because your speed under water was only three or four knots, in those days. You had to surface every night, because you ran under, with batteries underneath, and the batteries only lasted a limited amount of time.

13:00 You had to get up and charge, charge the batteries for your diesel motors, and you could do about 12 or 13 knots on top of the water, and that was your speed, excellent speed then. And most of it was related to, you know, you had a four-inch gun on the top, and I was the gunnery and torpedo officer, on a temporary, acting

13:30 on probation officer. And in attack, you had to learn to get into the right position of the ship, because you were very slow and they were doing, merchant ship was doing 14 knots, or a destroyer was doing 20 knots. And you had to make sure that you got into the right position to be able to attack the ships. And then I was passed out by a

14:00 general named George Hunt. George Hunt had sunk more ships in the Mediterranean than any other person had, with less torpedoes. Which simply means that he used to fire two torpedoes, instead of fire. And I was in the passing out parade, passing out examination,

14:30 the submarine all of a sudden took a nosedive like that. And he just said, "Well fix it." So if you don't panic, you can fix it, there's no problem at all. You know it's heavy there, it's only heavy because there's too much water down there, and there's not enough aft. So you pump the tanks aft to stabilize it, and then pump, then get the

15:00 ones on the front of the ship, the bow of the ship, you pump them out. So if it gets heavier at the back and lighter at the front. Anyway, I seemed to pass that successfully and I became a submariner's officer.

And what was he like?

Oh, terrific fellow, George Hunt. He lives in Australia now, I've met him in the, in the

15:30 service's club up there, he's got an aura about him that, and yet he's quiet. And most of the successful men are quite, they're not blabber mouths. And he's the most respected, he, he got two DSOs [Distinguished Service Order], and probably most respected submariner in Australia, anyway.

16:00 **And did you feel that aura about him, when you first met him back then?**

Yeah, he had a presence. But you know, anybody with more stripes than you, has always got a presence.

What did you think of the subs when you first went down?

I thought it was fantastic.

What did you like?

I think when you're very young,

16:30 and the people around you are awfully young, you don't get frightened. It's only when something happens and you don't know how to fix it, that you've got a real concern, and you might get frightened.

Were there other young guys that didn't cope very well with the submarines?

Oh the selection service is pretty tough.

17:00 And I didn't know if anyone really failed the test, but there obviously were quite a few.

But when you were in the boats doing some of those exercises, did other men freak out, or?

No, they don't seem too. I mean, 90 percent of the people are born to submarine.

17:30 There are only submariners, they know all about it, and they're confident in what they do, and you've got to be confident in your skipper. And I think they had, the skipper's captains, they're usually men of very considerable experience. You don't, you don't lose many subs from the, internal accidents.

18:00 I mean you can. I mean you can go down to 300 and, 300 feet was the limit, and we had a, we had this new submarine, the Tireless, and we took it down 300 feet. And it seemed to cope reasonably well and didn't spring any leaks.

18:30 And you know, if you go down, today the submarines they're built, they can go down to 500 feet, and they're built much more solidly, but of course submarine today, they stay under the surface for three months. And they do, the main reason you

19:00 surface is that you run out of batteries. And then these days with atomic power, you don't, the atom sort of drives, gives the power to the boat and you don't have to surface at all. But in the olden days, submarines were pretty, you know, pretty primitive compared to what they are today. They're a major war vessel of most navies today.

19:30 They don't built battleships and cruisers any longer, they just build atomic submarines.

You said at the time it was one of the best decisions you'd ever made, why did, why do you think that?

I think because you're, it's a small boat, there's about five officers and about 40

20:00 crewmen. You know everybody, you're in quite intimate surroundings, because you sleep on, I used to sleep on, there's five bunks and six officers, you sleep when somebody, when you get off duty, somebody takes your place, and you go back and sleep on a

20:30 hot bunk, which is the term for somebody else's bunk. There's, if there's five officers bunks, there's six officers. And the captain of course, that's not a good illustration, the captain sleeps in the captain's cabin. And the first lieutenant always sleeps in a separate situation, but the

21:00 the lower officers sleep, there's always one less bunk. And so you sleep in a hot bunk, but you only do that for a fortnight.

Was it considered a special place to be by the rest of the guys in the navy?

Well I think submarines think they're special,

21:30 and whether that's a reflection of, to other people, I'm not quite sure. But they think they're special, and they certainly show, after the war they all stick together. They all contact each other and they're still, Captain Crawford, who was my captain, still meets with other officers in England.

22:00 **You said that you were the officer for gunnery and torpedoes, can you tell me a bit more about that job, what that involves?**

Well you've got a four-inch gun on the front, on the bow of the boat. And this is got a special entrance to it by a ladder and, a lid on the top. So,

22:30 when you decide to have a gunnery action, you're steaming along and the boat is coming to the surface. You actually open the hatch underwater, because the pressure of air in the boat doesn't allow any water, so you get it opened about three seconds before you should, and nobody gets very wet. And you're all on a ladder, and you've got to man that gun, and fire the gun

23:00 before your opposition has a chance to do it. Because you are, you are very susceptible, you only have to be hit once, and the sub, if it's hit on the hull, it's finished because it can't go underwater anymore. So, you're highly trained to do this, and the idea is when you attack

23:30 something, you shoot one shell and if it goes over the boat, you shoot another one. If it goes on the other side of the boat, and the third shot should get the boat. So that should all happen in a minute and a half.

And then you go under again?

Well it just depends,

24:00 whether you sink, if you sink the enemy, cause we didn't sink many enemies with service action. So if you sink the enemy, you don't have to go under. But submarines usually surface at night, in the old days, where nobody can see you, and go underwater during the day.

Just stop there for a second.

In the First World War, there was two, we had two

24:30 submarines and they went to fight the war in, in Gallipoli and one got lost before it, up the north of Australia, and the other one went through to the Mediterranean and Gallipoli, and then did tremendous work apparently in the Dardanelles with supplies. And it became you know, that

25:00 Australian boat became quite famous. And I think the crew were captured, and they, it was surfacing at night and somehow they, they hit the submarine which couldn't surface again, and they were put in jail in Turkey, and they had a terrible time, the lights were never turned on day or night in the cells,

25:30 and they escaped. And they escaped right through, they went right through Europe and back to England, which was unbelievable.

Amazing. What did you find hardest about the training, compared to what you'd been doing prior to that in Australia?

I think you've just got to be adaptable,

26:00 you know. I really liked all of it, the, because it's such a confined spaces, and its so, the crew is relatively small for a ship, and I think the, I think because

26:30 it's supposed to be a really dangerous vocation, most people that joined the submarine service, more, are certainly more agreeable than they would be in a big ship. If you were in a big ship, and you're dealing with hundreds of people, there must be a few nasties about. But if anybody doesn't fit in on a submarine, they only had one trip. Because

27:00 the place is so confined, you can't afford any disruptions and arguments. So there are none.

And what happened at the end of training?

What happened at the end of training. Well we, we were posted to fight the war in the Pacific.

27:30 So.

But prior to that you worked on the ferry, when did that happen?

Oh no, that was during the invasion.

We might go back to that and talk about.

OK. Well I was posted to, I was on this ferry in the,

28:00 in the middle of the Thames, and we were supposed, we were anti-aircraft guns on it. And they were bombing, they were 1,000-bomber raids going over London every night. So there was plenty of activity and it was like Guy Fawkes Day during the night. And we fired, you know, every night, hundreds and hundreds of

28:30 anti-aircraft shells in the air, but you could never tell because it was, half the time it was dark, and the next time it was, you know, actually thousands of artillery guns firing at planes. And every now and again you'd, somebody would hit one and they'd, you'd see them come down in flames. And every night there was some,

29:00 some were hit. That only lasted about a week, and then we got this posting to go to Portsmouth. And we steamed around in our paddle wheel way, and got into Portsmouth and there's somewhere between 3-500 ships in Portsmouth,

29:30 just unbelievable. And then, you know, everybody was sort of, we got, you obviously got the impression that something big was going to happen, and then we got, every crew member and every officer got a letter from General Eisenhower, saying that on the 6th of June, you'll be

30:00 partaking in the biggest naval expedition of all time. And he wishes us well, or something, something like that. So anyway on the 6th of June, it was a really bad night weatherwise, so nothing happened on the 6th of June. And

30:30 the 7th of June, these hundreds or perhaps, hundreds and hundreds of ships went out of Portsmouth and we all started to sail out at night, about, I don't know, probably midnight. And then behind us,

31:00 there were, there were lots of big ships that when we got close to France, there was still, you could still see some lights from residents. These battle ships and cruisers and destroyers were all firing shells in, in to France, and,

31:30 so most, most of the troops went aboard you know, at, as soon as daylight happened.

And could you see that happening?

No, not much, because all the Americans went, we were at Arromanches [Arromanches-les-Bains], all the Americans landed at Cherbourg, and I think they, the troops

32:00 went aboard, went ashore before we were there, they went ashore in the dark. So there were the British troops, and they eventually took Cannes I think it was, a big effort there. And there wasn't a great deal of activity in our area, as far as the Germans were concerned.

32:30 And most of them went ashore without any casualties at all. The Americans just, on the right, ran into anti-invasion manoeuvre, and they lost hundreds and hundreds of troops.

Did you see anything?

Oh, yes you could see, you could see all the shells being fired, particularly at night,

33:00 there was a tremendous amount of activity there. And I think we were, we were concerned about submarines. You've got to remember this boat is a ferry, the most innocuous ship in the whole invasion, and hardly likely to be a great target. On that, but when, and then when we got there,

33:30 at night, we stayed there for, well I stayed there for about a fortnight. Every night the bombers came over, the German bombers came over and they bombed, they bombed us with acoustic mines, which had no effect. And all the ships at night were tied up, they weren't moving. But in the daytime when they started, there would always be two or three ships, either badly damaged

34:00 or sunk, from the acoustic mines. And you know, we, some of the crew members of the HMS Aristocrat, some of the officers were obviously ex-merchant seamen, and you know, some of them were a bit weird. It's like Guy Fawkes Day there at night, because you know, there were so many

34:30 guns going off at planes, that you could actually see the silhouette of ships and everything. And I went to smoke a cigarette and this bloke went off his head. A relatively senior officer said, an ex-merchant seaman said, "Put that out, they'll see you." Absolutely ridiculous, because you can actually see everything with the amount of activity that

35:00 was happening. So anyway that happened every night, the bombers came over and I think first of all they dropped shells, and then the acoustic mines were much more effective. But I got a, you know, you're expected at,

35:30 submarine base at Bluff I think it was, at certain date, and it was about four days away. So I spoke to the captain and he just said, "It's really up to you, you've got to." So I, as the Americans had such a bad time up there, we all had our little boats that had drifted down from the American,

36:00 American invasion. So we all, we used to hop in the boats and go ashore and see, you know. Of course the war had all sort of passed after about three or four days, and all the French people were just locked up in their houses, they wouldn't come out, because they obviously thought well if this invasion doesn't succeed, and we fraternise with the British, we'll be in more trouble.

36:30 And I don't know whether that was the case, but we never saw any civilians at all.

What sort of damage did you see?

In our area, very little. We, I don't think, I don't think any of the troops got into serious trouble, any of the British troops that landed. And they made a terrific sort of impact in the first week, as far as

37:00 territory that they took. But as I said, in Cherbourg they ran into an anti-invasion manoeuvre and all these boats were drifting, American small boats were all drifting down to us, and that's why we used to go to shore in our private little boat. The one I had never had any, any wounded or dead Americans in it, which some of the others did.

37:30 **Where were they coming from?**

Hey?

Where were the wounded and dead coming from?

Oh they were coming from the invasion further north. Do you want to have a look at the atlas?

No, not yet.

The British landed at Arromanches and Normandy, and the Americans went up to Cherbourg, which was an area to the right, which probably meant it was,

38:00 oh to the southeast. And there, there was initially a limited amount of shelling of the ships, but that seemed to pass very quickly, because

38:30 you know, there was actually hundreds and hundreds of bombers were shelling the French area. And...

What could you hear when that was going on then?

Oh it was just, oh, like thunder. And the area at Arromanches to inland, seemed to be

39:00 cleared very, very quickly. I don't think that was an area that they, and I'm pretty sure that the troops didn't have any great casualties. But further to the right, the Americans certainly had enormous casualties. And we were shelled initially from the long range guns, but

39:30 you know, there was so many, so many bombers were coming over, British bombers every day, that the area was cleared very quickly. So that part of the war was, oh I was there for about two weeks, or three

weeks.

What was your?

Apart from the night-time bombing, wasn't too bad at all.

40:00 OK, we might actually stop there.

Tape 3

00:32 **Robert, just to go back to when you were heading over to Europe, what were your expectations of what you would do in the war?**

Well there's a great unknowing thing about it, isn't there.

01:00 So, because what really happened was, you were called in and seen as gentlemen at Admiralty House, and then said, well, you know, what do you want to do. Have I discussed this before?

That's OK, you can go.

And you say, you know, all the things that were your preference,

01:30 which was obviously if you were a junior sub-lieutenant on probation, you want something tiny, so you want motor torpedo boats, frigates, destroyers, and anything that's relatively small with not too many people, so you have some

02:00 identity in the ship you're on. And if it's a big ship, you have very little identity, and the bigger the ships are, the less important you are. And furthermore, the less input you have. So as long as I got on something small, I was happy, and I had no real intention of joining submarines, because motor torpedo

02:30 boats and frigates would probably be more exciting, and I never really studied what submarines are really all about. Except my uncle said, "Whatever you do, don't join the submarine service." And I never really liked him very much anyway, so he had very little effect on my decision.

Which uncle was that?

Sir Samuel Walder, he was Lord Mayor of Sydney, as I said.

And why did he say that to you?

03:00 Because I think he was trying to be helpful, and he probably thought submarines were, submarines would be, you could get hurt or killed more easily, than in a bigger ship, which is partly true.

03:30 **When you were going over on that boat, what was the mood like, what did you blokes talk about on that ship?**

Well it was a freighter, fast freighter. It had, I don't suppose it had more than about 50 passengers, and most of the people were taken up by wives joining

04:00 husbands overseas in the, you know, war wives joining husbands.

But you were heading into a war that was really already very much underway and things weren't, at that stage of the war, things weren't going that well?

No.

You were heading into that war, what were you thinking about?

We weren't, we weren't concerned at all, we should have been much more concerned. Because it was very peaceful, nothing seemed to happen, you didn't pass many ships,

04:30 we didn't see much until we got in the Suez Canal, and even going through the Mediterranean, which is at that time is a disastrous area with the German submarines that were plying in the Mediterranean, and that didn't seem to worry us, because we probably didn't know enough about it. Then we went in the north sea,

05:00 and that was the time when the submarines were sinking an enormous number of British ships, and I hadn't even read about that, or I didn't know about it. And you know, nearly all the ships of our type were escorted at that time, because they were, the Germans were sinking so many ships initially,

05:30 you know, the U-Boats could have won the war. But it wasn't until, until they broke the code of the U-Boats, and they found out where the U-Boats were congregating for the next attack, and the British knew, knew this after a while, and then the U-Boat menace diminished considerably, because they sunk so many U-Boats, that

06:00 they were no longer effective.

So when you arrived in Europe, in that quite obviously in that dangerous situation.

In England.

You were in ignorance about the danger, really, you didn't realise it?

I didn't realise the danger going across the, near the English Channel and the area adjacent to England, was as bad as what it turned out to be.

06:30 And it was quite, absolutely, well they nearly, they nearly won the war with the U-Boats, and the submarines. And it was only when they broke their code, that they started to sink lots of U-Boats.

So you weren't really worried as you were heading into this war, but what were you thinking about it?

07:00 You know, it's a long time ago, isn't it. Well I was thinking it was another adventure, you know, I was going to see things. I'd never been to England before, and I was joining the submarine service which I was, when I

07:30 did join it, you know, I went to. I don't know if I told you, but I was called to the Admiralty and they just asked me what I wanted to do. And one of the last things that, all the things that I wanted to do, was small ships, motor torpedo boats, motor gunnery boats, destroyers, frigates. And then

08:00 he said, "We've got a vacancy in submarines," and I accepted that. Against my uncle's wishes, but it sounded like a small ship and it turned out to be a wonderful choice.

Did you at any time, at that time, did you consider the possibility of having to kill other people, or yourself being killed or wounded?

I think you're aware of the element of danger.

08:30 And you know, I used to go to London frequently, because I thought the Londoners were terrific people, and were very courageous in the fact that they had to live there, and every night London was bombed. And we used to,

09:00 go at night, go into a motel and watch the bombers, oh no, watching the bombers coming along. That's not quite right. We were watching the V1s [German jet propelled rocket] come over, and the V1s are a missile which you can trace from its exhaust. And

09:30 you know, if the missile was sort of right in front of you and it stopped firing at the back, you knew it was going to crash down in the vicinity. So if it was right in front of you, you obviously got out of your, your sight and ran downstairs, before it exploded. But that didn't happen mostly and you could actually watch, watch them come through,

10:00 and in that respect it was quite exciting, apart from the impact that happened. And then when the V2s, came through, the V2s were another missile that you couldn't see, it went up in the stratosphere, and that was when you couldn't watch, because you couldn't see it. And I just admired the sort of courage of Londoners who seemed to be so happy, and

10:30 they were putting up with this every night.

Can you remember your very first experience of one of those air raids, what it was like for you the first time?

These missiles? It was exciting. It was exciting, you don't think of the devastation immediately. And when you

11:00 meet the people and talk to the people in London. I used to spend most of my leave in London and I used to always go and dine at the Savoy Hotel, with danger money and everything, we had plenty of money to spend. And the Savoy Hotel was the ultimate in those days, of sophistication. And being a very junior officer,

11:30 I was surprised at the sort of attitude all these senior officers had, that such a junior officer would have enough money and sophistication to go to this elite dining place. And the other thing was, the best thing was when you asked a girl out, and said, "Would you like to go out to dinner at the Savoy?" you never got a refusal. So,

12:00 and that was, that was great, the music was good, the food was good. And all those senior officers were terribly stuffy and I think they were a little jealous of the fact that I had a nice young girl.

Did you meet anyone special while you were in London?

Yeah, I met lots of girls, lots of girls. There's one particular girl

12:30 in Newcastle on Tyne that I was quite friendly with. And I took quite a few ladies to bed, but it was, it

was sort of concerned about the fact that venereal disease was rampant in those days, and I hadn't,

13:00 I didn't try for intercourse very much at all. Because I was concerned about, you know, VD [venereal disease] and the repercussions.

What had the navy told you about that?

Oh they were, they actually told us very forcefully about what it was, and that if you got it, you'd probably be out of the war. And they, they implied that,

13:30 it was, it could be incurable, which was initially true, but certainly wasn't true later on. And that, that obviously, you know, was a matter of great concern.

Had they shown you films, we've heard that often different services were shown lots of rather

14:00 **ghastly movies and images of?**

No, I don't think, I don't think they got to that stage when I was there. But you know, there' certainly the publicity in the papers was pretty apparent, and it was, it was almost out of control at one stage of the game. Until they got their antidote that it could be cured quite easily, but I don't think that was in my time.

Had the navy

14:30 **issued you with any kits for protection and condoms and so forth?**

No they might have to the troops, they didn't to the officers, they must have considered we're not so virile. And they could afford to get their own. But I mean,

15:00 I, I slept with some girls but I was always protected. It was a matter of considerable concern.

So the social life in London was pretty good when you were there?

Oh it was terrific, it was great. And it was the sort of atmosphere and the people that was so wonderful, it was

15:30 what they had to put up with. And the streets at night were full of people. And of course the bombing and the V1s didn't usually start til dark, and they didn't start til, I'm not sure of the exact times anymore, but about 11 o'clock at night, 11 til two o'clock was the main area, I think, when the

16:00 bombers came over, then the V1s, and later the V2s came over. And as I said before, you could actually watch the V1s, and that seemed to be quite exciting, as long as they weren't coming your way. And you didn't think too much about the repercussions, but after talking to hundreds of Londoners now, apart from some of them who had tragedies, they put up with it heroically.

16:30 **Excuse me. And you said that you didn't really think about the devastation, but what did you see of the devastation?**

Oh yes, in daytime you saw it all, when you walked out in the suburbs, it was quite horrific.

In what sense?

Just a general destruction, you didn't see the, you didn't

17:00 see the people because all the bombing was done at night, and you didn't see the casualty rates during the day. But the devastation particularly in the suburban areas, not so much in the London area, which I can't understand, in the suburban areas was, you know, frightening.

At what point did the war

17:30 **seem real to you, if you like?**

Oh I think it's, as soon as you got in the submarine, you were fully aware and so were the rest of the crew, that had probably been there a lot longer than me. I mean some of these, Crawford, who was the captain of the Tireless, he was,

18:00 he was second in command in the Mediterranean of the sub that sank lots and lots of ships, you know. So he was a war veteran by the time he came to us.

Just to clarify exactly what you did. You didn't actually join the submarines until after D-day, is that right?

Yes.

You signed up to be a submariner.

18:30 I signed up, then I was sent back, sent on this paddlewheel steamer to Portsmouth.

So that all actually happened before you got onto the subs. So can you tell us, why did that

happen, how did that happen?

Oh because there wasn't a vacancy for me. I was, I was just posted to this, you know, the thing was, lets get rid of this bloke, he shouldn't go too far away, I'll

19:00 stick him on the paddlewheel steamer on the Thames, he can't get into much trouble there. And all you did was fire these, these guns at planes coming over at night, not knowing whether you hit anything or not, you probably didn't anyway. And then I think they must have forgotten the paddlewheel steamer was designated to be part of the invasion force, so I probably got lost for a while.

19:30 And went to Portsmouth and just, just hundreds and hundreds of ships there, I was nonplussed to the reason that this was going to happen, but you got the feeling that something momentous was about to occur. And then people, crew members talking to other crew members, for the few days we were there, before we got sent on the invasion course,

20:00 we became aware that we might be in the invasion force, but I just thought that's ridiculous, how can a paddlewheel steamer go on an invasion force, it's innocuous and ineffective. But more we did, we took all the non hobnobs [non upper echelon] that built the port of Arromanches, with these cement, floating cement,

20:30 floating cement, what's the word.

Pontoons, maybe?

Hmm?

Pontoons?

Pontoons, floating cement pontoons. And of course, some of them were lost, but they built, all the engineers helped to put all these together, and that's, this was the main landing area, that all the troops and the tanks and all

21:00 went ashore on.

So just so I'm clear, when did you actually arrive in London, and join the submariners, when was that? 1942?

So 1942 I went to school, and I came from there, so it's probably the end of 1943,

21:30 I'd say the end of 1943, and I was probably, I was probably in London.

And as soon as you got to London, you signed up to be a submariner?

No, I went to, I went there, and the first thing you do is you report to Admiralty House. And then you, there's this retired or older senior

22:00 officer, and he just questions you about what you want to do. So the innocuous sub-lieutenant on probation, you want something small which gives you some degree of importance. And all the small things, like motor torpedo boats that sounded pretty exciting to me, and Fairmiles and fast moving

22:30 boats like that with a limited amount of crew, were all taken up. So the only thing they had for me, was to, after travelling all that way, was to go on a paddlewheel steamer on the Thames.

So what I'm wondering, you were accepted to go onto the subs, but then there wasn't a place for you?

That's right, but at the end of the interview, he said submarines.

23:00 So I had to, I had to wait for a call up to the submarine service, which I got after about three weeks in France. And then the great problem was, how do you get, how do you get out of this war that's going on, and we all had

23:30 these little boats that we could. I don't know, they all had motors in them, they'd all drifted down from the Americans which, you know, had a really bad time, landing at Cherbourg. So we had our own vehicles, and we could drive round the harbour. And I did that, asking people, and then I, I met this Australian who was on a Fairmile crew, motor torpedo boat crew. And

24:00 I said, "You know, you're not going back to England at all, are you?" and he said, "Yes, we're going back in two days time." So I took my leave and they agreed to take me to Portsmouth.

This is after the D-day invasion?

Oh yes.

So I'm just trying to get a chronology going, just so that I understand. So you actually were posted to submarines but then had to wait, and while you were waiting, you were sent to the Aristocrat?

24:30 I was sent to the Aristocrat, that's right.

Right OK.

Then the Aristocrat, for some unknown reason, joined the invasion.

So how did you feel about being on this paddle steamer, instead of a submarine?

Well I knew that I was going to be posted to submarines, so it was only a matter of waiting. And you know, I'd been waiting a long

25:00 time to get in the war then. And it wasn't very exciting, even although there were a 1,000-bomber raids happening on London every night. Firing at planes up in the air, never knowing if you'd hit them or not, because every now and again they'd crash, but there was another 1,000 people firing up in the air too. So,

25:30 that was, oh I suppose it was, you know, it was quite exciting in a small element, way.

Can you describe the Aristocrat for us, what it was like?

I thought I had a picture of it somewhere.

Imagine we don't have a photograph, can you just walk us through the boat and describe what it was like?

Well it's got a paddle

26:00 on each side of the boat, and by the way, Ian Hunter was the first lieutenant, Ian Hunter was a film star, he was the first lieutenant on the Aristocrat. And it's got,

26:30 it was a, you know, it was a ferry so it's good big decks, so people can stand up as the ferry is going, and then its got you know, cabins, so when it rained all the people can, can get into the cabins. And then its got two big paddles on the outside, and an engine down below and I can't remember looking at what drove the paddles,

27:00 but it made a fair bit of noise and it was old and it was slow. I think we were one of the last boats to arrive at the invasion because we were so slow. No, that couldn't be right, we left early, because we had all these people that had to build the port. And...

How many crew were on the Aristocrat?

27:30 Well we had about 15 or 20 big wigs, building the mulberries. And the officers, there was an old captain who'd obviously just come into the navy, because he'd been on the paddlewheel steamer forever. And there was Ian Hunter, who was first lieutenant. There were two officers,

28:00 and there was a crew of about 20.

And this paddle steamer was armed with anti-aircraft guns, so how many guns were there?

Oh there was about six or seven, and we were, I don't know whether we were effective or not. But every night when we were bombed by German bombers, we were manning the guns,

28:30 and it was once again like Guy Fawkes Day, because there was two or three hundred warships there, they were also firing up. Every night we'd hit some planes, the lot of us would hit some planes. And you'd see them come down in flames. But the bombers were flying very, very high, but

29:00 it was a nightmare, and they really caused, well most of them dropped acoustic mines, so when the ships started in the morning, there was always, there seemed to be ever day, one or two ships would get injured or sunk.

Did you see any of those ships sunk?

Oh yes.

Can you describe what that was like?

29:30 Well the ships were OK, I don't know about, whether. We would have acoustic, we would have attracted an acoustic mine or not, you know, I thought about that very deeply, whether the noise of the paddles would have been enough to send off the mines. But it was, oh it was very disturbing you know. But every morning, you know, some

30:00 ship would be badly damaged or sunk by a mine. And every night the German bombers would come over and drop the mines. And they were pretty courageous people too, because every night when they came over, there'd always be, you know, four or five of them shot down. Because there was so much firepower in those ships that were anchored.

30:30 **And how close were those planes to you, when they were shot down?**

They can be within 50 yards, you can't, you know, you can't get out of the way of a plane that's being

shot down. And usually when the plane is shot down, it's, you know, when it's shot, it really travels a fair way under its own speed.

31:00 And then just crashes in the water, in flames. And obviously you don't try and pick anybody up, because they wouldn't survive the crash.

Were you ever close enough to see the pilots?

No, you couldn't see the pilots anyway, it's night-time.

And in the morning when you saw some of those ships being sunk,

31:30 **did any, were the crew able to escape?**

Well the ships were mostly damaged, if they were sunk, they were sunk at night. So all the activity had to take place then. And there was special, by that time, there was special life, motorised lifeboats, working all the time.

So in the morning, what was the scene of devastation on the Thames?

On the Thames, it wasn't on the Thames, it was at Arromanches.

Yes.

32:00 **So you're talking now about the invasion, sorry. I thought you were still talking about when you were being bombed in London.**

No, well the only thing that you,

Sorry.

happened in London.

I thought you were talking about those.

No, no, no.

Oh OK, sorry.

I didn't see any ships sunk in London.

I really got confused there, I'm sorry. We're talking about being on the Aristocrat in London and now we've moved to the invasion, my mistake, I apologise. So, when

32:30 **you were in London and you we still in London on the Aristocrat, you said that you were being bombed every night, and the, the Aristocrat was, had anti-aircraft guns.**

Yes, you wouldn't know if they were effective, because there was, there were literally hundreds of guns firing in the air. And you, some of them had tracer bullets, so, a tracer bullet guides the gunner as to where the bullets going, so he can

33:00 alter it enough to get on the plane. But you know, they were pitch black, but it's, every now and again it was like daytime, there were so many searchlights, there were so many guns going off, you know, there must have been 1,000 guns around London. Because you know, it was being bombed every night, that was the main. And when they started to lose so many planes over London, they started

33:30 to bomb other cities.

How protected did you feel onboard the Aristocrat in London, I'm keeping it in London?

I wasn't concerned, neither was anybody else in the streets, not the thousands of people that were walking the streets early in the night before the bombings started which were really usually at midnight.

Not even during the bombings you weren't concerned?

No, you always thought somebody else was

34:00 unlucky. But the Londoners themselves, they were just, I mean this happened, that only happened, you know relatively few nights for me, that happened hundreds of nights for them. And they didn't seem afraid. I think they were concerned, and those ones that had their houses destroyed, their relations killed, they were obviously concerned.

34:30 Perhaps those weren't the people that we met.

So what was your view of the enemy at that time?

Well I can't, I don't think I had emotions of hatred or anything, for the enemy. I just thought it was the enemy, and eventually one day it was going to be him or

35:00 me. And you know, there's no feelings of hatred or, you thought they were, often when you read about

what they were doing, they were despicable. But as far as the encounters between them and us,

35:30 well you just hoped it wouldn't be, you wouldn't be unlucky.

How long would those raids in London, how long would they actually last, those night-time raids?

Oh they'd probably, they came over, you know the raid itself wouldn't be more than an hour. Because you know, the planes all came over, and they can only drop their bombs and then they have to get out the way, cause they didn't have wouldn't, they didn't have enough gas to linger.

36:00 And they didn't want to linger anyway, there was 1,000 anti-aircraft guns firing at them.

So onboard the Aristocrat, you had something like six anti-aircraft guns, and they would all be firing at the same time?

Yeah, they'd be firing.

So what, what was the sound like?

It was unbelievably noisy, you know, it was that, but it wasn't our guns that were making

36:30 the noise, it was all the big guns that were really, you know, making a tremendous racket. It was, can't describe it because, because there's no other sound like it. There is, when those big ships only fired their

37:00 anti-aircraft guns, they didn't fire their big guns, but the racket was just tremendous. But it only lasted for, you know, less than an hour. Where are we, in London or in Arromanches?

In London, still in London.

Well in London, well it only lasted, the bomb raids came over and you could hear them coming, and the searchlights would pick them up,

37:30 and they would just drop their bombs and turn around and go back. Is that?

Sorry, you were saying about the air raids in London would last for nearly an hour each night. So it must have been kind of an extraordinary situation to be in.

Well I didn't live in London, I only had leave, so leave would never last for more than about seven days.

38:00 So, but the social activity in London was quite tremendous.

So even while these bombing raids were going on, people were having a really good time?

I don't think they were having a good time, but they were certainly not despondent, and they were certainly terribly courageous, because you know, they probably had a 1,000 raid, I only stayed seven days.

38:30 And it just gave them, I think they were just so courageous that they, they had some spontaneity about their attitude, nobody was very depressed, they were all quite courageous.

And how did that inspire you?

Oh it inspired me,

39:00 and I just had a great admiration for them. And they couldn't avoid it, they couldn't do anything about it, they were in situ, and they just had to cop it. And of course, I didn't meet all those people who were damaged and lost children and lost their homes.

39:30 And the people that were walking in London then were, I mean there were thousands of American and English troops in the streets.

How did you as an Aussie get on with the Americans and the British troops?

I got on with the British very well, and I didn't really meet that many Americans.

40:00 And no well, it was just a general camaraderie of troops, you know, whether they were Americans or English or anything, everybody in those days got on well together. It was,

40:30 always a problem in getting girls up to your bedroom in the good hotels. And you had to work out a plan, where you engaged the receptionist while you snuck the girls in the lift. And that was extremely difficult, otherwise you had to walk up five flights of stairs. And we used to, I used to stay at the Mayfair Hotel,

41:00 and we worked out after a while, that the best idea if you were with three or four people, would get two people to keep the people at the desk, you know, answering questions while another person snuck them up in the lift to the third or fourth floor.

We'll stop there.

Tape 4

00:33 **Officers on that sort of behaviour?**

Oh I think the only the thing, that I noticed they sort of frowned at, is when I dined at the Savoy as a very junior officer, they sort of gave me the impression that I shouldn't be there, that this was for the elite. And you got that sort of impression. But you know, senior officers

01:00 didn't know about the hotel business, otherwise they probably would have adopted it themselves.

So you kept all that under wraps. And the girls were pretty willing to spend time with you, yeah?

Well I, I think, I think the whole sort of atmosphere during the time, made everybody,

01:30 you know, I suppose some of them lived in London thought that, you know, you had to make hay while the sun shines. And everybody seemed to be happy, everybody was living for the moment, or the day.

Was that what you were thinking as well?

No, I was thinking what a good time. No, I,

02:00 I didn't ever contemplate, I knew I was in danger, but I always thought I'd be lucky enough to get through.

So.

I think everybody adopts that attitude.

So Robert, did you do the tests for a submariner, before or after.

A submariner.

A submariner, I'm sorry. Did you do the tests for that before or after you were on the Aristocrat?

02:30 **Before or after?**

I, I was interviewed, and I selected submarines, I was put on the Aristocrat, and what I had to wait for was a vacancy.

So you had to do, at some point you had to do some tests to be?

Oh yes, I had the tests to be an officer in the boat, and they were called boats. And that was usually

03:00 done when they gave you watch, and you had to go, in a sub you do, normal watch on a boat is four hours, in a sub it's two hours. And obviously they tell you to take charge of it, and the captain or the first lieutenant is standing, or checking on you all the time, to see how you're going.

03:30 And if you're, and giving you advice.

Did you spend any time on a sub before you joined the Aristocrat or not, in the end?

Oh no.

No, not at all, OK.

No, no. They just, you just had to wait for a vacancy, that's all.

So you spent some time in London on the Aristocrat, and then you

04:00 **received the orders about the invasion?**

No, I went to London, went to Portsmouth, went to the invasion, then the..

So the Aristocrat was in London, and you travelled with it to Portsmouth, or...?

Yes, on the Thames, I travelled with it to Portsmouth.

Right, OK. So can you tell us about that, sort of trip from London to Portsmouth on the Aristocrat?

Well it's not very far, and it's, it was

04:30 uneventful, we did it in the daytime, so we weren't attacked or bombed in any way, and we arrived by

night-time at Portsmouth, amongst these hundreds and hundreds of ships. And we just anchored there and sort of, tried to find out what was going on. So we went to other ships and asked them,

05:00 and we got, the general impression was we were there for the invasion.

What was the mood on board when you sort of arrived in Portsmouth and saw these ships?

My mood was adventurous, you know, there's nothing, something's going to happen, we're not going to be, we're not going to be bored. So it was that feeling, if you got shore leave, you'd go ashore and,

05:30 and look for girls to go to a dance.

So you were pretty excited by it all? When you saw these hundreds of ships, you thought, something's really happening?

Well yeah, I don't think 'excited' is the word, I think I was a bit confused about what was going to happen, and I didn't know what was going to happen, I mean you can't imagine what

06:00 an invasions like. And they didn't give you any lectures about how they were going to land the troops, or whether it was going to be air attacks for weeks and weeks beforehand. But, and you, until you got out of the, until you saw all the landing ships that were in the harbour, you realised

06:30 the invasion was reasonably imminent.

Now, you said earlier that you couldn't sort of imagine this, this paddle steamer being part of the invasion. What did you think about this, this boat being part of this major invasion?

We thought it was ridiculous, we thought, if you find a war, you're supposed to, in my elementary thought, is that you're supposed to be in destroyers and battleships,

07:00 and you know, something with big guns on it, not on a paddlewheel steamer. I mean paddlewheel steamers should fight paddlewheel steamers and there's not enough to go around. But anyway, I think it was the fact that, they wanted, they only used it because they wanted every ship they could manage. It was something that was going to be, I mean, nobody's ever

07:30 carried out an invasion like that, with so many troops.

So when you first got the letter from Eisenhower, can you remember what you felt or thought at that time?

I thought, for the first time, something's going to happen. So our letters all arrived to us, probably on the 5th and all shore leave

08:00 was barred from that day, because they didn't want any information to get out. And I, you know, I think I started to put together, all of these ships are here for some purpose, and on the 5th which was the next day, something's going to happen, something tremendous is going to happen. And you can't actually envisage thousands

08:30 of ships and see it at once, or hundreds and hundreds. And then the aircraft, the bombers were, were flying over a few days before, and they were very active, I should imagine in bombing the areas that were going to be subject to the landings. And there was a, probably a

09:00 feeling of excitement. At least, you know, we're going to be a part of something, that might be tremendous.

So can you tell us how that day, the day of the invasion actually began for you, and what you did during that day?

Well it, the ship started to move out at night, at dusk.

09:30 And you know, we were a pretty slow boat, it's not far across, it'd only be 40 k [kilometres] or so, it was probably, we probably left about 12 o'clock at night, midnight. And then you couldn't see much in the dark, and most of the ships were without, without lights. And I can

10:00 remember in the early hours of the morning when light was just coming on, I looked around and saw this massive armada of ships, destroyers, cruisers, battleships and then, and then there was this

10:30 frightening salvos of big guns firing into the landing area, potential landing area. And that went on for some hours, so if there are any troops that are in our area, on the land, well, I should imagine they would have been destroyed. Only on the immediate landing area,

11:00 most of the, most of the shells were just near the shoreline. Because they couldn't shell too back, too far back, because there were plenty of civilians there, living in houses, and they definitely weren't destroyed. Because we used to, you know, get a jeep and drive through France looking for French girls. But there were no, there were no,

11:30 you'd knock on the doors of residences, and they'd never open, because they were. If they were

occupied, and some of them were, they weren't game to mix with an invading force that might, might be pushed back.

How long were you actually there before D-day? So you arrived.

In Portsmouth?

Oh, this is Portsmouth you're talking about, sorry.

No, no, I'm not, I'm talking about the landing.

Yeah, the landing. So how long,

12:00 **you're talking about visiting these civilians, when did you do that? After, after D-day?**

After D-day. We went ashore. We knocked on doors, or we looked for people, because you just saw nobody at all. And the houses weren't destroyed, I'm pretty sure they were occupied. And we went, we went a reasonable way

12:30 inland, a mile or so. And there was no communication with the French at all.

So just staying, just going back to the actual day itself, what did you personally do that day? You were describing the dawn, what did you do after that? What did you?

Well, all, what we did, we sailed.

13:00 We got very close to the land, and a lot of the people aboard, were the people that were going to put together the Mulberry Harbour. And the mulberry, these mulberry things was these big cement, floating cement piers, not piers, wharves. And they put them together to make

13:30 three piers out. There was supposed to be three piers, but some of the cement ones had been sunk or lost on the way over, so they could only make two and a half piers out. So the ships could anchor, unload and get rid of the troops, the troops and the cargo and the guns and everything. And that took them,

14:00 took them three or four days to get those.

And when did they actually start doing that?

They started doing that at dawn.

That day?

Yes. They had to, because you had to get the, get as many tanks and, ashore as you possibly could. I mean, the Americans

14:30 adopted some tanks that they could actually get close to the shore, somehow I don't know. We had enough, not to sink and certainly the British tanks weren't. But all, anything motorised and you need plenty of things for guns, and they were all landed through this port that we built.

So what was, on that day, what did you

15:00 **personally, you, as opposed to everybody else on that ship, what did you have to do, what was your role that day?**

Well I was a watch-keeping officer, so the watch-keeping officer is in charge for four hours, so, I was in charge of what's being done on the ship and what the captain requires you to do. And where the ships to be stationed,

15:30 and the crew. Making preparations for the night making sure that the few guns we had on board, the anti-aircraft guns, had, you know, sufficient shells nearby to make sure that they could fire into the night. And you know, the searchlights had to be checked, it was a bit like Guy Fawkes Day. There'd be five or six

16:00 hundred sets on these bombers that were very high up, they didn't come in low. And just dropped these acoustic mines. In the end they did, at first they tried to bomb them, but most of the bombs ended up in land. And then they dropped acoustic mines, which meant that each day when the ships all started to move, there's always a couple of ships were badly damaged or sunk.

16:30 **In the morning on D-Day, what was the atmosphere like onboard the Aristocrat? Were people in any sort of panic, what was going on with everybody?**

Everything was happening, our main thing was featured around the wharf, we were there, the troops had already landed by the time we got there. And there was very little opposition,

17:00 in that area. Although you could hear 20 miles away all the guns going off at Cherbourg, where all the Americans were, and all the shells going. And I think the ships initially shelled, past the villages up in the hills, not knowing whether there were any troops there, and I don't think there were. And then the troops

17:30 landed and they went in there quickly and then supplies came in. Well most of the, most of the suppliers were in by, by those vehicles that can sort of go on the beach, four wheel, well there weren't any four wheel drive vehicles,

18:00 you go on the beach and you get through with trucks. And then off the landing vessels, landing all this equipment. So there was no, very little opposition in our area.

How complicated was it to build these piers in that time frame?

Oh I should imagine it's terribly complicated. I mean they'd been working on it for a year at least. I think there was

18:30 supposed to be three piers coming out, as I said there was only two and a half, and you know, and they're floating cement case on, which all had to be towed over. And they were very effective, the landing went on endlessly night and day, with supplies.

And during those,

19:00 **you were there for something like 15 days, I think?**

Yes.

During those 15 days, what did you have to do, you personally?

Well we had, we had to look after most of the people that were building the port, that was the main aim. And at night, we had to do our best to shoot down German planes.

And that was what you were telling me earlier. And

19:30 **so in the morning, each day, what would be the sort of scene in the morning when you woke up after the battle the night before?**

The battles were, a fair way, the battles revolved around German bombers coming round, and the battles where we were, moved quite a way inland, and you could just see the guns going over. And

20:00 the main reason for being there, was to help with the supplies going ashore and look after the British troops that were now inland.

You said earlier that sometimes when those planes would come down, they'd be relatively close by, or to you, or not?

When?

OK, so during that 15 days you had, you were fighting, you were shooting planes, you were firing at.

At bombers.

Bombers. OK

20:30 They're a fair way up in the air.

OK. And some of them were hit?

Oh yes, they were hit every, every night.

OK. Did you see any, anything the next day after that kind of, did you not witness any of the kind of destruction or devastation the next day?

Well if the bombers are hit at night and comes down, the plane disintegrates and the crew are killed. So there's not much

21:00 to see, I think it's sunk.

So, there was nothing, nothing left, nothing?

Not unless it lands on the land, and we weren't on the land enough to take great notice of that.

So in the water, you didn't actually see any sort of?

Oh yes, you'd see debris, some of it. Some of the fuselages that can float. But generally, the plane and the engines and the weight of the plane, they'd just sunk out of sight.

So,

21:30 **on that first day, on D-day, the day of the invasion, to what extent did you have a sense of the significance in what you were involved with?**

That's a good question. Well you know, I was just a junior officer and I didn't visualise the importance,

22:00 of what was really happening, that this was the first venture into ending the war. But as it turned, you

know, as you discussed it with other people, you really got an increased significance of what had happened. And I think the British were lucky

22:30 in selecting the right spot to get ashore quickly, but the battles, the battles went on. After about four or five days when the troops had gone inland, there was obviously a lot of activity happening there. Because you could hear it in the distance and you could hear it at night, because the Germans resisted pretty fiercely,

23:00 about 50 miles inland. And of course, I think, I'm not sure, but I think you could, some of the noise that you could hear was from the Americans, 50 miles up the, up the road, 50 miles to the south, to Cherbourg, where they, they got into terrible trouble,

23:30 which they overcame eventually. Running into a manoeuvre, which was really started before the landing. And without any knowledge that the landing was going to take place, they just walked into an anti-invasion manoeuvre and they lost hundreds and hundreds of troops.

And during those 15 days when you were spending some time on shore, did you witness any of that at all?

24:00 **Were you close enough to?**

No, we weren't close enough to the American section, and our main activity, we went about 10 miles inland. But most of the battles that the British troops had, were further inland.

Were there any moments during those couple of weeks when you really did feel very threatened?

Well I think when you're being bombed every night,

24:30 you get concerned that there's not an unlucky one, and you definitely get emotionally upset when, you know, when ships are, other ships are hit in the nearby vicinity. Yeah, I think there's, I think there's an inward sort of fear, but the camaraderie of everybody,

25:00 you always feel it's not going to be me, and that's more hope than fact. But you get upset when other ships, and you see people going up to save the, you know, save those sailors that are in the, in the water. But it was surprising that, I mean the main concern was, after a

25:30 while when they dropped the acoustic mines, that was always, seemed to be nearly every morning one ship was damaged or sunk. Then you know, rescue parties, and we weren't part of that deal, had to pick up the survivors. And that's, that really is

26:00 a bad weapon for the human psychology, because you know, if you get hit, you get hit, and it's all over in a minute. But when you, when you know that something's going to happen to someone, it's there that some ship will be sunk next morning, when they start their engines, is of concern. And I never worked out whether the paddlewheel steamer would, the paddles would set off

26:30 an acoustic mine, and I still don't know. Because acoustic implies the noise, but I'm not sure whether that's the fact, I think it's probably the vibration of the propellers starting that sets off the mine.

But you obviously, were other people showing signs of fear?

No, I don't think anybody,

27:00 anybody really shows. Oh at night, one night, I let a, I don't know whether I, I lit a cigarette and it was like Guy Fawkes Day outside with all the searchlights and everything. And this engineering officer got terribly upset and told me to put out my cigarette, because everybody would be able to see it and we would be

27:30 bombed. And he was quite, you know, concerned and I'd say probably fearful too. But apart from that, you're really, you're contained in some sort of isolation with the crew. You know, and when you'd got out, and we used to go out and talk to other people,

28:00 they don't show any fear. And that doesn't say they're not fearful.

Did you have any belief system at all, that helped you through those times?

No, I just thought I was going to be lucky. And you've got to think that way, otherwise you, you'd get frightened. If you don't think you're going to be lucky,

28:30 I should imagine you'd get nervous and very concerned, and that would affect your ability to do the things you had to do. And I never saw anybody outwardly fearful, except, except these officers that tell me to put out the cigarette. And that was the, but

29:00 everybody, the only way to go, everybody thinks they're going to be lucky.

You said you weren't really aware at the time perhaps, of the significance of that operation. But looking back now, or in retrospect, what is your, what are your thoughts about having

being involved in that invasion?

Well I've read a lot about it, and

29:30 I was just so fulfilling I think was a, that I was part of such a terrific enterprise. And that's it.

30:00 **So after that, you finally got to go onto a sub, yeah?**

Yeah, so. Anyway, as I said before, I couldn't get back, I got a call to report at, at Bligh to a submarine training ship. And so I questioned lots of

30:30 people, and eventually I found, I was lucky enough to find another Australian who was in a motor torpedo boat. And he said, "Oh it's funny, we're going back tomorrow, or in two days time," and I said, "Will you take me?" and he said, "Well have you got permission?" I said, "Well, I've got permission, I've been, I've got to report to submarine base in Northern England." He said, "Well that's fine."

31:00 So I, I got aboard and we went to Portsmouth, and by that time I'd souvenired about three German guns, and a couple of rifles and I tried to, you know, he only let me take half that gear away. So I wandered back, and I've got all these guns, I must have looked like the most ferocious

31:30 commando of all time, that I'd souvenired.

Where did you get them from?

Oh you got them from inland and, when we went, and most of them were German ones.

Were they just lying around, scattered around?

Oh they were lying, yes. So I got those, and I got a few shells for one of them. And then I had all these looks of awe, with all these guns

32:00 everywhere. So and then I just, I got on a train up to Newcastle on Tyne, and then got out to Bligh. So then reported to captain, oh no, what

32:30 did I do? First of all, oh no that's right, I didn't do any special training, I just reported to the ship, you know, bunked down at shore because they were on leave, and I went out on the next trip to the north sea.

After your experience

33:00 **on the Aristocrat, how enthusiastic were you to be on the sub?**

Oh well, I was, well I, I suppose I was more curious than enthusiastic, I didn't know what a submarine was like, I'd never been on a submarine, and I, and the only one that I'd read about,

33:30 was two Australian submarines from the First World War. And I was curious and I, you know, obviously I wanted to be accepted by an established crew. And so we went, you know, we did lots of training, training runs in this new sub, and we had some gunnery actions in the north sea.

34:00 And...

Which sub was that one, what was it called?

The Tireless.

The Tireless. So what was it's history?

It was, this one was a new sub, no history. And with all the crew were, had had plenty of experience in submarines, except me.

34:30 And Captain Crawford was first lieutenant in a submarine in the Mediterranean, and, that had sunk a lot of ships. And I think this was his first command. And anyway, he was a highly experienced

35:00 submarine officer. And then we did lots of training runs, we had some gun actions in the north sea, and...

Can you tell us about the first time that you went down in a submarine, what it was like for you?

It was a new submarine, so it was, didn't only concern me, it was some concern to

35:30 everybody, because the submarine had never been tested. So the maximum, I learned afterwards, I read it in a book recently, the maximum period depth of the T-class of submarine was 350 feet. Now I didn't know this at the time, but we went down to 300 feet, very slowly,

36:00 because you've got to look for leaks. At the first sign of a leak, you've got to be prepared to, you know, shoot up to the surface. Anyway we had, I was surprised that he took it down so deep. We had no leaks, everybody aboard the sub was, had some concern. And nobody seemed to be

36:30 unduly worried, and we went down almost foot by foot in the last, you know, 100 metres, 100 feet. Everybody was a bit tense, nothing happened, there was no leaks, and after staying there for a while, we surfaced, slowly. Then you've got to

37:00 surface fairly slowly, because the pressures in a submarine of the depth, the submarine obviously gets a bit smaller. And you've got to let your body sort of adapt to different pressures, so you're going up very slowly. And this, of course, doesn't happen in a naval submarine, in a naval accident, but you don't go down to 300 feet, anyway.

37:30 You only go to 300 feet to get away from someone dropping mines on you.

How could you tell that everyone was tense?

Because you were looking at the depth indicator, everybody is looking at the depth indicator. And you know, there's no noise, nobody's talking except the captain.

38:00 **And what would the captain be, what was the captain saying?**

Oh the captains' just giving instructions about the depth, and take it down slowly and you've got to balance the submarine, because you've got planes, planes are like fins on the, on the fore end and fins on the back, and they stabilise the boat. And then you've,

38:30 you've got to, you've got to trim the boats, and there's tanks, forward tanks that you fill up and blow out. And there's tanks at the stern that you do the same. And there's a Q-tank in the middle, that'll sort of take it down, just in the middle. But you don't want, you've sort of got to balance the tanks down, because you don't want it to strain

39:00 the boat too much, by just pushing the middle down with the, obviously the rear and aft, but you've, it's better to balance it with the weight of water in the tanks.

How would you describe that first experience for you?

Oh exciting, fearsome, a bit frightening,

39:30 you know. And your emotions are controlled by other people's emotions. If you get somebody that goes off their head and starts screaming and ranting and raving, you've got to sedate him quickly, because it does affect everybody. But you've got to remember these are, apart from

40:00 me, are all old hands. So then you, we did some tests on the speed, on the water, and you just, different manoeuvres which tested the boat out, and they were called boats, everything was good. Fired our guns and I was the gunnery

40:30 officer, and you know what you've got to do in a submarine, you've got to hit the person, the boat that you want to hit, before anybody hits you, because you can't afford to be hit. So you're trained to get up a ladder, which is about that wide, and you've got, you've got somebody that trains the gun, you've got somebody that

41:00 loads the gun, and you've got somebody else who does something else, and then you've got me, in this case. And what you've got to do, you've got to hit the ship, before they hit you. So, you should be able to hit the ship with three shells, the third shell. So you aim at him, and wherever, if the shell hits the water over the top of him, you then fire another shell with a lower range. And if that

41:30 should go before your target then the next shell, which is in between, should hit the target.

It's quite amazing.

Tape 5

00:34 **After your training, did you have leave in Bligh?**

Oh yes, so we went on a few training runs and gunnery runs and we were there for quite some time. Because I used to take my

01:00 leave in Newcastle and…

What sort of things would you do in Newcastle?

Well I had a, I organised a flat in Newcastle, a few of the officers shared it when they had leave. And that was obviously for us to sleep and in case we got lucky, to take ladies up there. And we used to go, there were big dances,

01:30 big service dances in Newcastle, because there was, it was full of troops, not just submariners but troops on leave. And then the dance halls were, from what I can remember, were quite, were quite big. I

think I'm getting a bit confused with the ones in Melbourne. There was certainly meeting

02:00 places for girls, and I took quite a few girls out. And...

And that officer's uniform was doing the trick still in England?

Oh I don't know if it was the officer's uniform or me. But most of the people in Newcastle were oriented to

02:30 the soldiers and the sailors and airmen who were fighting. And I'm not sure whether Newcastle was bombed or not, but the whole area was full of servicemen. And I met lots of people at dances, and I took quite a few of them

03:00 out. And when leave was available, I took one particular lady out to a resort in, in London. Not in London, the resort was in the east side of London, down right down in the

03:30 resort area. Do you know what that is? No, you don't. So I took her.

Can you tell us what the resort area is?

I can't remember it, I'd have to look up the, I'd have to look up at the atlas. Anyway, it's quite a well known

04:00 resort and, in England which is in the south, southeast. And so I took some girls on holidays there. I obviously took quite a few girls to London.

04:30 And when we eventually got our posting to go overseas, I invited all these girls to the party. And then some of them come from some distance away, and a bus was available to take my visitors, and visitors from the other

05:00 seamen away, and I just remember I had to sit next to a girl who, when I sat next to one, I realised I lost all the rest. So I should have stood up all the way, and it would have been a much more successful operation.

05:30 **Did there, was the much from men that were in, around the navy, did you hear of many men going to brothels in London, or Newcastle for that matter?**

I don't, I don't think they had brothels, I think a lot of girls worked in the Finchley. I didn't know if there were brothels, I certainly wouldn't have gone to them, a brothel.

06:00 You know, I was concerned about, and I'm sure that this was overestimated, but the troops were told that VD was rampant, and I took a lot of girls to bed but slept with very few of them. I had intercourse with very few of them, because I was, this was at the back of my mind,

06:30 this was rampant, and I'd only met these people, and I certainly didn't think they had it, but the promotion by the forces was so great, that it was obviously overestimated, which was deliberate.

What about homosexuality in the navy, was there much talk about that?

I didn't, I believe it happens, but it certainly

07:00 doesn't happen in small ships, and it's impossible to happen in a submarine, because everybody is so obvious. The only person that's got a closed bunk is the captain, and everyone sleeps in bunks, they're obviously, it just couldn't happen. I believe it has happened in the bigger ships, but

07:30 certainly not in a submarine, so I was unaware of that fact.

You said before that there was quite a rigorous process to choose people to be submariners. What sort of qualities do you think they were looking for, when they were choosing?

Say that question again?

What qualities were they looking for in men, that they chose to be submariners?

08:00 I think, first of all if you want to be a submariner, you've got to volunteer, you can't be sent to a submarine without volunteering. And then, I can only speak from a very limited sense that I think if you

08:30 showed any fear or incompetence or got seasick, or people couldn't get on with you, because you've in a very close proximity all the time, you would be rejected. But it's, it's, I hadn't thought deeply about it until you put the question with it,

09:00 it's quite obvious that in confined spaces, and it's recognised by the navy, because you only have patrols for a, out at sea for two or three weeks, and then you have a couple of weeks off. That of course doesn't happen in atomic submarines, which can stay underwater for months. In fact they're better underwater than they are on top.

09:30 That was only, with the introduction of atomic energy and power, that that happened and that wasn't available during the war. So I'd say, they soon eliminated anybody that was difficult to get on with.

What were the crew on the Tireless like?

10:00 Very professional. Most of them had been submariners for a long time, you've got to volunteer. It's a, during full wartime, it's a very dangerous occupation. Certainly for the Germans who lost, it wasn't until,

10:30 until the British picked up the code where the meeting place was to sink ships, that they made any impact on the Germans. But then the impact was horrific. And it's, I should imagine, an awful experience, dying underwater. And you know,

11:00 there was some British submarines in the early days, that weren't very well designed, and there were quite a few losses. And they, you don't lose one, you lose the lot. And that in itself makes everybody more cautious. But I'd say the commanders of submarines are exceptional people,

11:30 their training is, is quite terrific, they're had years of experience in submarines before they become a captain. And they're a very efficient fighting force.

How big was the crew on the Tireless?

Good question.

Estimate, maybe.

12:00 I'd say about 45 people. You've got, see you've got about five people in the engines, and you've got to surface every night, because you're running on batteries when you're down below. And that's a terrible job, the engine room. When you're on the surface, the engine room is going, the noise

12:30 is unbelievably loud. There was about three people in there, the torpedo branch there was four officers. You've got a gunnery crew too, the idea is to, you've got to be able to man the gun within about three to four minutes of surfacing. Which means,

13:00 the first people go up in an air bubble, which I explained before. And you've got to train the gunn and man it, and get the shells. You've got some shells up there in, in waterproof containers, and then if you've got to have a prolonged action, you've got to bring the shells up the hatch, which is difficult.

So there's the,

13:30 **the engine room, the gunnery crew, what other crews are there?**

Torpedos, torpedos the main thing. You have, you have up to three, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, 11,

14:00 12, at least 12 torpedo tubes. Two facing aft, two mid-ships in the middle of the ship and six in front of you, in three on one side and three on the other. And they're, they're always loaded, those. And I don't know about the rear ones, whether they'd be loaded.

14:30 And very difficult to fire rear torpedos, because it's very difficult to find the range of what you've got to, what you've got to hit, and you'd only fire if you were trying to escape from somebody.

How many people would be on that crew?

I think there'd be about 45.

But on the torpedos?

On the torpedos, oh,

15:00 forward hatch, so you need people to, to fire the torpedos doesn't require anybody, you just press a button. And then you've got to reload them, well that takes about six people, they're very heavy and they're very long. So six people in the forward torpedo department. You need, you have,

15:30 you have four people on the four-inch gun in the front, and then you've got machine-guns at the back, and then you've got the instrument crew, and then the captain, first officer, three other officers. So in all, about 45 people,

16:00 and that's the biggest submarine we've got.

Was that about how many people would have been on the Tireless?

Yes. But the submarines that did the most damage in the Mediterranean were the small boats, the U-Boats. Captain George Hunt, who was the bloke that passed me out, sank more ships, which I said before in the Mediterranean with less torpedos, which meant he was a

16:30 brilliant tactician and operator and captain. He was just the right size for a submarine, because he was about five foot one, and terrific charisma, great officer.

Were there any people on the Tireless, whose physical characteristics made it difficult?

Made what?

Made being in the submarine

17:00 **difficult?**

Oh anybody that's tall, nobody, a person who's really tall wouldn't be selected. I mean there's a pretty rigorous initiation there, and if you don't fit, your temperament's not right, you can't see properly, you've got to have good eyesight for a submarine, you're hearing has got to be good. You've got to be very physically

17:30 fit, fighting fit. And if you don't have all those qualifications, you don't get chosen in the first place.

How did the English treat you as an Australian onboard?

Terrific. I mean we didn't consider we were English or Australians, we were just part of the crew, and it didn't matter what you were, as long as you were continual and efficient, you got on well. And,

18:00 and you live in a very close proximity and you're never away for more than three weeks, otherwise you would become irritable. You don't close your, don't change your clothes, you have to get out because the aroma would be overpowering. And there's limited facilities to wash, there's obviously no baths, there's a

18:30 shower and there's a limited amount of water you can use on that. So mostly you just bathe yourself with a washer and try and clean that ay. But your clothes start to smell, and that's one of the reasons, that's why I should imagine atomic submarines have great laundry facilities. And apart from that they have,

19:00 they're big, that's 2,500 tons, that one, see these ones are 10,000 tons, they've got movie theatres in them.

How many Aussies were onboard the Tireless?

One.

You were it?

Yes. There's not many Aussies in, in the submarine service.

What were the other nationalities onboard the Tireless?

Australian and British.

19:30 **And when you weren't, when you weren't out doing some kind of exercise, what was the accommodation like back on land?**

It was comfortable, very comfortable. I think they made up for cramped conditions, and the conditioners were very clean and there was plenty of help with the washing and everything.

20:00 **Was it a barracks, or?**

It was a sort of barracks, yes. It had been a submarine base initially, and therefore when, when, they obviously put a lot more submarines during the war. And I think they went out of their way to make sure the barracks were comfortable, but you didn't stay there for more than a night, you know. You

20:30 either went home, cause 95 percent were British, they all just went home. And the submarine time at sea and the leave-time, cause the leave-time was good. So you'd have, I can't remember exactly, but if you went to sea for two weeks, you'd have two weeks off, and that's as it should be too.

Did you ever hit bad weather in your training?

21:00 Terrible weather going up to Hong Kong. We went up to Trincomalee.

But prior to that, in England?

Oh in England, oh the weather in the north sea is just shocking, and the cold in winter, it's unbelievable. And the water, the waves crash over, over the, what do you call it, the bridge. Yeah,

21:30 it's very unpleasant and freezing, that's why you only have two hour watches, you couldn't stand it for anymore.

So two hour watches, what would you do on a two hour watch?

Oh two hour watch, you're in charge of the submarine, you're up there, you're guiding it, navigating it, putting the speed on. Speed conditions to it, making sure that you're heading in the right direction, you're in charge. Making sure you see somebody before they see you.

22:00 **So when you're on that watch, a wave could go over you?**

Yeah, big waves in the north sea frequently went over you. And apart from that, in the north sea in the winter, is frightening. I mean you'd have to be young to put with it.

What did you wear to keep warm?

Oh, I can't remember but I know we had these thick woollen things, polo neck jumpers,

22:30 and then we had, under that we had woollen shirts if you could get them, or thick shirts with singlets underneath, and then your coats over the top, and that's why. I mean, well most people were young, and the watches were half of what a normal ship is. The normal war ship, you've got a four hour watch, those

23:00 were two hours. And it's difficult to see other ships, when you're low down like they are. And they didn't have lights on at all.

So it was dark and cold, and...Were there times in those two week trips away at sea, that you'd get bored?

Well you're too cold to get bored, you don't get bored, because you're only away for two weeks.

23:30 And you're doing, every four hours you're doing watch. You just get tired. Tired and cold.

What did you miss about home when you were in Europe?

When I was in Europe? Am I in a submarine, or not?

Anywhere? Did

24:00 **you miss home at all?**

Yeah, I missed my mother, I didn't, I had, I don't think I had a girlfriend at the time. Because I'd joined, oh I had a few girlfriends in Melbourne, but then I went from, you know, Melbourne, overseas. And

24:30 Mum and, my mother and Anthony's father, who's the local member here, and he was, he was head of the Country Party, saw me off. And, because my father had died by then, much before then. And they saw me off from the fast freighter that I went away on.

25:00 And then I didn't have, I wrote to my mother as, about once a month, some times not as much as that.

Did you get many letters from home?

Yeah, once I asked for money, which I shouldn't have. Because I don't think my mother's circumstances, and I didn't quite realise that, my father had died,

25:30 they were very good on the financial side.

Was there anything that was hard to get while you were in England, because it was sort of still Depression and during the war, and?

Nothing that disturbed me, except beautiful women.

But you managed to meet a few of those.

Well I tried hard.

26:00 Look, there was rationing there, and I think when rationing goes on for a considerable time, you accept it. It was obviously, it was very hard to get fresh fruit and fresh vegetables, a lot of them was tinned. And

26:30 general lack of sunshine and warmth were the things that concerned me the most. But really, you were so busy or so tired, that you, it doesn't have a great effect on you.

Did you get sick?

I was just thinking, I didn't get sick at all.

27:00 But after the war I went out from, from the Gold Coast I went out over the heads, and I got sick for the first time.

Seasick?

Yes.

Did you get any flus or colds or?

No I, I smoked and I think I did get a few flus and colds. Because I know

27:30 that as soon as I got back, I stopped smoking, and that was the best thing I ever did. But we all smoked, it's part of the, I suppose it's part of the tension, and it's part of the fact that you couldn't smoke at

school. But you couldn't smoke aboard the ship of course, you only smoked on leave. And I can remember one fatal mistake I made, we had a farewell party

28:00 when we were going to, out to fight the war in the Pacific. And I asked all the girls I'd taken out, which was quite a few, about 10 or 15, and I had to get a bus back, to take these people back to Newcastle. And I made the mistake of sitting next to one girl, I should have stood up. As soon as I did that, I lost the rest.

28:30 **Why did you choose that girl?**

I don't know, I think it was the nearest seat.

And what do you mean you lost the other girls, they wouldn't talk to you, or?

Oh they all thought, well he's got a preference, and you know, nobody's going to, you should know that, no girl is going to play second fiddle.

And did you have a significant relationship while you were there?

No, I had a girl I was very keen on, but

29:00 she also had a boyfriend. So, it wasn't significant relations, I never took her to bed or anything like that. But I was very impressed with her figure and her beauty and her conversation.

What about the men on your crew, did you form any sort of significant friendships?

Well I must have made some

29:30 impression on the crew, because I've got a crew member who comes out from England to see me.

Who was he?

He was the wireless, Asdic [anti submarine detection] operator. The Asdic operator is the one that sends the pings out, picks up other submarines. And also in charge of communications, if you have to communicate back to the base,

30:00 or meet somebody, if you have a meeting place somewhere in the ocean, you do that. And anyway, he comes out here quite a lot, he's mad about Australia, finding it very difficult to get a passport, he's been trying to get out her for 10 years. Has got a relationship with an Australian girl, and they're going over to Western Australia and they're buying two separate homes that are next to each other, which seems an ideal way

30:30 to make a marriage successful. So that's the only one, and then George Hunt, who's the bloke that passed me out, who's, you know, a legend in the submarine service, he lives in Brisbane. And I'm, I was quite friendly with him when I was on the Gold Coast, bit far away.

31:00 I've asked him to come down and stay, but he's reached the age where he doesn't want to travel this far.

Do you remember any funny experiences that you had down below in the sub, in training or around that time you were still in Europe?

Well funny experiences are usually serious things on a submarine, when somebody makes a terrible mistake.

31:30 And the only thing that really concerned me was the trials of the submarine when we were going down 300 feet, and I think the maximum depth was 300 feet. And really, you don't have, you don't have much, you're dealing with all men,

32:00 and after about a week they all start to smell. And you really haven't got time on a sub, you have mess and you eat, and you have conversations and its, the two things you are doing most of the time is sleeping and on watch.

Was the food good?

The food was terrible, absolutely

32:30 terrible. Dehydrated food, absolutely frightening. So there was nothing pleasant about the food, you never looked forward to it, you just realised you had to eat it.

What sort of food was it, dehydrated what sort of thing?

There was, I can't, no it was just a mess,

33:00 I mean there's no such thing as meat or anything, because you didn't have enough refrigeration for it. You had to, you had to have food that didn't require refrigeration, and that's all bad, soups were the best.

What sort of facility was there for preparing food?

Well, you didn't have a cook, no such thing as a cook aboard, you know,

33:30 there's about 50 people aboard the sub, and they're all eating at different times. So you did have somebody in charge of the mess, and he did some of the food, and the main thing that you wanted, was hot drinks. So you had your hot chocolate drinks and

34:00 things like that, which were good. And you couldn't have any solid food up on the bridge, but you, you can ask for plenty of hot drinks and they all came up. Because in any sort of sea, the waves are breaking over you at night, and the north sea in the winter is unbelievable, you had to be young to put up with it.

What about alcohol?

34:30 No you can't drink alcohol on a British submarine. But you made up for that of course, when you, when you went ashore. I got, I got drunk a few times, I had a really bad experience, yeah.

35:00 We went out to a party one night, and I know that I drank so much, I came back and I wet the bed - I shouldn't be telling you this, should I - and my partner drank so much, he was violently ill. And then, we were called up

35:30 by the captain of the depot, and told what he thought of us, which was not very nice. And then our leave was stopped for two weeks. I can't remember what I was doing to get so drunk, but I know I must have had a good time.

What was the drink of choice at that time?

Oh, it was beer or whiskey for me.

36:00 And then I, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I was on leave in, in the Mediterranean, have to look at the atlas to find out the town. Do you want me to find out the town?

No that's OK, tell us the story.

Anyway, we,

36:30 we, we were told there was a good place to go, where all these girls used to do things to other girls, and we, about four of us went down to have a look at this, and it was really pretty tame, you know, nothing very exciting was going on. And

37:00 all of a sudden, the provos, who are the military police, started blowing whistles and coming in. So I raced upstairs and into a girl's room, and said, "Do you mind if I come in here?"

37:30 And she said, "Oh no, that's alright," and I think I hid under the blanket or something. Anyway, they found me. So we were all lumbered, I was a sub-lieutenant, and we were all lumbered into the paddy wagon. So I was, I thought I'm a pretty good runner, you know. And I forgot to emphasise

38:00 that to myself, over a short distance. Anyway this paddy wagon sort of went around the corner and I jumped out the back with two other young blokes that were there, and started running. And all of a sudden, these people started blowing whistles. And I looked behind me and there was about six native police in bare feet chasing me, and they're obviously better runners than I was and they caught me.

38:30 So, then in front of the senior naval officer, who said, "You should have known you were in a brothel, and we don't expect that of British naval officers or colonials," and I was the only one of my ship, and he said, "Your leave is stopped for eight weeks."

39:00 Well then we took off down, out to fight the war in Australia, and they stopped at Aden and they stopped at another place, I couldn't get off the submarine, it was absolutely true. And these officers used to come back and tell me of the terrific times they had when they were ashore, which is most upsetting. So we actually, I got over that, and by the time we

39:30 got to Ceylon that period had expired, so I went ashore a few times there.

So the sex show hadn't...?

This is at Trincomalee, actually, on the west side. And, then we went out this night to a beach in Ceylon, and it was night time, and we all, it was hot. So we all

40:00 went for a swim in the nuddy, and we came back and all our clothes had gone. And we were a long way from home and we've got nothing, not even a towel. And we've got to try and get back to Trincomalee in the nude, and it's the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life. Because half the taxis, the first 12 taxis wouldn't pick us up,

40:30 and we eventually got one taxi and we told him of our dilemma, he was parked and he agreed to take us back. And we were still, we were still quite wet. And we had to walk through this wharf, all in the nude and get back into the ship, with about 300 sailors looking at us, very embarrassing. So,

41:00 anyway, that, that was the embarrassing thing.

We must just leave it there for a moment.

Tape 6

00:31 Trincomalee, Colombo it was. Went back to Trincomalee.

Can you tell us a little bit more about what happened?

There wasn't, well nothing much happened, we were. We'd all decided we'd been, this is a shore break, we'd obviously been, we'd had a couple of drinks but not many, and it was a hot night.

01:00 And we drove by taxi from Trincomalee to Ceylon. And we admired the, I think Ceylon's a beautiful city, all, when the Empire was great and the buildings were beautiful. Anyway, it was a hot night and we finally found a beach, I don't know if we'd been looking for a beach, and we,

01:30 a hot night and we all decided we'd have a swim. So we took all our gear off, and plunged into the water, and we were there for about 10 or 15 minutes, and we came back to get out clothes and they were gone. Which is, so we were wet and no clothes, and we decided to try and get a taxi. But, you know, all the taxis that we hailed, wouldn't

02:00 pick us up, because they thought these people are different, they're probably drunk and they're certainly in the nude, and they're not respectable. Anyway finally in the end, we got a taxi that took us part of the way. But we had to get out of the taxi and walk onto the wharf, and there are five submarines tied up at the Trincomalee wharf.

02:30 And there are lots of sailors outside the ship, and lots on the bridge and there we are, we've got no gear on, we can't cover ourselves up, we're in the nude and the captain is up on the bridge, looking at all these nude people, hoping that none of them came from his submarine, and of course, some of them did. And so, in the end apart

03:00 from the generals, they all started to clap, which drew more attention to the whole incident from people on the wharf and everything. And we had to sort of put our hands over our vital parts and go aboard, and try and get some clothes on. And that sort of display stayed with the conversation for some considerable time.

What did you do when everybody started clapping?

03:30 You can't do much, we had two hands on our private parts and we were fairly, very embarrassed.

How many of you were there?

Oh there was about eight to 10.

And were you all officers?

Yes, officers, junior officers, all out for a night on the town, and a nice swim to finish it off.

Had you been

04:00 **under the influence of alcohol?**

No, not really. You know, we'd had quite a few drinks, but after a swim and no clothes, we sobered up immediately.

And so how did the local people who saw you on the road, while you were?

Oh well, we didn't ask anybody to comment on it, we just.

How did they react though?

Hey? Oh some of them started to clap which drew more attention to it, the whole incident.

And how did

04:30 **all the commanding officers from the different subs react?**

Oh they said something like, you know, we were probably excused from normal seamen, ordinary seamen and leading seamen, but for officers, it's not done, and you should be ashamed of yourself. And I'd had my leave stopped anyway, so I didn't want it stopped again.

So you'd had your leave stopped because of the incident with the, being found

05:00 **in the brothel?**

Yes. So I was in enough trouble. Anyway, a few days later we sailed off, no, we were there and all of a

sudden the war finished. So.

Can you tell us about that?

Oh well, the captain got a communication over the radio, that the United States

05:30 had dropped two atomic bombs on Tokyo, and the Japanese had asked for peace. So that meant out war was finished.

And what was the reaction among?

I think one of relief, I think everybody wanted peace, even the most ardent warmonger would

06:00 want peace, particularly as the war had gone on for so long. And most of the sailors were English sailors, British sailors and they all lost somebody in the war, some relation, and I think they were much relieved. So we, we then.

What sort of celebrations were there?

Oh well, the celebrations were pretty mild, because we were, a few days later we had to, or a day later

06:30 we had to continue our journey, well continue our journey up to Hong Kong.

Just before you go to Hong Kong, we'll just go back a little bit. When you, you first sailed to.

Trincomalee.

Trincomalee, excuse me. You had a week or so in Ceylon altogether, or how long were you there?

Oh we were there about a week.

So.

We refuelled, the batteries

07:00 were charged, and the sailors were just given a break, because, and I should imagine some would go and stay a couple of nights in a hotel or something, to get away from the cramped surroundings. From what I can recollect, there was no real naval base there, where the sailors could, could go to. Although it was a very important submarine base all through the war.

07:30 So there should have been some accommodation for seamen there.

And you, you had your leave cancelled from when?

Oh well, the leave was cancelled from Aden, and that meant I couldn't go ashore through, when we went down to, it was in Suez it was cancelled at, and then we went down to Aden. Then all the

08:00 sailors and officers were telling me what a great time they'd had ashore, and how friendly all the girls were, and it was pretty upsetting. And having your leave stopped normally on a big ship would be bad enough, but on a submarine, it's ridiculous, it's just so cramped, you can't do anything but walk along a little deck.

So how do you deal with the, was it eight weeks you had on the sub without being able to go ashore?

Oh no,

08:30 it was only about four weeks.

Oh sorry, four weeks. How did you, do you go about stir crazy?

No, I just got completely envious of everybody having a good time, and read books, I think, I can't remember what I did. But I know it was absolutely boring and it was worse when we pulled up to a port and we weren't at sea, because at sea you had a job to do. So it was very unpleasant, and in Colombo,

09:00 was the, the break I got, the term had expired and I could go ashore, and then made the mistake of coming back nude.

And then, and what, was there any, were there any repercussions after that?

Oh no, I think everybody was happy, there were mild celebrations the war was finished.

No, I mean were there any repercussions for the nude incident?

Oh no, there couldn't be really.

09:30 We explained to the other officers with a lot of snide comments made, what had happened. And you know, everybody had no clothes, so it couldn't have just been one. So I think that was accepted.

Did you ever find out what had happened to your clothes?

No, I didn't, I should imagine some Ceylonese are wearing them, or,

10:00 or displaying, we didn't have, we wouldn't. I don't know if we had a coat on or not, I think we would have had to have a coat on. No we didn't in the tropics, you have a shirt, you have your epaulets, so its only the shirt and the, probably the shorts we were wearing, because it was hot, and shoes and socks were missing.

They took them all.

Yes.

10:30 And you know, the underwear.

Did you see the humour in it?

No, I see the humour in it now, but if you're a participant, you don't see the humour in it, particularly when you're trying to cover everything up, and there's a lot of, you know, 30 or 40 grinning sailors, looking at you. Especially if you're an officer, and all the seamen think this is, this make,

11:00 I don't know what they think, they think it's hilarious that it happens to somebody senior to them, and not them.

So when you, when you first got to Colombo and you were finally able to go ashore, what was that like after all that time onboard?

Oh, it was fantastic, that's my, my leave had been. I'd done my period of not having, going ashore and it was wonderful, and I really admired

11:30 Ceylon, the capital, I thought the buildings there were absolutely stunning. Have you been to Ceylon?

No, I haven't.

No, they were old world but they were beautiful, it was like, I think you used to see in India, when the British were there, the great buildings they've got, like Raffles [hotel] and places like that. And...

Can you describe

12:00 **the sort of thing that you saw there, in terms of what the local people were doing, and also the ex-pats that were there at the time?**

No, we didn't see anybody much, except our occasional visits to shore, and we always visited a base, you know, a British, a British army establishment, usually.

12:30 And we, we didn't consort with the natives very much, simply because we really didn't have time, you know, it was usually only a few days, and we wanted to find out what Colombo was like. And the best way of doing that was talking to the British people who had been there a long time, because Ceylon

13:00 was never captured by the Japanese.

When you left Europe to go to the Pacific to fight the war there, what were your thoughts about what you might encounter?

I don't think I thought very much about it. I mean we were a submarine, if we were, we were obviously

13:30 going to attack Japanese ships, as the Germans were out of the war by that stage. And we probably, I don't know where we, where we were going to be based, if we were going down to Ceylon

14:00 to fight the war, but we probably would have been based there. And we probably would have been patrolling in the Indian Ocean and there was certainly Japanese ships in that area, particularly as they'd taken over, you know, British countries in that area. And we were going to help the Americans win the war, in the

14:30 Pacific, because they were fighting solo at that time.

What was your idea of the Japanese as an enemy, as opposed to the Germans?

I didn't think about it. I thought if they're the enemy, they're the enemy. I think, I think I was, I dislike the Japanese more, because I must have

15:00 heard some of the episodes that happened in Singapore and places like that, where the Australian troops were tortured and treated very badly. And the Japanese sort of had a reputation of being much crueller than the Germans were. Most of the Germans, apart from a, the influence of the nasty,

15:30 Nazi Party in some troops, were good fighters and reasonably honourable soldiers.

Robert, do you remember where you were when VE [Victory in Europe] Day occurred, when that part of the war ended?

16:00 Well I, I should remember it, shouldn't I. I think it was probably Ceylon.

You were already in Ceylon, when?

Yes.

Oh OK.

And that, and that meant we were not going out to fight the war anymore, and obviously the course,

16:30 our course for war patrols and things like that, altered completely. And the captain was then directed to go to Hong Kong. So we, we sailed up to

17:00 Hong Kong, and in the process of that we were in a storm, and I think that's a picture of it over there. And we were in a bad storm for two weeks, we travelled all the way on the surface, the ship was badly damaged, the outer gear, it had to go, it went into dock to be fixed up, it had to be fixed up in Hong Kong.

17:30 And at that time a British depot ship was there, a depot ship for submarines, because there were quite a few British submarines in the Pacific at that time, and they were tied up alongside. And, so that was the first time for a long time we could, from Colombo onwards anyway, that we could go ashore.

18:00 And we went to restaurants in Hong Kong, and we went up to Repulse Bay and we were looking at Repulse Bay, which is. Have you been there?

No, no I haven't.

It's absolutely exquisite. It's up

18:30 over the peak in Hong Kong, and there's this beach, and on the top of this beach is a hotel, and the hotel had been stripped of everything, all the timber had been taken off of it, there was nothing left of it, a cement frame. And we were admiring, we were thinking of having a swim, and there was a house built down on the beach,

19:00 on the right hand side, and it seemed to go on endlessly, right around the point. And we met these two people looking at the beach, and they said it was their property, down the bottom. And the fable was, if the father stopped building it, he would die, so the building went on for ages.

19:30 And they invited us back to dinner in this gorgeous home, which was, as far as I can recollect was done in different British periods, in furnishings. So it was a fabulous house, great dinner, good company. And I invited them back to the depot ship.

20:00 And on the appointed night I'm waiting on the deck, and these Chinese come over by boat, small boat, and they get on the deck. And the commander of the submarine depot ship said, "Who are these Chinese?" and I said, "They're visitors of mine, we've had dinner with them, and I'm returning the hospitality." And he said, "No Chinese

20:30 are allowed on this boat." And I said, "These Chinese people are friendly, they're British oriented, and I feel they should stay, Sir." And he said, "No, tell them to go." So I, I think it was the most embarrassing moment of my life, I had to tell them to leave. And I went back to the,

21:00 this commander called me over, and he said, "That's the problem with you colonials, you don't know your place." And I said, "Colonials, I'm in your navy and I've done my best to protect your country and I consider that's an insult." He said, "Well if you don't like it, you can go." And I said, "Well I will go, and if you don't

21:30 put me on the next ship to Sydney, I'm going to report you to the Admiralty." And I was on the next ship to Sydney.

Just like that?

Yes.

So, this commander, he was the, was he on the Tireless?

No, no, he was the commander of the depot ship.

Of the depot, in Hong Kong.

Which is a big depot ship, there was about six submarines tied up to the depot ship.

22:00 **And he was the commander of all those?**

He was the commander of the depot ship, and was a superior officer to any of the captains on the ship.

So he was a superior officer to your captain?

Yes, yes. So I told, I told my captain what happened, I said, "I'm sorry if I'm leaving you short handed,"

and he said, “I wouldn’t worry about that, because there are people on the depot ship that can take your place.” So I came back to Sydney

22:30 on an aircraft carrier, and saw my mother in Macquarie Street, and I heard that the Tireless was coming back to Sydney.

Just before we go there, cause I know there is a story coming up, I just want to stay with that story a little bit. What did, what else did your captain, the captain of the Tireless have to say about what had happened?

Oh he wouldn’t

23:00 comment on it, he obviously thought it was a bad show, and, but didn’t say too much about it. And I was a bit sorry to be leaving the ship, because you know, I’d been with these shipmates for a fair while.

How long had you been with the Tireless then, by this stage?

Oh for, the term of leaving, leaving England to there,

23:30 which was quite a few months.

And how close were you with the crew?

Oh with the officers, very close. I think everybody in a submarine, very seldom do you find somebody that you don’t get on with. I think they’re probably the best crews in the world as far as compatibility is concerned, because they just have to be compatible, if they’re not compatible they’re transferred.

So can you tell us about any special relationships

24:00 **that you had with any of those men?**

Well I can tell you about what happened later on, and a relationship, I still see the wireless operator, he comes to see me. And he’s, he did a lot of work in South America, South Africa in electronics, was there, made a lot of money. Lives just out of London,

24:30 and he was here, you know, three or four weeks ago. And loves Australia so much he doesn’t want to go back to England, and for about five years he’s been trying to become a citizen and has found it almost impossible. He’s now got an arrangement where all he has to do is stay here, and apply for an extension and an extension, and he won’t have to go back. And he’s the

25:00 only one. Crawford has sent messages to me, he was the captain, through him. I’ve heard about the first officer, but I can’t quite remember what it was. And George Hunt of course, lives in Australia now, I’ve seen him a few times. And he is

25:30 revered in Australia like he is in England, you know. Somebody introduces him in a club as a submariner, and the bloke said, “Oh, there’s only one submariner as far as I’m concerned, and that’s George Hunt.”

Now George Hunt was the officer who passed you out when you did your test. Was he on the Tireless?

No, no, no.

Oh sorry.

He was on ships in the Mediterranean, and as I said, previously I think, he sank

26:00 more ships in the Mediterranean with less torpedos than anybody else, and he’s revered in the submarine service.

And you continued to have a relationship with him?

Yes, yes. Not a close relationship, I don’t, since, when I was in the Gold Coast, I could contact him much more frequently than down here.

And what sort of, what sort of a man is he?

Oh he’s a, I don’t know, he’s got an aura

26:30 about him.

You spoke about that earlier, yes.

And everybody looks up to him. Because his history has followed him, and he loves Australia, he’s a pretty senior gentlemen now, he’s 85 or 86. And he goes to the United Services Club, a friend of mine, until recently he ran the United Services Club, and he lives

27:00 six doors down.

So just, just going back to when you were suddenly leaving the Tireless, up until that point

had you any idea that you might leave the submarine at that?

Well, the war had finished and I hadn't really planned on making an effort to get to, because the next stop was Hong Kong, and I'd just arrived there

27:30 and we'd only been there a week or so. And I think at the back of my mind, I was hoping the submarine might call into Australia on the way back. Which eventually it did, but I wasn't on it.

So you must have been really sorry to leave it, under those circumstances?

Oh I did, but we made up for it. Because my mother and I entertained them when they came to Sydney, and they had a great time. There was a couple of great hotels in those days

28:00 in the city, Princes and Romano's. And we went to Romano's on several occasions, and I took them to the big bar at the Australia Hotel and we took them to the races, my mother was a great racing fan, got special tickets for them from the committee, and they had a terrific time. Mum organised five or six of her friends to go out in the sub, and

28:30 take a dive outside the heads. And then eventually all good things come to an end, they sailed back to England. But I keep in contact with them through this good acquaintance of mind, good friend. And he loves Australia so much, he doesn't want to go back to England. And has decided to,

29:00 he's now qualified to stay here and when the term finishes, he just re-applies again and he's able to continue.

So how much time had passed from the time you left the Tireless until you saw everybody again in Sydney?

Oh about, I think about six or eight weeks.

29:30 And they came down to Sydney, they let me know somehow, they must have rung from Hong Kong. So they tied up at, where did they tie? The naval base in the city. Where's that, near Double Bay, Rushcutters Bay, where do you come from?

I'm from Melbourne, sorry.

30:00 Well it, there's a big naval base right almost in the centre of Sydney, near Woolloomooloo, and they tied up at the naval base, and stayed for quite a few weeks, had a great time in Sydney. And as I said, we went to Romano's, and Romano's, I heard later on, had a reputation of doing what they did to us, they gave us two bills.

30:30 And we found out about that before.

What do you mean, they gave you two bills?

Well they give you a bill to one person, then if you've got a big party, they give a bill to another person. They get two different waiters, that waiter gets paid and that waiter gets paid, and you don't realise that until you've walked out of the establishment, and then it's too late. And I knew young Romano the son, I met

31:00 him somewhere after the war. And it was quite, those two, two restaurants were the top of the tree in Sydney. And I had plenty of money then, I had all my reserve pay. And the worst thing about it, after the war, there was just no transport, so from the city to, to Double Bay,

31:30 was a pretty long walk, and I walked that many times.

What was it like when you actually got back to Sydney, after you left Hong Kong and you arrived back in Sydney. What was it like for you to be back in Australia after the war?

Oh it was wonderful, terrific. The two closest people to me were my brother, who was then a qualified doctor, dermatologist, he was a dermatologist,

32:00 he was the leading dermatologist in Sydney for 20 years, he was the head of the institute. And you know, a great guy, one of the world's biggest practical jokers. So, there was a story about him, and a friend of his went to the Tivoli.

32:30 And anyway the show stopped, there was an American comedian on, and they said, "I'm terribly sorry, we'll have to stop the show, we've got an important message for Mr Brewer," John Brewer is his name, and he was a bachelor and everything. And they said, "Oh, your wife is in hospital Mr Brewer, and she's very sick,

33:00 and you've got to attend her, recently." And he just sat down and laughed a bit, and then everybody in the audience started to boo. Because they thought here was this husband up there who was married, and his wife needing him desperately, and he just ignored, and he wasn't married at all. But in the end, he had to leave.

Because the crowd made him leave?

Yes.

33:30 **So.**

So we're in Sydney.

Yes, but I just want to go back a little bit, because I know we're in Sydney. But how, how hard was it for you to leave the Tireless under those circumstances in Hong Kong?

It was easy. I mean I didn't want to leave because of the crew. But being a depot ship, as I was told, they could supply another officer immediately. I didn't know the Tireless was coming back

34:00 to Sydney, and they didn't know either. And the thought of getting home and the war was finished, I really thought more of my mother and my brother than I did of the crew, although I respected the crew very much too. After being away for so long from home, it was a joy.

You said that that incident with the Chinese people

34:30 **was one of the most embarrassing moments of your life - why was that so significant for you?**

Because first of all, I thought these people were exceptionally nice people, they were very wealthy, they were obviously great friends of British tradition.

35:00 And that the war was finished, there was no sabotage or, to be suspected. And because the commander showed a lack of discretion in penalising, you know, important Japanese people when he was in their country.

35:30 And it was highly insulting to me. And I should have reported him after the war, but time goes on and you don't do things like that, and it's very hard to make a complaint when you're out of the navy. And you can't really make a complaint in the navy, on matters which, which probably don't,

36:00 are not equivalent to defence or naval tradition it was, it was just bad manners.

Well I want to go back even a step further to that storm you were in, you sort of glossed over that, can you tell us a little bit more about what that was like?

It was absolutely terrible, nearly everybody was sick, looked sick. I don't know how long it took, about five or six days, it never stopped,

36:30 and submarines are not built to go in storms. Because if you have a look at the sub there, every wave, or every second wave crashed over the bridge. So a person doing a two hour watch was absolutely saturated, the only good thing about it, was it wasn't freezing cold like it is in Britain.

37:00 But it was unpleasant and everybody was feeling off, and there's no conversation and people went, as soon as they went off watch they went to their bunks, and it was wet, and all your clothing was wet and it's almost impossible to dry it because of the conditions outside, and it was miserable. And the worst ship you could ever be in,

37:30 in a storm, is a submarine. Because it's half underwater anyway.

So can you, can you describe for us what it's like in the sub during a storm like that, what the conditions are like?

Well if the seas are side-on, the boat is rolling like that, which is probably the worst. And submarines just aren't build to be on the

38:00 surface in a storm, they should be underwater. If you're underwater doing three knots, it would have taken us about six months to get there. So you have to, when there's no war about, travel on the top of the surface, because so many things are better for you. The food is better, your clothes are still dry because the only people getting wet are the people on watch.

38:30 But they're not, they're not built for storms, and if you, so there's no alternative. You run out of fuel, and you've got to come up anyway to charge your batteries every night, so you've got to come up half the time anyway, whether there's a storm or not.

39:00 **So how often were you on watch during that storm?**

Two hours, every four hours. I did two hours on, four hours off, two hours on.

What was that like on watch?

Well it's wet and miserable and terrible. And all you want to do, you get a bit tired too. And you've got to pay much greater

39:30 attention to the lookout, because you don't see other ships in a storm. And so you're on edge all the time. And it's just absolutely miserable and its nerve wracking.

Was it so rough that you were having trouble maintaining your position, or?

No, it’s, our position,

40:00 well you can’t tell where you are, actually. You’ve got a navigator and he works out that the wind is at a certain strength, your speed is such and such, so the maximum you could do would be about 12 knots. The wind is blowing at 10 knots, so you’re doing two knots an hour, two miles an hour. But it wasn’t as bad as that, you actually did more.

40:30 I don’t know if the storm was head-on or not, but if it’s side-on, it just makes it much more comfortable, because the worst thing you can have, the boat is rolling like that, because it’s built like a cigar anyway.

So was that the worst, were they the worst conditions that you had experienced in a sub?

Oh yeah, except being a, being depth charged when you’re at sea is not very pleasant,

41:00 fortunately enough we didn’t have much of that.

We’ve come to the end of the tape.

Tape 7

00:31 **Can you walk us through the Tireless, just give us a walk-through, as if you were, sort of a tour guide, if you like, just lay out the whole submarine for us? And be as detailed as you can?**

Well the, as you go down the hatch, which, the hatch is the area where you walk from inside

01:00 the submarine to the bridge. You walk down into the submarine, and you end up in the control room. Now the control room is the attack room, and all the orders are given from there, through microphone to the engineer. And the engineer is running engines that can’t run under water,

01:30 so that simply means that you must surface every day, for the engines, not only to propel you, but to charge the batteries. Because the batteries in those days wouldn’t last much more than 12 hours, so they must, they obviously, more than 12 hours, says 20 hours. Because if you were attacked by a destroyer or something like that, you might have to stay

02:00 underwater for a lot longer time. So there’s the control room in the centre, then as you go aft, there’s a sort of very small kitchen area on the side of the board, the starboard side of the ship, where all the terrible food is prepared. Then the engineer,

02:30 they’re diesel engines, you have to surface before you can start them. If you started them underwater, they’d take all the air out of the water within about three minutes, and you’d suffocate. So the engineer makes sure that when you surface a submarine, you initially start on the batteries, until the engines come in, then you stop the batteries.

03:00 And the engine supplies recharges the batteries as well as propelling it, at about 10 to 12 knots, which is about the maximum speed. The speed underwater is about four knots maximum. You go forward to, the first cabin is the captain’s cabin which is the only separate cabin,

03:30 and that has minimum toilet facilities. And then you go to the next area, which is a mess area, but there’s also torpedos on the hull, which are extra torpedos, apart from the torpedo room. Then you go to,

04:00 on the starboard side there’s a hatch up to the four-inch gun, which is on the top, which you can, you can probably see on there. And the four-inch gun is the, the theory is in submarines that if you’re going to use the gun, you’ve got to fire the gun before the opposition does, because you can’t afford to get hit. So there’s also a supply of ammunition down there, but there was ammunition also

04:30 near the gun, which you open these seal proof hatches and you pull out the shells and put them in the gun, and aim the gun and fire it. The idea of firing is that you fire the first shell at the distance that you think it right, and if that goes over the target, you then fire another shell at a smaller distance, that goes under the distance, the third shell should hit

05:00 whatever you’re aiming at. And the whole thing is based on speed, you must fire the gun first before anybody else. So the gun crew is probably very, pretty experienced and you know, we had plenty of target practice, and we were pretty good at destroying the targets that we had, which were only temporary targets for practice.

05:30 So, so all the torpedos were, six torpedos three on each side, and then the bow, there’s nothing, there’s nothing behind those, because the torpedo tubes are going right out to the super structure, so you can find them without being hit. And most of them were

06:00 underwater, even when the boat was underwater. So there’s that area, sleeping bunks on the side, quite a lot, two lots of three, six, about, three, six, nine, 18, about 36 bunks,

06:30 in the forward end, and then you have some bunks adjacent to the captain's cabin, because he only takes half the ship up. And then you have the control room, from which you can, you can go up to the bridge, and then behind that is the engine room.

So there's two places you can go up to the bridge?

Yes.

07:00 There's the forward gun, the only gun, you've got to be able to supply that and fire the gun quickly, so they're reasonably close together. There's one, you can't, each one does a separate function.

With that kind of confined space, was there processes in place to keep things locked down and in their place?

Oh every, everything is locked down.

07:30 Everything. You're only at sea for about 14 days, so, but everything is locked down and everything must be tidy. You've got to remake your bunks everyday, and if somebody's not sleeping in them the other time, the bunks go up into the side of the hull.

08:00 But in some instance, fortunately, you sleep in a hot bunk, which means you don't want to be at sea for too long. They're not built for comfort.

The whole, you mean the submarine's not?

They're not built for comfort, they're built for short times at sea. Cause today with the

08:30 atomic submarines, they're the major war vessels, people don't build any battleships anymore, or cruisers. And these, our maximum speed under the water was about, oh four or five knots, I suppose. On top of, on top of the water 12 or 13, these ones do, atomic powered they do about 30 knots under the water, just incredible.

Were there any significant advances in the

09:00 **submarine technology while you were there?**

I wouldn't have known and I don't think there were, there would. I think the torpedos were improved, they had a great deal of trouble with torpedos in the early days.

In what way?

Oh, they didn't go off, and of course the Americans had much worse trouble. Their torpedos for the first four months of the war

09:30 never went off at all, never stayed on target, were just absolutely frightening. And of course, they, and the Americans you know, submarines sank the biggest warship in the world, which was the Japanese warship. And they created complete havoc,

10:00 in the major battles they had with the Japanese. And the Japanese had superb warships. So.

Did you come across sunken vessels?

It's very hard to come across them, they're down in the bottom of the sea, and...

Not in the shallower areas.

10:30 Oh no, the only thing is you might run into one, but you don't want to. Because if you, if you damage the submarine at all, as far as the hull is concerned, you're finished with the submarine.

Did you come across tricky situations where it had to be manoeuvred, out of even natural predicaments, or?

No, I think as far as the maintenance

11:00 of the subs, their design and their safety features, I mean they had, the British had some terrible experiences with submarines, one called the Thetis that went down, and lost all hands. And somebody, and there was another major blow where they just lost the submarine, this was in peacetime. And every navy has had the same problem, for some reason.

11:30 They always had, the Americans had mass calamities when they had submarines initially, before the war. And, you don't lose one, you lose the lot.

Was the Tireless more sophisticated than the one you were training on?

No, it was the same sort of boat, only newer, same model.

So the equipment didn't change with it?

No, they only had a couple of different types of submarines,

12:00 they had U-Boats which is small, and many of them were used in the Mediterranean where distances weren't great. And they were great boats too. Nothing, nothing like the sophistication of the boats that we designed out here, which was built in Adelaide. And although they had

12:30 terrible preliminary problems, these boats are now very sophisticated, and have been commended by the, the American navy, because one sub sank about, in practice, sank about four major war vessels and was completely undetected. Although they, the first ones were noisy, and there's nothing worse than a noisy submarine, because as soon as the asdic

13:00 picks up the noise, they, you get a beam on this side and a beam on that side, and you know exactly where it is. And the German submarines were sinking so many boats going to Britain during the war, that Britain could have lost the war because of, you know. A hundred cargo ships would start off, and only 50 would arrive,

13:30 it was absolutely horrific. And fortunately the British broke the codes of the Americans in ordering their submarines to different positions. And then they knew exactly where the subs were, and they virtually destroyed the submarine fleet over a period of six months. And they were losing the Atlantic battle, and the Americans were sending all these ships over,

14:00 and the calamity rate was just horrific.

After having all of those amazing experiences in the war and in Europe.

Were they amazing?

I think they were amazing, yes. Not many people have been in a submarine.

No, well that's true, very true.

It really is quite incredible.

We've had one good commander of subs was an Australian during the war.

14:30 And of course, there's not, the submarine service wasn't very substantial. Although the German submarine service nearly won the war.

But having had that experience, when you came back to Australia was it hard to adjust to civilian life?

Oh it was easy, it was a pleasure, everything was sweet. Sleeping in good conditions. The worst thing about it is,

15:00 you're never really terribly clean in a submarine, you can't, you're not allowed to use that much water.

So it was nice to be back home. Did you miss the guys from the boat?

Oh yes, I did. They all came back to Sydney, and we spoilt them there, my mother spoilt them. They were terrific, and we've still got this major contact, who goes back

15:30 to England and tells them all at meetings, that, about this junior sub-lieutenant on promotion, living in this beautiful area.

Was there anything difficult about adjusting to civilian..?

Oh no there wasn't, the whole, your whole future was then ahead of you, and I had to decide what I was going to do.

16:00 So, Uncle Bill, who's a good friend of my mother's, and eventually married my mother, decided that I should have an academic career, so I did law for a, a couple of years. And then, at the meetings, I used to add up, and 98 percent of people were doing law,

16:30 were sons of lawyers, and I thought this is going to be too tough for me to get a job, all these people are going to walk straight into their father's businesses. Unless I'm brilliant at this, and I didn't think I was, I'd find it very hard, and I didn't want to waste four years. Then my stepfather was, Uncle Bill, was a chartered accountant, so I did accountancy, chartered accountancy for three years.

17:00 And then I, I, my mother lived in some flats in, not flats a house in Wolseley Road, which is now the Belgium Consul, a beautiful house, we had the downstairs and some friends of ours had the, oh, some people lived upstairs. And I got friendly with one of the people upstairs and he said, he was in,

17:30 in a factory producing, trying to produce washing machines. And he said, "Come out and have a look at it." And I came out, and here's this, here's about 10 people producing about five washing machines a week. I thought that's just frightening, and the washing machine market of manufacturing

18:00 was non-existent. I think there was only one manufacturer named Norco, no, Nayco, I think it was, one manufacturer in Australia, and they were importing all their washing machines were Bendix. So there were plenty of Bendex's about, the Bendex's were fairly dear, and they were halfway to producing an

agitator-type washing machine. And I thought,

18:30 that's interesting, I was really bored with, with doing anymore study of accountancy, and I was working in an accountants firm at that time. So I came over, anyway we produced the production, oh, finalised the production about 100 washing machines a week. And the first ones weren't very good, but we had, I just thought well, we're going to

19:00 get better as we go along, but what we've got to have is a great service department. So we used to sell to David Jones and all the top stores, and we could never supply enough. The demand for washing machines after the war was, was tremendous.

Why was that?

Nobody had washing machines, they just had these, everybody washing in the tub.

19:30 And there was, obviously no washing machines before the war, oh there might have been the agitator type before the war.

Was it a better economy for people to be purchasing?

Oh well, I think people had, you know, seen American movies and they realised that washing machines were a luxury item and an essential item, and the demand for washing machines was terrific. So anyway, the

20:00 first washing machines weren't too good and we got better, and nobody heard a complaint about our washing machines. Because our service department might have been very expensive, but they rang us and our washing machines got better, and our service department then decreased, and we were making, oh I suppose 100 washing machines a week, and we were getting orders for 300 a week. And...

How different were the washing machines to the sort we have now?

20:30 We actually made a tumbler type machine, we, you fill it from the top, it was an aluminium thing, and it was quite deep, it was about that deep, so when the clothes came over they dropped a long way into the water, which makes a better wash. And in the end, they were great machines.

And quite a successful kind.

And very successful. And then,

21:00 and we actually had this, after we got out of the, that cellar down there, we had a factory at, well on the east side out in the factory area, which I can't quite remember the name of. And we, you know, we were producing about 150, 200 washing machines a week then.

21:30 We had, the chap from Maytag, who produces the Maytag machines, came out to see us and he asked me to send him a machine over, which I did. And now Maytag is one of the world's biggest washing machine companies, producing a whole lot of equipment. He never paid for the machine, never thanked me for it. But I sort of

22:00 made him a millionaire. And...

Did the washing machines make you a millionaire?

Well they were going to but, but I sort of, we were a 10,000-pound company, and I kept thinking all these people that are starting up producing refrigerators and equipment, are all multi-million dollar companies, and in the end,

22:30 I don't think we'll be able to compete. So this bloke was, fancied our washing machines and he paid, I sold out and I sold my major share, which he ran it. And he just, well he didn't use it successfully, it was just greedy. He thought he'd make twice the profit by trying to sell the manufactured washing machine,

23:00 direct to the public, which meant that everybody, every retailer scrubbed him. But anyway that was after, so I got enough money to, to take a holiday, and so I went up to Surfers Paradise for a while. In the interim, I'd been married.

How had Sydney changed when you came back?

Oh well just, you know, I lived in

23:30 Sydney all my life, the eastern suburbs hasn't changed that much because there's so many houses there, they can't build anymore.

But when you came back from the war, had Sydney changed to you?

Oh well, I, yeah, I went away to the war as a boy, and came back as a man, and my tastes, my tastes were certainly rounder. The nightclubs in Sydney, Princes and Romano's which I went to frequently, and

24:00 at that stage, just after the war, there was no transport. So if I took a girl out to Prince's or Romano's, I had to walk back to Vaucluse which took considerable time, you know, took three quarters of an hour to

walk. But we were young and fit, and the girls were pretty young and fit, so it didn't matter that much.

And you met your wife at that time?

How did I meet my wife?

24:30 Yeah, no, I used to go to the night clubs after the war, because there was no such thing as nightclubs during the war, that I went to, anyway. So I anyway, there was Prince's which was the superior one, and Romano's and then there was, there was one at Kings Cross which was run by Abe Saffron [Sydney underworld figure], who was a,

25:00 an absolute crook and a gangster and a raper of young women. And she was singing there, and I had, you know, trying to do accountancy and I had to stay up til, I think closing hour was two o'clock, two o'clock every morning to make sure she got home OK. And then, then I married that lady,

25:30 and in the interim, I'd gone up to, not the interim, afterwards, I went up to have a look at Surfers Paradise for a holiday, and I was by myself, she couldn't come up because she had a young child, and I just loved it. Stayed there too long, and then in the end, she decided to come to Surfers.

26:00 And that was one of the best moves I ever made.

What did you love about Surfers?

Oh it was just, it was casual, everybody knew each other, it was right on the beach. In the early days it was magic, there was plenty, everybody knew each other, there was a party every week at somebody's home, and the place we bought out was Ivy Hassard, who was a

26:30 reasonable designer of dresses and things. And we utilised her talents for a while, and my wife took over the designing, and she was far superior, produced some of the best swimwear gear and sportswear gear, and we exported some of it to England and some to Paris.

27:00 And she was acclaimed on a number of occasions by the Courier Mail as one of the six best designers in Queensland. And, so they were, they were good times. And then I was playing up a bit and I got caught and she left me. Just then, but she shouldn't have gone because we had two kids by that time.

27:30 **How long had you been together?**

Oh about 10, 12 years. And...Anyway, I've, at that stage of the game, I had to get a job, so you've got to remember Surfers Paradise was very primitive in those days, and some of my friends were in the, had restaurants.

28:00 And they didn't know much about the restaurant business either, and they were making a great success of it. So I decided to go into the restaurant business. I didn't have any income, so I had to do something, and I got the top floor of a five-storey building, which is not a good idea to run a restaurant, anyway. And I opened this restaurant and called it The Penthouse

28:30 and it was a tremendous success. And then I'd heard about disco, so, in the States. So I flew over to the States and found out all about disco and the music and pulsating lights, and I bought two back, two people who were in the business back to Sydney. One was the,

29:00 the sound man, and one was the DJ [disc jockey], and we opened this disco, and we just had to beat the people back, it was full every night. And then I took another floor and another floor and in the end, I had four floors of entertainment and we did, oh I can't remember over what period, but we did over four million people.

29:30 And then I had a heart attack and disaster set in.

How old were you when that happened?

Oh I was, only about 20 years ago, I suppose. And I lost, I lost my new business I'd started, it was badly run and the woman that was left in charge was drunk every night. And

30:00 I had to struggle. And prior to that I'd sold 40 percent of The Penthouse on the top floor, and Kate and I went away for a world trip on some of the money. And when we came back, this woman had ruined it, ruined the top floor. And so the top floor was never the same, but the other floors were

30:30 really terrific and made a lot of money, because they were, you'd do, there's 200 people to a floor, and on a busy night you'd turn over 50 percent, so that's 300, 900 people a night, all paying door money and all buying drinks. And you can talk about food, but you make money out of drinks. I always found it very difficult to make money out of food,

31:00 because if you're giving top service, and I was a snob, you've got to have sufficient waiters and sufficient waitresses and always pay the chef more than anybody else was getting. Which unfortunately it didn't always mean I produced the best food, but I sometimes did.

Did that war experience in any way, do you think, affect how you then went on into these business

31:30 **fields?**

No, no, if you, if you look at the piece, you'd have to be slightly mad to do what I did. And the only reason we got away with is, was the place was literally undeveloped, it wasn't sophisticated initially. Everybody went to the Surfers Paradise Hotel, which had 500 people in a night, with

32:00 10 security people, they had to walk you through this line of security people, and that was the only place you could drink and have a dance. So it was crying for other places, and of course the buildings were going up all the time, because so many people wanted to go to Surfers Paradise. And there was no other place between Sydney and Surfers Paradise

32:30 that had major entertainment.

And you picked that up when you first went to Surfers, you picked up that there was an entertainment vibe there?

Oh you knew, you had to go one of five restaurants, you kept on meeting everybody you knew anyway, and then the tourists started to find the place, and it was really a magic place in the early days. You know, it was a place, I had a party down there, that's before my wife came up,

33:00 and I asked about five people to the party, and it was in an accommodation unit on the ground floor in Seabreeze, which is near the beach, you know. I ended up with 200 people, all uninvited, they'd heard about, there was a party going on, and I nearly got thrown out of the place, because, but most of them were well controlled. But everybody knew everybody, and that's alright. And if you invited one person that they

33:30 knew to the party, well then the word spread round very quickly.

You were saying right back at the beginning of the interview, you said that at high school, all of your friends talked about going into the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force], and into, going to the war. Did you ever catch up with those school friends when you came back from the war?

Yes, I did, when I lived in Sydney, and I went to school,

34:00 I went straight from school, so nearly all my friends were school friends. And I obviously caught up with quite a few of them.

After the war?

Yes, after the war.

Was their experience of the war different to yours?

Oh yes, everyone. Mainly, the whole thing was, I ran this officers training thing to go to the war, and

34:30 everybody wanted to join the air force, the air force was the glamour thing. But they mucked me about so much that I joined the navy, because I was supposed to be partially colour blind or something.

So did they tell you about their air force experiences?

Oh I think, it's alright to talk about it during the war, but most people are pretty reticent about what they

35:00 did after the war. The whole thing was after the war, what do you do, how do you get a job?

What was Sydney like just after the war?

Oh well, it was obviously much quieter than it is now, but still, I mean businesses were going up everywhere, because everyone was conscious that a quarter of the population was away,

35:30 and the whole emphasis had to be related to the people at war. And it was, I suppose, it was exciting because the, I forget the name of the great bar, the long bar in the Australia Hotel, was where everybody went, it was a social bar and you met people that you hadn't

36:00 seen for ages. The war changed, everybody that came back had to get a job, had to learn a living, had to go to the university, and I, I mixed to a certain extend with a lot of old friends, but I also made new ones, and I realised I had to

36:30 do something to make some money.

Had your mum changed at all?

Oh she got older. When I, it's a funny family history because I was at boarding school all my life, which was quite ridiculous because I lived in the same street as the boarding school. I sort of get the message now

37:00 when I think about it, you know, they, they didn't want me about, and I must have put some sort of liability against them about looking after me, that they wouldn't have if I went to boarding school. So

my mother was a lovely woman, she was probably better

37:30 when she got out of the atmosphere of my father's, which was terribly social, and met this chap, Bill Stiff, he was head of Western Stores, he was a quieter person and I think she really enjoyed her life with him, much more than with Dad. And certainly was much more of a mother to me after the war, than I received before the war.

In what way?

Well she had more time, and you know,

38:00 she was my, her younger sister, there's some truth in it, Mum came from a very poor family. And the Walder's at that time were a very social, esteemed people and Sir Samuel Walder was lord mayor of Sydney. And Mum sort of assumed an importance that she didn't have before.

38:30 And I think unfortunately that I was a bit of a liability, so when I went to boarding school, even most of the time when they lived in the same street, I wasn't home all the time and therefore didn't have to be looked after.

Did you feel that even back then?

No, I didn't, I only felt it when I analysed it later on life, I didn't think about it back then.

39:00 **So it probably was less about you, and more about your mum trying to fit into a new world?**

Oh, I think she, Mum was, just wanted to be terribly social. With the Walders' apparently she was accepted as a socialite, she played cards five times a week and sometimes played cards at 12 o'clock at night. She'd get out of bed, and with Dad wanted to play cards for four hours, and get back, jump

39:30 into bed at five o'clock in the morning. That's what I'm told by her sister. So I think she assumed the sophisticated life, but all round was a nice woman, but her social life was probably predominant. I've never told anybody else that.

40:00 **But then you felt you connected more with her later?**

Yeah, I did. When she, Uncle Bill was a gentler person, they didn't want to go out to the best restaurants, they'd rather eat at home. He'd lost his wife, and his son was, his son was in air force. And...

40:30 **Did you find it easy to make a connection with him?**

Oh yes, it was easy, he was a nice bloke, really nice bloke. He, after the war, I didn't know what to do, so I did two years of law and then I got out of that, and then I did accountancy. And I got accountancy through the firm he worked at, Bennell and Company, and that stood me in good stead. I didn't complete the course, I got half way through it, passed well,

41:00 and then decided to go to Surfers Paradise, no, decided to make washing machines.

Tape 8

00:35 **Robert, how would you describe your, looking back now, how would you describe your overall war experience?**

It's a very difficult question to answer. I think it was

01:00 an exhilarating experience in many ways, I mean I was an 18 year old boy when I went into it, and I think I came out a much more mature person. And I, I found most of it exhilarating,

01:30 and I thought it brought, the experiences brought a lot more maturity to my outlook on life. And I don't know if it, it's painted me, or pointed me in any particular direction, I don't think it did.

02:00 But I also appreciated the tremendous cruelty of major wars like the last war. And I'm sure about going to war is the correct thing before the Russians and Hitler

02:30 got more territory and more powerful than they did. And I admired the British for taking the step which was initially beyond them, in trying to defeat the Germans in France, which they didn't do. And I had a

03:00 great appreciation of the people who joined up, knowing there were dangers, sometimes extreme dangers, and yet wanting to do this for their country and their family. And I think the major experience you get out of it, is you don't want any more,

03:30 any more wars, that there must be peaceful solutions that can be negotiated.

So having had that experience and feeling that way, you've since seen many wars in the world, how does that affect you?

04:00 Well I mean the predominant feeling today is that, with most people, is the terrorist situation, I can't see that Australia should, should go to war unless they're attacked. However there are

04:30 extreme circumstances and there's no good waiting to be attacked if, if the country is going to get stronger, by, in the interim is when they, if they do attack you, they're going to be more effective. I'm hopeful that there'll be no major wars, I was against Australians going into

05:00 Iraq, and I thought the conditions that were, that were given out at the time, were entirely wrong. Iraq didn't cause us any real danger at that time. And the war was really quite unnecessary.

05:30 And so, I just hope, I don't think wars achieve anything, unless you're fighting in the extreme conditions and saving your own country.

Was the war that you fought in, a just war?

Well the Japanese one

06:00 certainly was. I mean they attacked the strongest country in the world, and therefore, if we hadn't had their support, they would have certainly conquered us, if they'd just aimed at us first. And as far as Britain were concerned, I think Churchill was far seeing,

06:30 and he realised that if Europe fell to the Germans, that Britain wouldn't be able to survive it, I'd say it was just.

Are the memories that you have of your wartime experience, the strongest memories that you have?

No, no not at all. I think that some of the friendships were, I mean they give you a perceptive of things, but

07:00 I've had lots of experiences since then, that stay in my mind as well, that were more recent ones. And I just feel so fortunate that I've had two women in my life that have been extraordinary helpful and beautiful,

07:30 as far as looks and character, and I'm lucky, very lucky.

Do you dream about the war at all?

No.

Did you ever dream about it?

I can't remember all my dreams. I don't, I think I did occasionally, I never had any nightmares about it,

08:00 I don't have nightmares anyway.

Is there a single strongest memory that you have, that you would consider the most significant memory of that wartime?

Well I suppose the memory that stays with me mostly, is the comradeship that you get in being in the

08:30 close confines vehicles, like submarines. And that you know that everybody is going to do their best, not only to save themselves, but to save you. And you're all by yourself and nobody else can help you, so you're totally dependent on their technical ability,

09:00 and then decide to win. And, which will help save your life.

There have been quite a few films made about the war, and also particularly submarine warfare. How, how realistic are the films and what, what's your opinion of the way war is depicted in movies?

The German submarine book, on a German submarine

09:30 was the most practical and great submarine book, submarine picture that's ever been made, and it was so realistic and it was based on fact, and the German submarines had a much worse time than we did, it was a great film. What was it called? The Boat.

And what about other films that

10:00 **depict war, for example the invasion, D-day invasion. Are they realistic in any sense for you, or?**

Oh I suppose they are, I was only one picture, but in one element of it, because there was probably much more happening. I mean the war was, the army front, the naval

10:30 front, and you know, obviously the aircraft section of it was almost paramount, and the effect that had on the ground troops in Germany. And you know, I admire troops most of all, the British bomber pilots that went out with the 1,000 planes, and came back with 900 every night.

11:00 And that, that must have just been horrific, they lost 10 percent of nearly every bombing raid they had.

Robert, did you lose anybody close to you during the war?

Oh no, First World War. In the First World War, I lost an uncle and the second one came back in a bad condition, so he was

11:30 virtually lost too. And I had Sam Walder, a cousin, he was in the air force, the Australian Air Force, he came back alright. I don't think I lost anybody close to me.

12:00 Oh a lot of school friends, that were in battles against the Japanese, tried to invade Australia.

You lost school friends?

Yes lost friends. So, being, and my brother was in, in Vietnam,

12:30 as a doctor.

Do you speak with one another about your war experiences, at all?

Unfortunately my brother passed away. But we did, we had talks about it, yes.

What sort of things did you talk about?

Oh, they weren't in-depth, you can't, you don't,

13:00 you don't get down to emotional things, it's more or less a statement of facts, there's no emotion in it, because it's too far away from emotion and you don't want it anyway. You just describe what you did and where you went, mostly.

Have you spoken with your children about your experience in the war?

No. No, not at all.

13:30 I might have mentioned a few brief episodes to my daughter, but it's not a subject I want to dwell on very much. But I don't think there's anything distasteful about it, it's just such an unsatisfactory process of eliminating things you don't like.

If you had your time over, would you do the same again?

Exactly.

14:00 See the only, and I think and I'm absolutely sure that when Churchill decided to go to war, he was absolutely right. Otherwise I'm sure that Britain would have eventually gone under. And it was a proven fact that they were making ships to carry troops, to take over

14:30 England.

So, now, what does Anzac [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps] Day mean to you?

Well I think I march for Anzac Day mostly for my brothers, lost brother, and the other one that came back, in a

15:00 very bad condition. And mainly it's the comradeship that I had with, with other people in the same service. And the fact that I still keep in contact with George Hunt and this other gentleman that comes out to see me.

15:30 **When you do get together with him, what do you speak about?**

Anything but the war. We speak about people mostly, the people that were in the submarine service and what they're do. The war is too far away to dwell on.

But do you think Anzac Day and remembering is important?

I think it's terribly important.

16:00 I really think you've got to pay homage to all those people that didn't only fight, but gave their lives. And I'm sure it will have never stop, having an Anzac Day.

Robert, is there a final word that you would like to say to all Australians about either

16:30 **your war experience or life experience, that you'd like to put on the record?**

Well I'd like to say something that resembles my life at the moment. And that is, you've got to find a place you love, in an area that's very congenial,

17:00 and you've got to take time to appreciate all those good things in life, like companionship and friends, and the weather. That only come with, when you can sit down and

17:30 take time off to think about your life and what's pleasant in it, and wake up everyday, like I do down here, and feel that I'm in a place next to heaven.

It's a wonderful place to be.

18:00 **Thank you very much, Robert, it's been a fantastic interview, thank you.**

INTERVIEW ENDS