

Australians at War Film Archive

Ellis Thomas - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

- 00:51 **Once again Ellis thanks for your time. Could you begin by sharing with us an**
- 01:00 **overview of your life. Where you were born to where you finished up about five years after the war.**
- Well I was born to the best of my knowledge in Woollahra. At 60 Wallis Street, Woollahra. It's only a matter of yards away from the Centennial Park gates known as the Ocean Street gates. Ocean Street goes right down to Double
- 01:30 Bay. It starts at Double Bay right across to the main road which goes out to the heights of Rose Bay and so forth and straight up the hill to the Gates of Centennial Park. The other big gates down at the other end are known as the Queen Street Gates. I was a good kid growing up. My best pastime was to get up on that
- 02:00 reservoir between the gates and the tram depot. It had lovely grassy sloping banks and you got up there with a skidboard and sat on it and zoom. You had a great zooming ride down the side of the reservoir. And the number of kids that had a lot of fun and laughter there would amaze you. Yes. I was familiar with lots of areas of Centennial Park.
- 02:30 I would even find rabbits down around the duck ponds living in the bush. But yes there was always football on, a big competition in rugby league at the bottom, soccer fields and of course cricket would be on in various areas too. And there was a lovely rose garden.
- 03:00 It was a very popular park for sporting or bicycle riding too. Round the grand drive as it was called. I think there was a three mile jaunt round there and it still is used a lot and next to it going around the grand drive was a horse riding
- 03:30 strip and there were oak trees, Portuguese Oaks, they were, not English or American. Portuguese, and we kids used to love to pick up the acorns and have a fight. They could hit you with a good wallop. And then there was a big statue of Sir Henry Parkes on the sloping side of the hill.
- 04:00 It was a good one of Sir Henry and then of course there was an obelisk down at the centre where there was the big ceremony of the foundation of the Commonwealth. That's where the name 'centennial' came in.
- And what were your parents like?**
- Well I was three years old and
- 04:30 my twin sisters were born after that. But our mother developed a blood clot in her leg and they told the doctor but he just ignored it and she was sitting talking to a cousin of ours at the time. She was aware that clot moved and it went to her brain and killed her just like that.
- 05:00 And my father had two sisters that weren't married and had no family. One took one of the twins and the other sister took the other one. Joyce and Marie and my Dad applied for me to go into an orphanage and after quite a long wait and lots of letters he got the green light
- 05:30 and I was sent to Burnside homes up on Pennant Hill Road Parramatta and my two brothers also went there to another home for elder boys. But eventually my father remarried to try and get his family back together.
- 06:00 And we went back to Woollahra and my twin sisters stayed where they were with their aunts and that was the way of our family for quite a good number of years.
- So how old were you when your mum died?**
- Three. The

06:30 girls were only weeks old when she died.

And Burnside Boys, the orphanage? What can you tell me about that place?

My two brothers were across the road on the other side, I think their home was called the Rock and I was in Blairgowrie which was virtually the other side of the road. So we

07:00 didn't see one another very much but I remember them growing some tomatoes and sending some over for me to have a tomato sandwich. I thought they were absolutely marvellous. I had never tasted tomatoes before. And the first time ever were those tomato sandwiches and I can still remember how lovely they were.

07:30 Was the orphanage a school as well?

When I was old enough to go to kindergarten the schoolchildren had to go all the way down Pennant Hills Road to Parramatta School. Somewhere down the foot of that road but I was too young to do that long trip down and that long trip walking home

08:00 and they built a school up on the left hand side of Pennant Hills Road called Burnside and that was really named after the home because the children to fill the school were coming out of the homes to go there instead of all that trip way down into Parramatta, that would cut it off and did. I remember going there

08:30 in third class to the Burnside school till my father married again to bring his family together. Then I went to Woollahra Public School. It was called a superior public school because it went to eighth class where as normal public schools cut off at sixth class. But you did

09:00 seventh and eighth class at Woollahra and then we went across to Randwick Intermediate High School, that's the boys and I think there was a school over there for girls as well where they could go on and get their intermediate. So that's what I did like a lot of other boys. You could get a tram to Clovelly up at the tram depot that took you right away round

09:30 through Bondi Junction out through the Bronte Line and over up on the hill to Randwick.

Just a couple more questions on the orphanage. How long were you there for?

I think four years.

And what were the teachers or those who ran the place like?

10:00 Well they weren't teachers by the way. There would be a matron and an assistant matron and they would run the homes where you were sent. And there was visiting once a fortnight when the parents could come and see their children. Yes.

10:30 It was fortnightly.

Were you lonely?

Oh yes. Yes you were. My Dad used to work on Saturday mornings and he would come from his work up by train and find his way up to the homes. It was late afternoon and of course he'd be thinking of heading home at a certain hour. Because he'd have to go from there right out

11:00 to Woollahra to go home. So he didn't have a lot of time to burn in a sense. He had a nice little visit and a talk and so forth.

Was there discipline?

Oh yes. Yes. There was firm discipline. Yes.

What sort of discipline was there?

11:30 Oh I really couldn't tell you the details. All I know is yes there was strict discipline and the matron in charge would be responsible for discipline. See every home had a matron and so many children.

And did you get in trouble for anything in particular?

Not that I can think of. My halo didn't fall off.

12:00 But that is the way the cookie crumbles. But I can remember Sir James Burn used to walk from his place and he had a beautiful dog and I'm trying to think of the dog's name. I used to know it very well but he always accompanied Sir James Burn as he wandered through

12:30 the grounds and so forth and when Sir James died the dog came and virtually lived around the homes and he would go to the hospital just down the road and they would feed him. But he seemed absolutely lost, poor thing and you got the feeling that the family didn't care a hoot for the dog.

13:00 Otherwise he wouldn't have been wandering the way he was doing and standing down at the door of the

hospital.

So the dog's name was?

Rover. And Rover often wandered through the grounds because he used to walk a lot there with Sir James.

The accommodation at the orphanage,

13:30 **what was that like?**

Fairly big dormitories and most of the homes were exactly like that.

Did you make any particular friends there?

Yes. I did know some of them in a sort of a friendly manner and I always kept in touch with the matron.

14:00 She lost her husband with a chest infection and she lost her baby son about the same time and I was down in Hay and I knew that her husband was buried in the cemetery there and I took a taxi up and I found the grave with the help of the dear old couple who were the caretakers

14:30 of the cemetery and they showed me his grave. A beautiful rock shaped like that and beautifully polished. Henry Penman engraved in gold letters on this beautiful stone. But that was her loss of a husband and a baby son. And

15:00 she worked there until retirement age and then she went back to Scotland to mind her mother in her old age and when her Mum died she put herself in a nursing home and she wrote me a letter that she was eighty-eight and very soon she would be meeting her Harry in the sky. I had the letter for quite a long time.

15:30 I remember showing it to a Salvation Army friend of mine and the letter disappeared. But I've never forgotten that, her last letter to me to tell me she was going to meet her Harry in the sky.

When you finally left the orphanage with your dad what were your feelings then? Were you happy or sad leaving the orphanage?

16:00 No. I was very happy to think we were living together again as a family. And in the past we didn't see one another that often. They were just fleeting visits some times. Particularly my sisters. I

16:30 was quite grown up when I met up with my sisters. It was a case of opportunities to meet one another. They were few and far between.

Was it hard living with your dad though and your new step mum in the early days?

It was a little bit hard. Yes it was.

What were some of the difficult circumstances?

More or less. Yes.

17:00 **What were some of the difficult things though?**

Oh it's hard to really put your finger on them. Just the total atmosphere. But however I used to do a lot of the shopping and always some housework. I used to get threepence a week and I would bank it.

17:30 You know the school bank. That's what I would bank, my threepence. I have never forgotten my threepence and yes I didn't have a lot of money in it and I am just thinking when I joined the air force I

18:00 had only a small amount in the whole of that bank account.

During your years of growing up the Depression came along. How did that affect you and your family?

Well the Depression hung on for so many years didn't it. Quite a long time. I think I said that we lived at

18:30 number 60 Wallis Street, Woollahra and that's where my Dad took up residence in that cottage when he came down from Brisbane I think in about the 1930s and he was there for many many years. That's where my mother died was in that cottage. And Lion Cottage it was called. And

19:00 it was built way back in the eighteen hundreds because in the book cupboard up near the fireplace was a date marked in the timber. Eighteen something. So it was built many many years ago. Dad used to have to be off to work very early in the morning. I don't know what time he started

19:30 but it was very early in the morning. He would be starting up at Sergeants in Darlinghurst.

What was he doing there at Sergeants?

He was head cake decorator in what they called the fancy floor. He used to decorate all wedding cakes and they used to make what was called a sponge heart and they would decorate it with flowers. They

did a roaring trade

20:00 with the sponge hearts and he had a Russian, Nick, they called him Nick and he was a master at making these sugar flowers and he made them to put on these cakes and, woosh, they sold like mad down in Market Street. Sergeants were there somewhere near where the lottery office is now

20:30 for many many years. They did a roaring business.

You would have got some great birthday cakes?

Yeah. I remember once coming down from Burnside to a dinner that my father cooked in a cast iron saucepan and he

21:00 baked it in there and I said, "Dad that's a beautiful dinner." I said, "If this is just an ordinary baked dinner what's it going to be like for Christmas?" Oh I was so taken. To me that was a real luxury item to have a baked dinner.

21:30 And one thing while I am talking about baking. They used to get parsnips and boil them and I hated them. And if they are roasted they are beautiful but just boiled, I lost all interest in boiled parsnips. You know what it is like when you are a kid.

So coming back to the Depression. The unemployed?

22:00 **Did you come across the unemployed? Did they come door knocking and after food?**

I remember marches down our street. Our street was filled with lumps of sandstone and when we got the motor lorries with the solid rubber tires, running those wheels on those upturned pieces of sandstone would slice slips in the rubber and so when the wheel went round, that piece hanging, flop, flop

22:30 flop, you could hear the trucks going down the street with the flop of the rubber was unbelievable. But I remember one night there was a big meeting on at Paddington Town Hall and the unemployed were marching down our street and somebody had a kettle drum and they were all

23:00 marching in time. Many of them were ex-servicemen from World War I and the beat of the feet all in time was terrific to listen to. But yes they had a mass meeting down in Paddington Town Hall to protest about the need for help for the unemployed.

23:30 They then brought in a scheme where if they did so much work for the council a month they would be paid so much money. And that helped a lot because at one time they were getting nothing. You can imagine the poverty and the distress in the Depression years was terrible.

What did families do to care for those who were unemployed or homeless?

24:00 The councils ran a system where they got a small pittance. It was very small and the people had to undertake to do so many days a month to get this little handout. But honestly it was so precious little it was unbelievable.

Where did people who were homeless

24:30 **live around your area?**

In the park and lots of places like that. Waiting sheds with seats in them were used as a bed. Under bridges. Oh there was so much poverty it wasn't funny. The unemployed and the homeless there wasn't a lot of caring for them.

25:00 **You mentioned that your father cooked a meal for you and your family and that was special. What sorts of things were you eating?**

Potatoes, parsnips and a few things like that. They were baked in this cast iron...it was like an oven in a sense. Baked in there with a lovely flavour

25:30 to me because it was a flavour I didn't get back at Burnside Homes. Most of their stuff was boiled and I used to hate the taste of boiled parsnip but when it is baked it is an entirely different vegetable.

Discipline. What did your dad do to keep you in order and discipline you?

Oh he was never too rough.

26:00 He might rouse on me but that would be it.

What sorts of things did you get in trouble for?

I can't remember.

You kept your halo did you?

Oh yeah. It didn't fall off.

What memories did you have of school?

I went to Woollahra and

26:30 it went up to eighth class and in those last years it taught a lot of commercial stuff like bookkeeping and things like that. But they had a fellow there by the name of Glasheen. He found his way up the ladder I think. I think he got on to the public service board but he was known as 'Basher'. Honestly I've been in the classroom

27:00 adjoining there and the petitions between the rooms they were half wood and half glass and if a person couldn't answer a question he asked then he would wail into them with the cane. And you can understand why they called him Basher. He never knew when to leave the cane alone. Oh yeah. I know where he was in other places after that.

27:30 And honestly he was criticized there in other places where he went for wanting to bash kids and thinking it was the way to teach.

What were your other teachers like?

Human. Most teachers did not resort to what he did and

28:00 even his own pupils had no time for him, none at all, because of his sadistic way he went about things. You couldn't call it anything else.

What things did you enjoy about Woollahra Superior Primary School?

I liked most of my teachers I had. They were good people. I remember once

28:30 I had a science...I got up in the higher classes. I think I was in year seven. I was at a science class and this teacher if you couldn't answer a question he asked you got the cane. And this lad George York was hauled out onto the floor because he couldn't

29:00 answer a science question. And he held his hand out, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd so the gentle cane falleth on the hand beneath." And the teacher went ahead and gave him the cane. The whole class, gggrrrrmmm!! .You could see the wave of disapproval for that science teacher through the whole of his class

29:30 like that. And in the war years I think I was in the prairie and I saw George appearing on the screen of people in London sending Christmas cheers home to their family. It was George and I believe I met a friend later and I told him about seeing George and he said, "Yes and George was lost over Europe three weeks after that."

30:00 He sent his Christmas greetings home to Mum and Dad.

Sorry. George was the science teacher or the boy?

The boy. Georgie York. He was lost.

Was there an occasion you got the cane?

No. My halo sat in the right place.

I can see it hasn't moved

30:30 so...

No, and it hasn't gone rusty.

Did you enjoy studying and classes?

Yes. I was interested in learning. Like I was telling somebody not so many weeks back that I won a prize and the prize was a membership of the Woollahra Library and I could go along and get any books I wanted.

31:00 So I went along with my card and I got all the books on Tarzan and Jane. I read them all. I thoroughly enjoyed it. That's reading.

What about Maths and other things?

I did well in maths. It didn't bother me.

And sport. Did you like sport?

I enjoyed tennis. I played soccer. I was captain of the Woollahra

31:30 soccer team. I played left half with a left foot kick.

And what are your memories going on from Woollahra to Randwick?

Randwick Boys was quite different. I was in the A class and

- 32:00 you had to earn your place to be in the A class. But I got my intermediate. And then I wanted to go on and get my leaving certificate and quite a lot of us went over to Sydney Boys High School but we weren't
- 32:30 wanted because we didn't do language, French or Latin. They even taught Greek there. George Saxby the School's principal, his father had been principal of Sydney Boy's before. I remember the boys thought we'll get a class magazine together and one of the things in the front of the magazine was
- 33:00 "Some people say that Mr Saxby wears a goatee because of his long association with us kids." He came around to give us a dressing down over our sense of humour. But he had this Shakespearian sort of moustache and this small beard but he
- 33:30 didn't want us there at all because we didn't take languages. He made it so tough for us. He virtually sat us in the school assembly hall twiddling our thumbs and doing nothing. And that's the way he treated us. I thought it was despicable really. He didn't want us and he made it so tough.
- Did you go? Did you remain there or**
- 34:00 **do something else?**
- No we heard of a high school over in St Peters. Camdenville I think it was and it came under the wing of Fort Street Boy's High School and anyway I did mechanics and
- 34:30 maths one and maths two. But yeah that's as far as we got. Plus of course English. We had a young teacher by the name of Edwards. He was a real sporting sort, a very young teacher.
- So what was the reason that Randwick Boys ended up at Sydney Boy's?**
- 35:00 Mostly yes.
- Yeah but why did you leave Randwick Boys?**
- They had nothing higher. Nothing. It was an intermediate high school. Full stop. That's where it finished, plonk. And we were trying to go on and do our leaving but we weren't getting much help at all from the Department of Education.
- Did you know what you wanted to do when you left school?**
- 35:30 I don't know. The commercial side like bookkeeping and things like that... I thought I might have got a job in that field. But, no, we ran into a dead end but...
- Did your father encourage you in education?**
- Yes. He was interested in what we did.
- 36:00 Yes very.
- And what had your two elder brothers done?**
- My eldest brother was a motor mechanic. My second brother worked in printing and my other brother was a sheet metal worker.
- So just for the archive what were the names of your three brothers and your two sisters?**
- 36:30 There was Alan, Walter, who was in the printing and Gordon, sheet metal worker. My sisters were Marie and Joyce.
- Had any of your brothers gone on and done the leaving certificate?**
- No. When I got my leaving certificate I got a job
- 37:00 with a firm of engineers in Clarence Street and I was getting fifteen shillings a week. I used to walk from Darlinghurst, I was living at Woollahra at the time and I would get the tram to Darlinghurst and then walked down Oxford Street, across Hyde Park and then down Market Street to Clarence Street.
- 37:30 To save a penny.
- Just coming back to the leaving certificate. Why did you want to do it? What was the advantage of doing it?**
- Well for admission to lots of other better paying activities but as you can see I was still looking for the better opportunity.
- Just during your days at school, was Empire Day a big thing?**
- 38:00 Oh yes, with our cracker night. That was a big turnout and we'd have ceremonies in the school about the flag and things like that. Yeah. Empire Day in those times was an important day.

And Anzac Day back then; was that important as well?

In a sense yes. We remembered the people who lost their lives there which were

38:30 a very enormous loss.

What did you know of World War I?

Not a great deal. I know my Dad told me about the Sydney Morning Herald used to produce a great lift out, one page, with all the fatalities from France. Penny to buy that sheet.

39:00 But they used to sell. So many people were interested to run their eye over that list and see if there were people there that they knew. But that is what they got for a penny.

What did your dad do during World War I?

He was working in Brisbane. That's where he met our mother, was in Brisbane. And

39:30 then he moved down I think I said about 1930 he moved from Brisbane down to Sydney but he was a cake decorator at a bakery up in Brisbane. I've forgotten the name of it now. I think it was Bennett's but anyway it doesn't matter. That's where he worked and that's where he met our mother.

40:00 **Did he want to join up in the army during World War I?**

No. No he didn't. He had a young family and he didn't wish to join the army.

And one more question. You spoke of Empire Day. Did you see yourself as proud of the British Empire?

Yes. I think the idea of Empire Day was to speak of what has been achieved

40:30 in the name of the empire, the establishment of settlements and things like that.

Did you see yourself as Australian as well?

I don't think we thought along those lines. We were happy to know we were Australians and full stop.

Okay. We'll just stop there and change the tape.

Yes.

Tape 2

00:40 **So you went to the teacher's college.**

Yes.

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Yes. We were known as the June session. We started in June 1938

01:00 which was most unusual because the courses usually started at the beginning of a year. But they were so short of teachers, particularly teachers retiring and they were replacements for them. That's how far they got down in their planning and I think one year they only brought in thirteen students to merely keep the doors open because they realized

01:30 that once we've lost all our lecturing staff where do we put another one together again so quickly, you can't. They were going to be stonkered and they knew it. So they started this June session where a lot of people like me were enticed to come in on a scholarship in June instead of in the beginning of the year in January and we finished then in

02:00 June 1940. So we were ready for appointment in the schools.

What do you remember of the outbreak of war doing that year?

The onset of the Japanese and that part of the war we were in camp at

02:30 Bathurst.

I want to go back though to the 1939 declaration. The start of the European war when you were at teacher's college. Do you have any memories of that?

Yeah, oh the main thing we were concentrating on then was to finish our course and be appointed. And I think most of the

03:00 students were like me. There was nothing much you could do about it. The fait accompli of Hitler was

staring you in the face for long enough to finally the thing started and I know the various heads of governments did their best to think up ways of trying

03:30 to stop it, but they just didn't get anywhere. Hitler was determined to have his own way, come what may. And there was nothing much they could do about it except give him a warning, which they did.

How did you react to that news though when it broke out in Australia? Was it something that you had to worry about or was it off in Europe?

04:00 We realized that it was going to be a war of enormity in the way of losses and damage and things like that were staring you in the face. It was not going to be a simple matter that you were going to settle in five easy minutes, nothing at all. I knew a few fellows who were in the City of Sydney

04:30 squadron and they were doing quite a bit of flying even before the war started. But there were quite a few in that category. But most of us at that time had to finish our course. You had to get appointed as a teacher and start in the job to be eligible to be reinstated

05:00 if and when the thing finished. If you didn't do that it was a closed door. And we had enough sense not to leave ourselves out on a rock nowhere because that is what would have happened.

So where did you go when you had finished your course?

I was appointed to Mudgee and I was teaching primary school

05:30 and was very happy there and one thing I used to do was teach dancing and I had Percy Granger's Country Garden and I composed a dance routine to go with that music and I had three groups.

06:00 I dressed them up very similarly but in different colours and they danced their section of the dance and it made a complete composition from Percy Granger's Country Garden.

What sort of age were the people that you were teaching to dance?

Ten and eleven years of age. They were happy and very

06:30 good type of people. And we had a school sort of function you could call it in the, I'm trying to think of the word. One of the English welfare groups and they had it in this, I'm trying to think of the word.

07:00 It was sort of a hall. It had a sprung floor for dancing and they had a lovely time on the school function night and my girls performed their dance routine to Percy Granger.

Were you thinking about joining up at this stage?

At that stage no I wasn't.

07:30 When I...at the time I came round to thinking of joining up and many in my group did, was when Pearl Harbour ... I was in Sydney University regiment and in camp out at the Bathurst Military Training Ground and we were

08:00 in camp there when Pearl Harbour struck and quite a lot of the young fellows who were with me enlisted as a result of that because we could see that once Japan came in we were going to be on the receiving end too.

So just to step back a bit you had already joined up in the militia. You had joined the Sydney University Regiment.

We were really, what shall I say?

08:30 We were sort of compelled to do military training and we all as graduates from the Sydney Teacher's College joined the Sydney University Regiment and we went to one out beyond Liverpool, there's a big camp. I'm trying to think of the name. But

09:00 the whole regiment went out there. I know because we had the artillery section of the regiment with us. I know one morning all the horses bolted. The sergeant major said, "They have given them too many oats for breakfast. That's the cause." They took off with the gun and all and galloped away. But however they got them back again and no damage was done.

How serious was the training you received in the Sydney University Regiment?

09:30 Oh they used to take...They took us out on what they called a bivouac where you slept on the ground in the open. You might be lying there and ssssssss one of these lumps of material goes whistling through the sky and falls away somewhere. Like they had a big stone there recently. There's a belt along the southern part of Australia and

10:00 that open road that goes across to Perth and then it is notorious for some of this debris falling down along that track. Like that big rock.

Like a meteorite?

A meteorite. Yes.

Where were you when you saw this?

Camping out in the open way out near Camden or somewhere. And these objects go whistling through the night

10:30 sky with the heat being generated with friction. It is enormous.

It must have scared the living daylights out of you?

No. It was going well on, no. But lying there on the ground looking up at the sky and teaching you. I guess the

11:00 life that you could expect to find sometimes in a military campaign where you had nowhere to stop and live and so on you've got to make the best of what you've got. That's the way I read it anyway and that's what we were getting.

Did you have any equipment in the university regiment?

We had our rifles yes. And I remember we did a parade through the Sydney streets there.

11:30 I don't know what it was in aid of but I know the whole regiment marched down Macquarie Street and along George Street and something.

And what did you think of that life that was being shown to you with the army, military style?

Not very comfortable.

Take a sip. So why did you think of the

12:00 **air force when you decided that you wanted to join up?**

I don't know why. I thought at least in the air force that you've have good quarters to live in. In the army and especially when it is moving you don't have good quarters at all. I remember we were domiciled at Bathurst at this particular camp

12:30 and they said to one of the boys, "You were on kitchen duty today. Did you make that stew?" "No. I didn't have any stew. The cook got the floor mop and stirred it with the handle." He couldn't eat the stew after that.

When you decided to join up how did

13:00 **you go about joining the air force?**

Oh I've really forgotten. I applied somewhere and quite a while afterwards I got some papers to report somewhere for a check up and I think it was down near the old Sydney Stadium and the White City Tennis Courts, there was a spot down there somewhere

13:30 where they were doing the enrolments in the air force and they were doing medical checkups etc. Filling in forms but there was a big enrolment area there for both men and women.

How long did you have to wait before you were called up?

Oh quite some months.

14:00 In October of that year I got a notice and I had been sent down to this little Emu Park one teacher school on my own. And I thought, "Oh if I go in now I'm going to leave this little school with no teacher so I will wait until the end of the year," and they'll

14:30 have a teacher. Which I did do and they did. They got a lady teacher who brought her own piano, so the kids had a great time. But that's how it went and I got my call up then in January.

Was teaching a reserved occupation? Did you have any trouble joining up as a teacher?

15:00 No. No. I didn't ever hear it being a reserved occupation.

So what happened then when you got your call up in January? Where did you go?

Over at the air force, the depot.

Bradfield Park?

15:30 Bradfield Park. Yeah. That's where I went and then after a few weeks there we were mustered into different groups and sent away to different training areas.

So what happened in those few weeks in Bradfield Park? What sort of training did you get in your first encounter with the air force?

I went to the wireless air gunner group.

16:00 I went to Parkes.

Before you went to Parkes though was there any sort of air force training at Bradfield Park?

A little bit and particularly on navigation.

What about drill and discipline and that kind of thing?

Yes. That was there too, yes.

How was it different to your experience with the army in the Sydney University Regiment?

16:30 I think the training was more intensive in the air force compared with what we did in the army. Very much more intensive. And anyway I didn't make the grade in the Morse. You had to get up to twenty-two words a minute and the receiver and the

17:00 transmitter was going at a terrific pace and I dibbed out on that. But however I was given a new mustering of bomb aimer which meant I was sent to Canada for that.

Were you trying to become a pilot? Was that what you wanted to do?

No. I was quite content with that and

17:30 I was sent out to Mossbank which was an all bombing station and I remember I was sent from Bradfield down to Melbourne and we were held in a personnel place. I think it was in the showground and then we were suddenly mustered one day, shipped down to the wharf and put aboard the New Amsterdam.

18:00 And we were...

Just to get me clear with the sequence. Did you go to Parkes first? You went from Bradfield Park to Parkes.

Yes.

And Parkes was the wireless air gunner school.

That's right. You are right. My cousin from Townsville did his training at Parkes in navigation.

18:30 He was lost coming home from a raid on Holland. They were shot down in flames and they all incinerated. A lot of them had a finishing touch like that. That was his sad end.

What were the blokes like in your course at Bradfield Park and Parkes? Did you make friends?

Yes. I knew quite a few of them as a friend. Quite a few.

19:00 When we got onboard this New Amsterdam we were allocated different places. There were thirteen of us in my cabin. We had three tier bunks and things like that. Those cabins were built for two people and we had thirteen. But they had to man the upper deck of a night time by roster, as anti-submarine watch.

19:30 And I wasn't in the cabin very long when our two warrant officers who were transporting us came in through the door. "Hey, we want you. The general wants you to join his staff." "Oh." And I was to learn that the warrant officer, OC [Officer Commanding] sar [sergeant] major

20:00 wasn't able to reproduce the daily routine orders so when they saw that I had been in the Sydney University Regiment, I'd helped the adjutant, I'd helped the regimental sergeant major. "You're it. You will produce the routine daily orders for the sar major." So I had to type them up on a stencil and then print them off on the duplicator.

20:30 And in the morning a little Scottish boy from the Black Watch, Jock, would gather up his copies of the routine and go and put them on noticeboards all around the ship. He'd come into the office. "Well you got today's issue of the commi coots?" "Yes. Jock. It'll be in a minute." And away he'd go. And one day I said to Jock.

21:00 "What unit were you in in North Africa Jock?" "The Black Watch. They were reinforced seven times over." That meant they lost seven thousand men. They were their losses in the battles across North Africa. Terrible.

What did those daily routine orders contain? What sort of things were you typing out?

Oh things

21:30 for this day and various instructions as to what was to happen on certain days during the week. We had, for example, some German prisoners of war and they were cooped up in some part of that ship. It was taboo for you to be in that area and those sorts of things would be in those instructions. That's a good example that did prevail.

22:00 We had fifty-two members of the Douglas Aircraft Corporation who were based in Somalia assembling

aircraft and flying them into our fellows in North Africa. Oh the sar major came along and he said,

22:30 "Look I'd like to run off all of these." There were fifty-two names and addresses and phone numbers of people in there and they wanted a set of info spread around them all of their group. So I set to and typed up three stencils with all this info, ran them off, collated all the pages and stapled them together and I

23:00 gave them to the sar major and he came back and said, "They were very pleased with those. Here's two and sixpence." Well the Douglas Aircraft crowd were staggered that there was a gunner in charge of the big naval six inch gun on the stern and the four barrelled anti-aircraft battery also near the stern and

23:30 he paid me two and sixpence for making all those copies for the Douglas Aircraft. But the thing I was going to say was the gunner on that big naval gun was paid two and sixpence a day but he had to pay income tax on it. They couldn't get over such a pittance of pay for the man with the main means of defending that

24:00 ship and paid so precious little. They were shocked.

Well in terms of defending the ship what sort of trouble did you have from submarines and what did the ship have to do?

We...All the fellows in my group were rostered for so many hours up on that upper deck anti-submarine watch. One morning one of our fellows came and

24:30 said to me, "I saw a ship last night on fire and disappear over the horizon." So the subs must have been in action there somewhere. But we were all the time changing course quickly and violently of a night. You'd wake up out of your sleep and grab for the rail so you didn't get catapulted off the top of your bunk. But I would say they were around somewhere.

25:00 **Did you have any major scares?**

No. No. Not that I experienced any. None.

What happened when you arrived? Where did you arrive firstly?

San Francisco. We were met well out of the harbour by the coastguard and I noticed

25:30 tremendous sandbanks in the water and they moved off from the spot with the coastguard and low and behold they had hardly gone any way when the ship just heeled like that. A fellow up on that side came zoom, right down across the ship and hit the rail on the starboard side and I could hear, down below in the kitchen and the eating parts the

26:00 crash and breaking of crockery. They lost thousands of dollars worth of crockery by that tilt when the ship on the sandbank. When they got in the harbour we had a big group of fellows, fully trained aircrew, and they were going to go across America and head off to England and the skipper wanted them to go ashore first so they could enjoy a day in San Francisco

26:30 before they headed off. The port officials went over the head of the skipper. "Americans ashore first." And countermanded his order. But that was it.

What were your impressions of America?

Well I know I went up this long road to Chinatown in 'Frisco [San Francisco].

27:00 It is an entity in its own, you know. And quite attractive to see how the Chinese live. But it is a bit like Australia is now. You've got a great diversity of nationalities. They all bring something different in customs and so forth.

27:30 Which makes life I guess a little bit interesting to see something different.

How was the war in evidence over there?

Oh well as far as Europe was concerned, not much at all. But I think the Pearl Harbour incident I think that

28:00 prompted a lot of fellows to join, particularly the air force when they saw the underhandedness in the Japanese with the diplomat at Washington talking peace and at the same time stabbing America in the back at Pearl Harbour.

So therefore when you arrived with the Japanese was there anti-Japanese propaganda, was there ships in the harbour, men in uniform? What sorts of ways was the war in evidence?

It was very calm.

28:30 No stirring of...Because there were Japanese as citizens in the United States anyway and no there was no hatred from the Japs even though they had done a despicable act but that was kept quiet.

You were on your way up to Canada. How did you move there and how long did it take you to get up there?

29:00 I spent the day in 'Frisco. At night we crossed the harbour and picked up a train going north. One of the problems was that they had a Negro in charge of every carriage. You were expected to tip him so he earned something to live on and you can guess how much we had in our pocket to tip a guard, nothing.

29:30 Nothing. And these are the things where the transport of people should be looked at properly by people responsible. It wasn't so.

How were the trains in America different from the trains in Australia?

The...It was very quiet in America.

30:00 There wasn't a lot of discussion of it etc and the trip up that west coast is absolutely beautiful. Magnificent timber and little maple trees and running streams and so forth, beautiful scenery all the way. Of course up near the Canadian border there is an ice covered

30:30 mountain, volcanos they are I think and it is a lovely trip. And then of course we got on the train over the Rockies [Rocky Mountains] and when we were well up on the Rockies the train driver stopped the train and said the boys could get out and have a snow fight, and they did. We were donging one another with balls of snow.

31:00 We had a good five or ten minutes and then the boys hopped back in the train.

Was that the first time you had seen snow?

Yes. I hadn't been down to our snowy grounds before. But I was to see a lot of it after that.

So what time of year was it when you arrived up in Canada?

It was coming near the end of the

31:30 winter.

And how did you react to the weather?

All right. Very interesting and you know, very favourable.

Were you specially equipped for it? What clothing and equipment were you given?

Well we were on the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway]. We went as far as Moose Jaw and we got off at Moose Jaw and got a train down south towards the American border

32:00 to Mossbank. That's in Saskatchewan. And then we were transported up to the air station and they paraded us out on the parade ground. Out came the CO [Commanding Officer] screaming. "Get those men off this parade ground now." I know I felt that my uniform had been bought at

32:30 Fosseys. It was so cold and it certainly wasn't keeping me warm but that's the way the CO felt about it to get us off that parade ground now. So we were shown to our quarters and we were settled in some little spot in different parts of the establishment.

Were you given a new uniform?

No.

33:00 It was still the same uniform I had been wearing but it certainly didn't keep the cold out. With the top coat on it would but as it stood it was freezing cold. They sent us down to the rifle range and we went into what was called a warming hut and we were briefed there. We'd go and have ten shots

33:30 and come back in. And I saw the fellow next to me take his gloves off and I thought, I wouldn't take mine off. Anyway I finished my ten shots and went back into the warming hut and hear was the fellow rolling on the floor and holding his wrists and screaming in agony. The cold had him, as quickly

34:00 as that. He wouldn't be taking his gloves off next time but to give you an idea how severe the cold was when it had a fellow in its grip in a matter of minutes he was really in pain rolling on the floor. That will give you an idea that it was no small problem. He had a big one.

34:30 **So what was going on at Mossbank? What were you there to do and what was the place you were at?**

We were there to do bombing and gunnery and that was it. But we were all allocated duties around the place. Since

35:00 I was on the general's staff coming over I was sent to the admin building. I was standing at the door there one morning and the day before I had watched a plane catch fire down on the lower level. And it started in the engine, spread into the wings, spread onto the fuselage and I could see these fellows in the gun turret and I thought, "Gee I hope you get out of there quickly."

35:30 All this fire around them. And the next morning as I was standing at the door waiting for the office to open, this young fellow came up. "Hello John." Johnnie Fanell. We knew one another at Sydney Boys High School and his arms were like this. The muscles were just in a state of

36:00 shock. He said, "I'm being sent home." He had been one of them in the cockpit of that plane the day before and that was the state he was in. Absolutely shocked at how close he was to being burned alive. Yeah.

Was that soon after you arrived at Mossbank?

Yes.

And how did seeing that affect you?

You've got to put things in your pocket and hope it doesn't happen to you.

36:30 **Did it make you think twice about what you were getting involved in and the seriousness of the war?**

It was too late to think twice. You had signed on and been trained and that was it.

So where did the training take place with Mossbank? Was it mainly on the range with gunnery or did you go in the air for bombing?

In the air. There was a huge lake.

37:00 I'm trying to think of the name of it. It starts with the letter B but they had a plant down at the southern end of the lake where they precipitated salts out of the water in the lake and particularly potassium salts. By changing the specific density of the water it causes the salt to come out of

37:30 the solution at a certain concentration and that's how they operate the factory and recover all that salt deposited.

And where were you training?

There on that station. Aircraft recognition, bombing, high level and low level bombing and

38:00 we'd do aerial gunnery where a plane would pose as a fighter plane and you would aim your gun at it and it would be recorded on a film. It'd be developed and you'd get the film back and you would be able to play it back and look at how well you did.

And what sort of planes were being used to train

38:30 **you in these areas?**

In gunnery it was the Bolingbroke ...A twin-engine bomber built in Canada. And that was the plane I saw go up and all that was left was two black globs from the engine and a great mass of white powder the shape of an aircraft on the ground, the outline. Aluminium oxide and Magnesium

39:00 oxide and mass formation from the burning metal of the aircraft.

But did you see it land, this aircraft?

No. It was going to take off. They started the starboard engine and the engine caught fire. Now most of the stations I'd been on when planes were taking off there was that

39:30 fellow there with a big fire extinguisher to douse that engine if it burst into flames. They didn't have it there. They had overlooked that safety precaution and they paid the price. Complete right off and destruction of an aircraft.

So the bloke you knew from school got away. Was anyone hurt?

As far as I know no but the ammunition was exploding all over the place and every fifth round was a

40:00 tracer. There were plenty of tracers going off as the fire hit the supply of ammunition which was down on the level of the floor and a fire was underneath it.

What did the men at the base do to control this accident?

I don't know. The plane was a right off as I said.

Did you watch it burn?

Yeah.

Was there anyone with a

40:30 **fire truck or...**

No. It was just well out on one side.

And how did the men get out?

If they proceeded up through the cockpit there would be a door on the left hand side where the pilot gets in and that's where they would have got out. They had to, there was no way underneath or on their side. It was all on fire. But as you can

41:00 see the effect on that poor fellow. He was just a complete, utter nervous wreck.

All right we'll stop there because we have to change over so we'll stop and do that.

Tape 3

00:39 **You were just telling Chris the story of you losing two teeth. What happened there?**

The army dentist was called in. He looked at my teeth and he extracted them both.

01:00 They had gone between the teeth. Both teeth. And we couldn't drink the water that they were getting in those wooden pipes. In my opinion they were getting the water from the edge of a swamp because when you picked up the water to go and have a drink you would smell this smell of rotting vegetation. It was horrible.

01:30 And hence they had these big dispensers of Coca Cola everywhere you went. Big dispensers of them. Anyway I applied to repat for recognition of the loss of my two teeth and I had to take them to the court in Parramatta. Full court there.

02:00 And repat had brought their chief barrister from Brisbane to oppose me and he was holding forth and mentioning such and such a thing and the judge stopped Mr So and So. "Such and such and such and such and you know it." He levelled him off and when the case had finished I said to the girl from my solicitor, "How did we go?"

02:30 "Oh," She said, "It will be a couple of months before you hear." That Friday, this was a Monday, and that Friday, "You won." In other words he thought he could pull the wool over the judge's eyes and the judge tore strips off him for being out of order and being improper.

Had the water rotted your teeth?

03:00 No. The Coca Cola because the contents in the Coca Cola is notorious for attacking teeth.

So instead of drinking the water you drank the Coca Cola?

Yes. There was nothing else to do when you had water with a stench that's repulsive when you put it to your face, the smell of it was dreadful. No wonder they were bringing it from the lake.

03:30 And I know I landed there by parachute and I was well aware of what the terrain was like there. It was all a swamp.

Just to understand. Mossbank, where you were training. Is that Winnipeg?

No. No. This is Mossbank was the bombing station I was on.

Before that did you

04:00 **go to Winnipeg?**

Yes. Navigation I did at Winnipeg.

Okay. But you were training to be a bomb aimer or a navigator?

No bomb aimer. But as a bomb aimer you also had to know a little bit about map reading and navigation. That is a must, because let's face it, sometimes you lose your navigator

04:30 with attacks from ack-ack [anti-aircraft] guns and fighters and so forth and you're the fill in to get home.

So what particular things did you learn while you were at Winnipeg?

We went out virtually on sunset we would be out three hours and more following a course, somewhere in the route you would often be called up on to drop a bomb on a target at a certain place.

05:00 But too often we went up, there was no intercom, and the way you communicated with the pilot was kicking your legs. If you lifted your right leg and waved it it was to steer to the right and of course vice versa if you wanted to the left you kicked your left leg, and at times that telecom was no ruddy good.

05:30 In other words the pilot didn't see it when you were trying to convey the message and so you didn't have the correction made. And honestly no intercom, you don't take off, should be the rule. On the

bombing stations you don't have your intercom functioning on that bomber and you do not take off. Full stop.

06:00 **What planes were you flying in with this weird intercom?**

I think they were Aggy [Avro] Ansons I think we were using there. I'm pretty certain they were Aggy Ansons but anyway this lack of intercom was a bit too frequent. Complete lack.

So at Winnipeg you actually weren't doing any bomb aiming you were just doing gunnery and navigation.

06:30 Oh no we, I know there was one time I refused to drop a bomb because the pilot was not getting my signals. There was no correction. I could see fences and I thought, we're in a built up area. I think this is too dangerous I refuse to drop and I said so at the debriefing why I didn't drop it.

Was that common for bomb aimers not to

07:00 **drop their bombs?**

I wouldn't know but I know I did. Because I knew when I saw this type of fencing I thought this is a built up area and it's too ruddy dangerous. I am getting no response properly from the pilot. So that made it too risky.

In training what was the relationship like between pilots and those training to be bomb aimers?

07:30 Pretty good. Pretty good.

Your gunnery course. What sort of things did you learn when you did that?

Well that is where I had the mid air collision. He was a young fellow flying a Lysander, big five bladed propeller and

08:00 he had an operator of the drogue on a big steel cable. He would let the drogue out or bring it in as required and when they got down to the end of the run at the lake the Lysander was to drop down and turn underneath us and come back up the way we came

08:30 down. Only on the other side I'd say and he turned all right...into us! You couldn't believe it. Hit the tip of the right wing and bent the tip of the wing up and he turned into us. And the cable, this real thick steel wire cable half cut the right wing right through.

09:00 But it was sort of anchored in the air and when he dropped away the cable pulled out of the wing, our pilot recovered control of our plane and carried it back because two of us had already jumped because he shouted, "Bale out!" And the other fellow was still there and he came back with him on the aircraft. They put it back on the ground at the airfield.

09:30 And all the brass were down there looking at it. The top of the rudder cut off, the wing tip turned up and the right wing half cut through. As the plane fell it pulled the cable out of the wing and that's when he could turn his plane and come back but the brass were there and they were absolutely astonished.

10:00 And the bombing place had sent an SOS [distress signal] back to base, two fellows on parachutes in the air. They knew something was wrong and I was picked up in an Avro Anson and carried back in a plane.

10:30 But the young lad from Calgary, that was his first trip. He was pushed out of the aircraft and I learned from one of the ground staff that he was a heap of pulp in his flying suit where he had hit the ground, dead. And the pilot had been married three weeks and he was still in the plane and it went

11:00 down into a great heap of snow and he finished with his hands sticking up out of the snow with his wedding ring on. He had been married three weeks, finished. And that was the end of that crew.

That was the pilot...

The pilot and the drogue operator. Both were killed.

So the drogue operator, had he jumped out or was he still in the plane?

11:30 I think our wing hit him and knocked him out. Because he was over on the side. I was looking for the drogue and I found it and that night I had a visit from one of the ground staff and he came to tell me that I was only some yards away from the poor fellow in his flying suit and he was astounded how close I was to seeing him

12:00 on the ground. But however it was a very nasty accident in my book. It should never ever have happened.

Could you see what was happening?

No. I had been in the gun turret and got out and Bill Page was to get in and he was still standing there and I think he could see it because

- 12:30 I could see the look on his face. His face sort of suddenly changed expression and I thought there's something wrong and that was it. You could see the thing about to happen.
- Now you were wearing obviously your suits. Were you already wearing your parachutes or did you have to put them on?**
- Yeah. We had to pick it up and snap it on. We had the harness on and we only had to clip the
- 13:00 parachute on there and that was it.
- Okay. So the first thing you heard or felt, was that the banging of the wing?**
- Yeah. A banging. Yeah.
- What did you think it was immediately?**
- I could see something was wrong. I could see the look on the pilot's face that something was very wrong and it was wrong too.
- So he then said**
- 13:30 **to bale out?**
- He shouted, "Bale out!"
- Yeah. So you grabbed your...**
- Parachutes, snapped them on and one lad jumped there and I jumped behind him.
- Is there any safety checks you do before you jump with your parachutes on?**
- No. We just carry the parachutes and put them on the floor. Just where we are in that open area
- 14:00 near the gun turret and we don't sort of, you'd be active with this mass in the front of you. It takes a matter of seconds to clonk it on and it clips into two big clips.
- What had been said to you about parachuting?**
- Nothing. Nothing.
- 14:30 **What were you thinking as you were standing at the door about to jump?**
- I sat, flopped onto the floor, put my legs through and slid out. I had taken my shoes off and I had snow boots on my feet and the slipstream pulled my boots off so I landed in my socks.
- What did you have to do to activate this parachute?**
- 15:00 Pull the ripcord. Just pull the ripcord and it opened.
- And what did you see once you were on your backside, you fell out. You had pulled your rip chord. What did you see of the planes?**
- I lost sight of the plane. I was concentrating on the parachute. I put the metal pull in my suit here like that but then I was
- 15:30 trying to control the parachute a little bit so that I would come down in a suitable area and that was about it. I finally...Well I was watching the ground slowly coming up and then I got caught in this sheer wind.
- 16:00 Boy. Zoom. And the wind pushed the parachute out there and I got an enormous force that flung me forward and to one side. It flung the left leg over and I thought for a moment I had broken my leg. I hit the ice with such a wallop.
- 16:30 I was three weeks in hospital getting treatment on my left knee so that I could use it. Three solid weeks so you can see that it was no very slight tug at all. A violent fling of me on the end of the parachute. And I said to a friend of mine that I just had enough breath left to say, "Jesus Christ." She put her head on the table and laughed her head off.
- 17:00 **So this wind came once you hit the ground?**
- Yes I believe these sheer winds as they are called are a holy terror to pilots in Canada and the United States particularly in the wintertime. They are so violent and they come out of nowhere, you get no warning. It is just whoosh.
- What was the most difficult thing about parachuting?**
- 17:30 **Jumping out of the aircraft, the controlling on the way down, the landing, what for you was the most difficult or terrifying.**

I think the landing can be depending on the surface you are coming down on and what's involved there.

So you've landed, you've lost your boots and you've whacked your leg. What happened then when you were waiting for help?

18:00 A farmer came along with his truck and he had already picked up the other chap and he came over to pick me up and I was aware that an Avro Anson landed somewhere near us on the ice and I was picked up and put onboard the

18:30 Avro. But when I got back to base I took the drogue up to the office and handed it in and the girl who packed our parachutes was waiting to meet us. And you wouldn't believe this but a friend of mine bought a real thick book called Twenty-Six Years of the RCAF and

19:00 he came to me one day and he said, "Did you ever had your photograph taken in Canada?" "Oh. I'll bring you something in after lunch." And he opened up at page sixty in this book and there was me talking to the girl who packed our parachutes and I thought, "Just as well the camera didn't come too low. I had lost my boots."

19:30 **You said you dropped the drogue off before you met the girl?**

Yes.

Explain what is a drogue? What were you dropping off?

Oh the drogue was the thing that was towed behind the steel cable and that's what you were aiming at with your machinegun.

So why did you have that?

20:00 It was on the ground where I landed. It was just a few yards from where I had come down to earth. There you have it.

So once you had met this girl did you go straight to hospital? What was the process from there?

I went to hospital.

And what was done for your knee?

Heat treatment and things like that.

20:30 I think they had a sort of a massager that they could massage the area. It was very very badly bruised. I couldn't walk on it. There was no power. Even when I got up out of hospital, when I came to stairways I couldn't rely on the leg. I was walking along a path and I've had this happen many times,

21:00 boom, my leg would go and down I would go in a heap on the snow and I knew that if I attempted to walk down the stairs with that leg boom I would be going face forward down the stairs and land at the bottom. And so I wasn't so stupid, to run the risk was too great. I would go to the side, grab the rail and lower myself backwards down the stairs. I couldn't dare

21:30 walk down the stairs in a normal way for fear of boom...Down you go. You can imagine going face forwards down the stairs. You would make a big mess of yourself to say the least.

In the hospital what were the staff like?

Very good.

Who was there looking after you?

Your staff is rotating a lot.

22:00 I was there for two or three weeks to get the power back in my knee to be able to walk normally and even then as I said I would be walking along after that and have the whole leg go from under me and over I would go in a heap into the snow. That happened more than once.

Just while you were in hospital were you keeping up any study or readying any

22:30 **books about your course?**

No that was it.

Who were there other patients in the hospital?

Oh look I don't know. I was in a room on my own. I wasn't with anybody else.

23:00 **Just coming back to the actual training you were meant to be doing, being shooting the drogue. Can you just describe the training for us of , presuming nothing goes on, where the plane is positioned, the drogue and the lead plane is positioned so that you can practice your firing and your gunnery?**

The amount of space between the plane and the drogue is considerable and your plane is

23:30 keeping back so that the gunner can line up with the drogue so he is at right angles to the target. And that's basic and fundamental in that sort of work that you are not up close together as we finished at the end of that. But I never got over that that poor pilot was never

24:00 ever properly briefed as to what he was to do at the end of the run. He was to drop down and turn underneath and you stop and ask yourself his own horse sense should have told him you don't turn into the other plane, for God's Sake. It's so ruddy stupid it's incredible, I really mean it. There is no sign of common sense in it. Because that's exactly what he did do.

24:30 **You were talking to Chris earlier about your friend Johnny from school days who was a bit shaken up?**

Johnny Fanell. As soon as we looked at one another we knew one another from our school days at Sydney Boys High.

Did this accident shake you up the same way?

Oh yes. It did. It did. To think that those two fellows

25:00 lost their life and with proper briefing that should never have happened. But there wasn't proper briefing because the pilot surely wouldn't have done it the way he did. It turned straight into you.

But did you consider returning home?

No. No I didn't. I didn't. But

25:30 poor Johnny, he was in the middle of that fire in that plane and the flame was burning underneath his feet. And the shock of it all...He was just shattered, completely shattered.

But the next time that you went up in an aeroplane were you concerned that the same thing might have happened?

No. No. I think with proper briefing and a little

26:00 something called horse sense should prevailed and it did. But the times when you've got some accidents...See that fire, you take that, everywhere else I've been before there has always been a fellow on duty with a big fire extinguisher, he's handy, he's ready in case that engine catches fire. Boom. He is ready there on the spot to

26:30 hit the fire with an extinguisher and in that case it was a glaring case of the procedure was not in place there and look what happened. The whole of that aircraft went.

Just a bit more on the gunnery course. What guns were you actually firing at the drogue?

The machineguns. I don't know the make or anything like that but they were using

27:00 normal machinegun ammunition. Every fifth round is a tracer and our ammunition we had three colours and the rounds are dipped in paint and so when they are hot going through the drogue they leave the colour on the material. And you are watching the run of ammunition and you knew when the first colour runs out,

27:30 right the second man in the cockpit, that was me and we were watching. I had finished mine. I was out of the cockpit and the third man was to get in and fire but it never got that far.

How was the ammunition actually replaced in the guns?

It was a long string of with the one colour

28:00 and then the second colour and then the third colour. That was the last man. And the hits on the drogue were identified with the hole and the colour and so they just went over the drogue and they could see how many shots or hits you had on the drogue.

After Winnipeg you moved on to Mossbank?

28:30 **Is that right?**

I'm just thinking, Winnipeg. We did navigation at Winnipeg. Yes I think I did. Yes.

And at Mossbank you did bomb aiming.

Yes.

Can you talk us through, from a bomber's point of view, the

29:00 **difference between low level bombing and high level bombing?**

Yes. Low level, sometimes it would depend on the cloud cover and you might be just under the cloud cover. You'd always have very great turbulence there and you bounced around. Hight level was abut six thousand feet and I know

29:30 at Picton I was often it to go aloft with new pilots and use the, I'm trying to think of the work, the pather of turning on etc, etc, Master switch on and bomb bay doors open and

30:00 you start giving directions of the run up to the target to the pilot and then you've selected the switch on the panel for the bomb and when you've hit the button, bomb's gone and then the pilot knows to change course and come in on another bearing each time he

30:30 would set a bearing on his compass and you would set it on your compass. What we call the pather and I'd go aloft with the new pilots where we would make dummy runs and be giving the pather even though we were not going to be dropping a bomb. To get used to the procedure of the pather to use and how we used

31:00 it.

So while you were training and learning on your course what was the most difficult thing about being a bomb aimer or learning and training to be a bomb aimer?

It calls for a lot of concentration. Guidance from the bomb aimer to the pilot, keep him on course and so forth.

31:30 Very important. And very hard to say without all the other things. There are a lot of matters to consider. When I was thinking of the, when I had finished my training course as a bombing instructor I got a call from the chief instructor and he said, "You are the top graduate and you

32:00 should normally have the pick of the postings but you are spoken for and you've got to go to the RAF [Royal Air Force]." And my very best friend went to a place called Abigail, a Canadian station and he had two young Australian trainees and I don't know what happened but they had a bomb stick in the bomb

32:30 bay doors and I think he made a horrible blue for that ever to happen. He hit the wrong switch at the wrong time and hit the release button at the wrong time when the bomb bay doors were not open. The result was the bomb eventually exploded and killed the lot. Pilot, bombing instructor,

33:00 and I think the two trainees all went.

Your friend was the bombing instructor was he?

Yes. He was my very best friend. He was the bombing instructor and that's what killed him. That bomb was stuck in the bomb bay doors.

What was your reaction when you heard the news?

Shocked. Absolutely shocked.

33:30 I went to his funeral in Detroit where his Mum and Dad were living. That was a fascinating story. His Mum and Dad came from South Australia. In World War I he was sent to America to buy equipment for the Australian forces in France and after the war he developed an automatic stoker for coke fired heaters in the basement. I used to look at blocks of land and I would see this

34:00 thing...oh they are going to build a swimming pool. That was the basement of the house. Me and my swimming pool. One track mind. But that's what it looked like to me and there would always be a little door somewhere down at ground level for them to push the coke through into the bin. That was down in the basement and the heating machine would be

34:30 adjacent to it. And this boy's father or young man's father had developed this automatic stoker and he was doing very nicely selling them. And that's where they fitted into the basement of the house and fed the coke into the furnace and of course you hung the laundry downstairs in the basement. If you put it out on the line it all gets frozen.

35:00 It takes a long time for it to dry.

Getting back to your friend. With what happened to him with the bomb being dropped still with the bombing doors closed, was that a common thing for new trainees to do?

No. Not at all. No. I never heard of it before but it killed the lot of them. They were all blown to pieces.

Were there any safety things you could do so that if it did happen the bombs wouldn't blow up?

35:30 No. The piston was screwed in at the nose of the bomb and I think it has a little propeller which spins off and when it is off you are left with the piston, boom and it's off.

During your time training and when you were instructing did you ever use anything other

than bombs like logs or anything else just to practise the routine of dropping?

No. Never.

36:00 They were live bombs we used.

Before I asked you what were some of the difficulties of bomb aiming. In respect of winds, wind speed, air speed, what were some of the variances you had in trying to hit the target?

Wind speed and wind turbulence. For example

36:30 I've been sitting in the co-pilots seat which is my place in the exercise and I'd be watching the altimeter...Yes, you are straight, you are level but there is an upward current of air and the plane is just going straight up, now how can you aim the bomb accurately with that. You can't. When we had at our station

37:00 that sort of a problem the shutters would come down, no bombing, there is no point and when the winds were really turbulent the CO would declare, "Pilots versus Bomb Aimers in a shooting match." Six shots with a pistol and ten shots with a 303.

37:30 I always used to meet Dick Bird, he was a pilot. "Ellis, not too much effort. Bang them off." "Okay. Dick. We'll bang them off." I would finish my ten shots and get on to my feet and there's Dickie Bird and he's got five shots left. That's his idea of banging them off.

38:00 And that didn't happen once. That happened quite often when the CO would call "Pilots versus the Bomb Aimers." That was his idea of keeping them out of mischief.

And other difficulties in dropping bombs, so turbulence was one.

Oh very much yes. All bombing would be cancelled.

What were some of the problems other than that?

I don't know what he did

38:30 with the trainees but that was it. If it was turbulent weather, no bombing.

Was there any adjustments you had to make dropping bombs in a thousand pounder versus a four thousand pounder?

Look I don't know.

39:00 You're quite right, if you've got bombs of different weights there is a different trajectory. There will be. Yes. The bombs don't all drop instantly from the storage part anyway. There is a bit of hit and miss and hope for the

39:30 best in many ways. It is hard to avoid that, very hard.

They don't drop at the same time because that's what you don't want or because the mechanical responses are slower?

The responses would be different according to the shape of the bomb and the weight of the bomb would be a factor. But

40:00 let's face it in most of their bombing raids they don't depend on one single bomb. Sometimes they did in the blockbusters and so forth. They were enormous, the damage that they did, but...No you were dropping a string of bombs and surely to goodness in that run of

40:30 droppings you are going to have some hits.

Okay. Well just stop there because we are at the end of a tape. Okay. That was good.

Tape 4

00:38 **From Mossbank which we were talking about you moved to a new station. What were you posted there for?**

01:00 I'm thinking. Mossbank. We did our bombing and gunnery at Mossbank and then I went to Winnipeg for navigation. We used to go out usually at sunset and we would be about a good three hours and come in in the small hours of the morning and have doorstep

01:30 sandwiches and coffee and at half past seven in the morning a group of New Zealanders would come tramping through our sleeping quarters and we only got in, in the small hours of the morning. They were going to a lecture up stairs above our sleeping quarters. That was Winnipeg.

The order isn't important but it went Mossbank then Winnipeg for navigation

02:00 Yes.

Right. So we got that round the wrong way before. Are there any other memories of that time apart from the New Zealanders tramping upstairs?

I'm just thinking. No. I can't, Mossbank was where we had the mid air collision.

02:30 **Did you have any leave around this time in any of these places?**

I don't remember. I don't remember.

After Winnipeg then is that when you moved onto the station where you met Sheila?

No. After Winnipeg I was sent to the bomb instructor's school

03:00 at Mountain View?

Okay. So Mountain View was the next stop. Why were you sent there? Why was it decided that you would be sent to instructor's school?

I just was out of the blue. You are off to become a bombing instructor, like that.

Was it because you did well in the course?

Yes.

What happened to the idea of picking your own posting?

That happened at Mountain View. That was bombing instructor's school

03:30 and the rule at that school was that the top graduate had the pick of the postings because of his achievement. I was down at the station somewhere and someone came up to me and said, "You are top graduate. Here's the list of stations. You've got the pick of the postings." "Oh." I said, "That's lovely." The next minute, "The chief instructor wants to see you."

04:00 I had better go and see him and he said, "You are the only top graduate never to have the pick of the postings. You are spoken for by the RAF and you've got to go. That's orders from Ottawa." I'd already picked out going to Abigail, a Canadian station. My best friend went there, he was killed and

04:30 anyway that's how I came to be here at number 31 bombing and gunnery, training Free French and bomb aimers, they'd mostly come from Algiers and they spoke very good English. We'd fly for a whole two weeks I think it was and then we'd have a rest period. They would head to Montreal to talk to the French Canadians.

05:00 But oh, the trouble was the French Canadians had been cut off from France for two hundred years and they spoke the French of Louis XIV. And they were struggling to understand one other, the French Canadians and the fellows from Algiers. After three or four visits they were beginning to understand it. They were picking it up as the saying goes. But there you have the story.

05:30 And I didn't get the pick of the postings but I was spoken for by this mob.

Why were you spoken for by the RAF? How did that come about?

They had had a lot of fatal accidents and they sent Group Captain Collingwood as CO of this station and his solution to the problem was give me

06:00 all the Aussie bomb aimers you can send me. That was the solution to all the casualties they'd had. One of my group and I went down into the local lawn cemetery. A lovely kept little cemetery right on the outer edge of the village and nineteen RAF graves in their plot. So you get the picture that they had had one too many

06:30 accidents and back home in England they wanted the solution to the problem and that's why Group Captain Collingwood was sent out and that was his solution. All Aussie bomb aimers.

What was it about the Aussies that was supposed to solve this problem?

He had greater faith in them than any other. That's what it added up to. That's all I can say is that he

07:00 requested all the Australian bomb aimers he could get from Ottawa and they did that to satisfy his requirement.

From your own experience training and from your experience training other nationalities like the Free French and others, did you think there was any truth to that, were the Australians superior in any way?

To be honest I

- 07:30 don't really know. Well 460 squadron was an all-Australian squadron and they were used by the RAF in most of the big bombing raids. They led the attacks. They lost one thousand and eighteen members. That's a lot of members to lose but nevertheless that's what they did. And towards the end of the war they built
- 08:00 467, all Australian and flying Lancasters so that the RAF did have a lot of faith in Australian personnel.
- The exploits of 460 Squadron and their losses there are well known but was there anything you saw from your own training that indicated that Australians were particularly good or do you think that everybody was about the same?**
- 08:30 Look it is a hard question to answer unless you've got all the records and you examine them all honestly it is a very difficult question to answer.
- I will ask it in a different way. Was there anything you noticed about the French, for example, were they different from you or I?**
- They were very very keen. They were very keen learn and would listen to you and
- 09:00 as I said they were very keen to get at the Bolsh [the enemy]. That was their whole outlook and they were very very keen to get into service too. So there you have it.
- Other nationalities? Did you come across the English themselves or Canadians or the South Africans?**
- No.
- 09:30 We had the Free French. RAF and that was it. I, as top graduate from the bombing instructors school, was given the task of not only going aloft with all the new pilots and introducing them to what we called the pather but also looking at the graph made of their bombing efforts
- 10:00 High level, low level, night bombing and these were all graphed on a graph and I just went along and those that were outstanding got a lovely bright green little ribbon pinned to the graph and those that were a mediocre, that was it. I didn't put anything. And those that were doing poorly there was an imprint of a hand with a forefinger held out thus.
- 10:30 The imprint in black on a white slip of paper was put on that graph which meant of course that's the Royal Order of the Dubious Digit. And meaning 'pull your socks up' and that was the assessment on that effort of bombing if it was so poor. That was one of my jobs.
- 11:00 **What was the ratio between green ribbons and dubious digits?**
- Oh I think dubious digits were a little bit ahead of the green ribbons.
- Could you see any other failings in that bombing and gunnery school to indicate why they might have had so many fatalities?**
- No. I really don't know. You want to know a little bit more of the particulars before you can pass judgement
- 11:30 on that. But that's the reason why the new commanding officer was appointed and his wishes were respected by Ottawa and enforced. You weren't asked would you like this, like that. "Here. Take that."
- Did you have much to do with that commanding officer?**
- Well there were four of us were first sent there.
- 12:00 One chap I had been with, Neville Nubrahine, had a commission. The other three of us had three stripes but the CO wanted us all given a commission but the fellow at Ottawa gave it the thumbs down, refused. But when
- 12:30 we finished our tour and I was on my way home. I got to Jericho Beach in Vancouver and I got a notice that I had been awarded my commission and I sent my wife a telegram. "Now have flat hat." I went off downtown and bought my officer's uniform and
- 13:00 that was it. And then the Canadians came to me and they said, "Listen. Do you mind acting as baggage officer? We get the tickets for the suitcases brought in from the two railway stations and we go in with a utility truck and pick them up every morning." "Okay, I'll do that." One morning there was an enormous
- 13:30 fog came up. No personnel are allowed off the station. I said to our driver, "Does that apply to us?" He said, "Oh no, no. We've got diving gear on the back and we've got to take it down and get it onboard the boat going over to the island. And so I was leaning out the side window telling him how far he was off the gutter and we found our way down. You could only see the
- 14:00 red filaments of a globe on the street or on the tail light of a car. The fog was so thick. Anyway we unloaded this diving gear to the boat they were waiting for us. And quickly put it onboard and boom the ship moved straight out and on the river at Vancouver they had these buoys and

14:30 boo boo and the skipper steers that big boat right down the river listening to those sounds. You just blink. How can a man move that huge vessel and just depend on his ears. It seems, you know, beyond belief but that's what he did and how he did it.

This happened after Picton that you went to Jericho Beach. We'll come back to

15:00 **Picton.**

It was a holding station.

After the war had finished?

No. The war hadn't finished. After the training, they were winding down. The simple fact was they had so much excess of air crew trained in England that they could see that they did not need any more. That's why the whole system was winding down.

15:30 **We'll just get back to Picton. You got an ulcer there. Before I was talking with Sheila there and you were going to explain to us how that came about. Can you tell us that story now?**

I had an ex-ray before I got to, it was before I got to Picton I had been

16:00 sent to the Canadian headquarters and I had an ex-ray and was diagnosed with a duodenal ulcer and that's why I went and had most of my meals at the hospital because the food at the sergeants mess, I have never forgotten it. I was up on early flight to go aloft,

16:30 fly three courses and by the triangle of courses work out the air speed and direction of the wind. But this particular morning I walked in and looked at the table. I couldn't believe my eyes. All the crockery had been dropped into a trough and someone had used that trough to wash; a tray that had either a lot of oil or

17:00 a lot of hot fat and had been dumped into this big tub and the oil had floated on the top and then they dropped all crockery in it and picked it out. They put it all on the table to air dry and every piece of crockery on the table had this thick film of grease over it. That was my breakfast table, supposedly. I couldn't believe it.

17:30 It was so filthy but the medical officer at the hospital had a shrewd idea of what was prevailing and that's why I would be briefed to come up to the hospital for most of my meals. He knew. I went in one afternoon. Lambs fry and a tart for dessert. There were two little wizzened up pieces of meat

18:00 sitting on the plate. That was your main course and your dessert, I'm not joking, was a pie, well, a little tart rather with a very thin edge of pastry and a little jam in the middle. And he said, "Mind your eyes and he picked up his knife and went boom and the tart shattered to pieces. That was the desert. I have never in all my life ever

18:30 experienced such shocking catering conditions anywhere. But that was the sergeants' mess and you paid for your meals out of your pay packet.

So what did you do? What was the solution to that?

Go down to the canteen and see if you could buy yourself something.

And you went to the hospital for meals?

Yes.

How did that differ?

I got food.

19:00 Not junk because that's what we were getting there and to call it a meal was just unbelievable and to think that you paid dollars out of your pocket for that meal too.

You mentioned going up to triangulate the wind speed.

Yes.

Can you tell us a bit more about that?

19:30 You marked three bearings on the plate of the compass and I've forgotten. I have done the triangle of forces in mechanics. I've forgotten how we actually used those three lines to apply them to the triangle of forces and come up with a direction of the main

20:00 wind and the force. I've forgotten the mathematical details but once upon a time I did know them. But lack of use for so many years you do. But yeah that's what we did and that's what we handed in for the bomb aimers when they were going up after we came down. That was a start. When the morning got underway a little bit better we could use the Camera Obscure.

20:30 Are you au fait with the Camera Obscure? It is a very clunny way of calculating wind speed and it gives

you a very accurate answer.

My understanding of the Camera Obscure might be different to yours. How did you use it to calculate wind speed?

Very simple, you sent the plane aloft and the pilot opened the side window and fires the Very pistol with a smoke cartridge in it out the window.

21:00 down below know that he is going to be up there and they are waiting for it. They see the puff come up on the table with the white paper over it. And the metronome tick, tick, tick. That is one second. You are going with your pencil following the cloud across the table a little stroke, right you've got all your little strokes, yardstick, you follow them along the line.

21:30 Then you count the number of ticks and you can calculate the speed from that. And direction, you've got a compass and a bearing on the main thing and so you can calculate the direction of those ticks. And you'll get a very accurate answer of wind speed and direction

22:00 which you set on your bombsight, your air speed and the wind factor all registered on the sight.

Just a little bit more about the training program there. How advanced were the students? Where were they coming from and what were you teaching them?

22:30 We were teaching them the factors involved in what they were doing. If you are bomb aiming and so forth they are all taught in the ground school and of course when they come out to fly they now apply it by putting it on the bombsite and checking it before they get started

23:00 that it's in order. Yeah. You are usually given a very accurate setting to put on the bombsite. One thing we did was when we were in the air the bomb aimer went up into the cockpit, looked at the outside temperature, would be indicated. He had a

23:30 little calculator. He set his calculator round to read a mark of temperature on this little calculator and the he read off from that the true air speed because the density of the air affects the reading of the air speed. That's what the little calculator did. It would apply the temperature to it and come

24:00 up with true air speed. Which he now set on the bombsite.

Now can you just describe a little about the bombsite you were using in these training days?

Well you had a magnetic bearing and usually set the bearing of the pilots onto yours. And of course you were lying on the floor and the idea is

24:30 you've got these two white indicators and when that is on the target, boom, you hit the button.

Later on though they had bombsights with gyroscopes in them. Were they used in your time?

No. No. We were using the well-established old bombsights and we didn't ever transfer any to the new American style of bombsights at all.

25:00 **How did you grade somebody in a bomb-aiming course? I mean you talked about whether they had green ribbons or digits but how would you grade it?**

By the graph, it would tell you how they were progressing?

But when they were dropping bombs were they dropping them on targets or with smoke or how would you tell where they bombed landed?

25:30 Well out on the bombing range you've got two bombing station places and what they are doing is taking a bearing on the bomb as it explodes. One from here but one from over there. Two lines intersect at the point of explosion. It is very accurate and very quick and clean and

26:00 they then ring the readings through to the ground station and that's where the record is kept, the answer they get back from the bombing range. From these two places, like when we jumped they could see the parachutes in the air and they knew something was wrong and alarm bells were sounded back at the station.

26:30 That's why everything came into action on the spot, from the siting of the parachutes.

Do you want a sip of water before...?

Yeah.

We'd better move on because we haven't got long to go. We talked about meeting Sheila before but in the lead up to that, was that a problem for the men out training in Canada,

27:00 **the absence of women?**

It is very hard to say. When you are out on the stations the chances of meeting people was very very limited. I remember once at Mossbank. It was very icy cold weather and I put on my balaclava

27:30 and put my beret on the top of that and I thought I'll go and see if there is any mail for me. I went up to this window on the side of this building and there was a WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] sitting behind the glass and asked if there was any mail for me. She took one look at my millinery and burst out laughing. She had never seen anybody with a balaclava and a beret sat on it as well.

28:00 But it was awfully cold.

Were there many WAAFs around?

On Mossbank yes there was quite a big WAAF station. I know we got carrots for every meal so we had good night vision. At one stage we had to go up to Moose Jaw, down to Regina and

28:30 I'm trying to think of the main city north of Regina for a night vision test. Boy, you had this pad and you strapped it to your leg and you had the whole room was, doors were closed and talk about black. Honestly

29:00 until you have ever done one of these tests and got into an absolutely black room, it is just unbelievable when they shut those doors. It is icy black and you keep your finger position at the beginning of these little strips so that when they show you something on the table you've got your pen or pencil carefully where you can pick it up

29:30 and your finger in position and you draw this picture on the pad on your leg. Then you move to the next one with your finger and they change it and another one and you draw that. You keep the finger there and down to the next one, and so on. You do about three or four of these drawn on your paper and hand that in as your response for the dark test.

30:00 And it was not easy. It called for enormous concentration to do it properly and of course don't move your finger into the wrong place at the wrong time. That was another factor.

What sort of shapes were they?

Weird and wonderful. They are all different and this is why you had to concentrate looking at the different shapes that came up and

30:30 only drawing the thing with a pencil and that was it. But you couldn't afford to be lax in your concentration.

I mentioned WAAFs and you were talking about carrots and night vision. Just back to WAAFs the dances and things, you were a good dancer. You taught dancing at school. Were you able to go out with women when you were

31:00 **on Mossbank and when you were out in Canada.**

Yeah. I did go to several dances. Particularly I went to New York on a visit. And there was a big hotel that had a special area for service people, and they had an orchestra and some lovely dancing. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

How long were you in New York for?

31:30 About two or three weeks on leave. And then I think I headed back for our station. But I was with another Australian and he got us a lift on a Flying Fortress. Oh we were on a big air

32:00 field in Georgia I think and we got a Liberator bomber that was made up in Canada. I'm trying to think of the name of the town. It was one of the Ford places that were building the Liberator and we got onboard that and flew down and over Tennessee and over a big reservoir and we came round into Georgia

32:30 and landed on the airfield there because I think they were flying them from there to Australia because I spoke with two of the pilots who had been over to Australia on delivery missions on liberator bombers and anyway we got a flight from there on this flying fortress to Washington and then we travelled by coach from there home, back to Canada.

33:00 **I know we talked about it before with Sheila. But what was it that caught your eye. Was it love at first sight?**

My calculator hasn't got an answer. I took her to several dances

33:30 in Picton and she was very prone to get a dreadful migraine headache. She used to suffer a lot with them in those days. One time I helped her home and she needed a lot of support to help her make it back to the hospital because we had a long walk and I would see her to the hospital door and

34:00 she was on her own after that. She would find her way into the hospital. But even after she came out here she many times had migraine headaches and she'd try and blot light out and things like that. But she seems to be over them now. I know she is not complaining in a long time.

34:30 So that's the good side of the story but for long enough she had a bad bout of that.

What did you have to do in those days when you decided you were going to ask her to marry you? Did you have to ask permission? Did you have to talk to people in Australia?

You are quite right. We had to get permission from the CO to marry and he did, he granted us permission. We both had to go along and see him

35:00 and submit our request and that was it. The parson on the station wanted us to have a station wedding but Sheila didn't want it. She wanted a nice family wedding at the Bloor Street Uniting Church in Toronto which we did and that's where we had our wedding service.

35:30 **Who did you seek to contact back in Australia to tell about this?**

I rang my parents. I didn't ring, I wrote to my parents and told them about our wedding. That was it. Just to my parents.

Was it a little bit sad for you to be married so far away from home and your family?

36:00 Well yes and no. I was very happy to have a nice girl like Sheila. And I was content for that very very much because I liked her and as I said we had gone out to dances together and I was very happy about the whole thing. I knew it would be an awful wrench in a way,

36:30 coming out to a different climate with different customs and differences in so many ways. But she was absolutely astounded about the fruits and the variety of fruits here. Even vegetables. She was astounded at how much of the year you could buy all those things too.

37:00 Because in Canada the season was so short and so limited. So it was a big big eye opener to her in those two things, how plentiful they were.

What did you think of Canada? Was it something that you considered that you might stay in Canada, having been there for couple of years?

No. I liked the Aussie climate much better than Canada. The cold

37:30 was so extreme. We had minus fifty out there in Saskatchewan one morning and I have never forgotten it. You went out into that cold and the muscles of your face were that stiff that you could hardly speak. I am not joking. I am not exaggerating. We couldn't fly. The hydraulics on the aircraft were frozen stiff

38:00 and no way could you take off. It was that was cold.

So you were married, after that you were posted away from each other. Can you tell us about that and how you coped?

Well I was being sent home and all the boys were being sent back. They had that much aircrew trained in England that they said, "Don't send us any more. We don't need any more. We have all we want. So

38:30 the empire air training scheme over night ground to a halt everywhere. That's why we were all being sent to Vancouver and we were being shipped down the west coast to a big American army camp forty miles up the 'Frisco River and it was a huge camp.

39:00 They were training them for getting rope ladders over the sides of ships. Either going down off them or coming up. We were trained in that so that they could transfer troops round the islands. And of course in the attacks that they made on the Japanese, did you see that the other night on the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation]. Oh I think it was last Friday night and the attacks on the Japanese

39:30 in the islands. It was some lads sixteen being pushed ashore in the attacking troops and the boy's saying, "I'm only sixteen." He was terrified, horrified of going into there where it was hand to hand fighting and a lot of Japanese were in caves.

So being sent home at that time what did you think you'd be doing? Did you think you'd

40:00 **have an involvement in the Pacific war?**

No. I didn't. I was sent to hospital at Concord and I was written off.

Was that the ulcer that...?

Yes. I was written off.

40:30 **Okay. Well just stop there. If it's okay with you we'll just talk for ten more minutes and discuss some things coming home. We'll finish then. We just have to swap the tape around and we'll finish in a minute.**

Tape 5

00:42 **So Ellis where were you when the war ended?**

I know I was in hospital at Canada on D-Day but that wasn't the end of the war.

01:00 Oh well I was back teaching. I remember at the end of the Japanese surrender there was great how do you do in Sydney at the cessation of hostilities with Japan. That was in early August. I think

01:30 about the 5th of August or somewhere there.

Did you take part in those celebrations?

I went to town like thousands of others. I got in the train and went into the heart of the city with the underground railway and I can remember the great excitement and the crowds of people in town. It was wonderful to see.

02:00 The Japanese had surrendered and I can't think of the cessation in Europe but I remember the August cessation.

Can you describe the scene in Sydney? What was everybody doing?

Walking around. There were masses of people

02:30 all so excited to think the war was over.

For you there was the added excitement that your wife and child would come home. Was there a child at this stage?

No. No. He was a little bit after.

He was born in Australia?

No.

03:00 He was born in Canada.

Were you anxious about that situation? About having your wife so far away?

Well yes I see what you mean. Well it was a case of patience and knowing that the big event would not be very far off. It wasn't.

03:30 In early August the Japanese surrendered and she arrived on the nineteenth.

How did you organize that? Can you explain how the ship was organized and who paid for it and what was the situation?

I'm

04:00 not sure, you know, about what was involved and so on and so forth. I know the Australian government were looking after her and that was the main thing. There were complications and they gradually sorted themselves out so

04:30 yes, it was a sort of situation where you just waited patiently for things to come round and sort themselves out. That's all you could do.

Tell us about the arrival and the problems you had with repat at that time.

I knew that she was on the Monterey.

05:00 I knew when she was coming in and I found out that she was coming down to Darling Harbour. I went down and there she was on the upper deck waving to me over the top rail and she came down and the fellow on the gate wouldn't even let her even come and give me a kiss. But over in the shed of the wharf was full of fellows all in their officer's uniforms and with

05:30 their lady friends with them, off the ship, but I wasn't allowed in. I didn't have a ticket. The next day I went into the Grace building and I had a piece of the fellow who was supposedly looking after my affairs. He said, "I asked for one for you and he wouldn't give me one." Some other bugger had the passes and I was

06:00 refused through this other rotter not to be handed a pass and not to be able to come and welcome Sheila on her arrival in Australia.

On what grounds did they refuse you a pass?

That's the question. I don't know of any valid reason at all but that's exactly what happened I was refused a pass to go and welcome my wife home to Australia. As I said this other bugger down below

06:30 could see it was my wife coming to say hello to me and he wouldn't let her do it.

Was it a customs thing? Why were they only letting greeting take place in one shed?

I don't know. They had a pass but I wasn't given one and given a chance to welcome her to Australia.

So when did you get a chance to meet up?

Well when she was

07:00 ready to come off with her baggage. That's when we could say hello.

And what was that moment like for you?

Well a wonderful feeling to welcome her into Australia. But to be refused permission to say welcome to her like all the others were doing was unbelievable.

Now she was with your son?

Yes.

07:30 He was in the basket.

And what was it like to see him for the first time?

Lovely. Lovely to see him. But that was it. I was absolutely disgusted that they would have the hide to say, "You can't have a pass to greet your wife." It just shows you the ilk that we have sometimes in government departments.

08:00 You feel as though you should have your gardening boots on to give them a good swift kick in the seat of understanding.

Sheila told us a bit before about your living situation in those first years after she arrived. Could you tell us a bit about how you set yourselves up?

I rented a ten foot six square room. We had Jim's cot in one corner and

08:30 we were in another room. I worked with this chap at Kempsey School and he very kindly helped me for when they first came to Australia they had at least a room to spend their time in. But it was

09:00 absolutely terrible to get accommodation anywhere.

What were the difficulties?

No available places. It was like that. We had this racket called 'key money'. If somebody had living quarters available for rent you had to pay them so many pounds to get the key in your hand to the premises

09:30 and then you paid the rent after that. But this key money was rampant in this country after the war and that's the way the cookie crumbled.

So after you were in that room you got a block of land.

I did. I looked around and bought this block in Coventry Street. It is right on top of the hill. The sewer vent

10:00 pipe is just a few yards over one side but you are in a very elevated area. In fact there is a street called Alston Street goes through and it was named after a Doctor Alston who was going to build a sanatorium up in that very area where I had that block of land and so

10:30 it said a lot of a doctor was going to do that at one time. He must have had a high regard for the climate there, which was good. But however I spoke with, I joined the RSL [Returned and Services League] and I was a member of Earlwood RSL and spoke

11:00 with the secretary and he said, "Look, draw up your plans for your house. You've got to get a draftsman to draw them to the requirements of the council. Submit them to Bexley Council." Which I did, had them passed and he said, "Now you build the garage and when you've got the garage built," I designed it so it was liveable.

11:30 I had a rail across the middle of the ceiling, thirteen feet wide and I think thirteen feet long the building was and I got a canvas curtain on rings and put it on that piece of conduit with hooks and we could divide the bedroom off from the living quarters. We put one of the wardrobes

12:00 round as an angle and that helped form part of the wall too. And this was the eating area. We bought a refrigerator and an electric stove, a warming coke stove there and I made it, I put fire things in the screw holes and I could take the screws out and lift the plate off. We

12:30 used to put a container of water on the top and have a nice warm wash going to bed. And had a stainless steel sink and draining board and cupboards and out that way was the bathroom and the

laundry. An electric

- 13:00 copper to boil the clothes and two tubs and the final corner was a toilet. And we had this sort of vestibule with a door there, a door there and a door there and then an eight foot five skillion in that quarter and Sheila was able to put lines around and dry some of the clothes in the draft under that cover.
- 13:30 And then I put a six foot wire fence right across the yard with a gate and that was to keep the children away from the building so they didn't go romping off over there and fall down between the rafters and I pegged the house and all the things out on the ground
- 14:00 and from the markings on the thingamabobs I could put strings along and that was for digging the foundation and we did the digging and cutting down on the corners with a post hole digger. I got a supply,
- 14:30 I worked out from the Commonwealth Bank I got a little book that they had telling you what to do and all the specifications and quite a lot of useful tips on your designing and procedures. It was a great help.

You built the house yourselves?

Yes we did.

How long did that take?

Quite a long time. The trouble was I paid for all my bricks

- 15:00 from a brick place over in Burwood and the Blind Society had places there on the boundaries of this brick pit and I paid for all the bricks and you got one load a month and the truck used to come in and we'd unload them on what became the front lawn into stacks about six feet high.
- 15:30 And each time you got a load a month, you can imagine, you waited many months before you ever thought of going ahead with the brick laying. But I had a friend to come over with me on the boat to Canada and he was a bricklayer. When I wanted him to do all the brick laying he could only do it up to floor level and then he had to go to Tasmania with his father
- 16:00 to another job.

We won't go through the ins and outs of doing that but I want to know a bit more about your life at the time. The archive is very interested in getting back together after the war and particularly the experiences of the war brides. Obviously it was difficult for those women coming out. How did you see it was difficult for Sheila?

- 16:30 Well most things, as I said. It was a waiting game. We had a special fellow along there once. We were living in that caravan she told you about which turned out to be a naval canteen and then I had an American army tent. I went to Condell Park where there was a depot and they sold me some canvas scrap and I carried that in a cornsack on my back from
- 17:00 Condell Park on the railway and round home and carried it up the hill from Bexley North Station on my back and there was an oval where the Red Rooster has a business now, was a second hand timber yard. I got a pole that suited an American army tent and floorboards, four pieces in squares
- 17:30 that were meant for an American army tent. We used that to store things and for our son to sleep, in the tent. The trouble is it had been, I think, in New Guinea and a lot of the stitching had worn out and these seams along the edges, the stitching would be breaking off in the stress and strain of the wind.
- 18:00 But however one night we had a thunderstorm that was very violent. You know, the lightning was fierce and I threw my clothes off because if I got them wet I couldn't get them dry and went out in the rain in my birthday suit and grabbed a tarp we had there and put it
- 18:30 over the caravan and tied it down so we wouldn't get soaked out by it leaking through the seams in the roof. And so we could sleep.

Did all these hardships have any effect on your relationship? On your marriage? Did it make it stronger?

Well Sheila understood what I was doing, that I was trying my best to give us a house of our own.

- 19:00 You'd be surprised when we moved out of the garage into the house how many young couples who came to us and said, "Would you mind renting us your garage until we do such and such and such and such." No. That will be all right. It will cost you a pound a week.

And you did that?

Yes. And people used to say to me, "You rent that for a pound a week. It is

- 19:30 unbelievable." Most people said to me, "You should be charging five pounds a week. You are giving it away." I thought, "Well we had a lot of comfort from it so it was nice to help newlyweds to get on their

feet too."

Right. Well we are coming to the end of the interview. There are a couple of last questions that we ask everyone. When you think of the war today as you've been doing with us this afternoon

20:00 **what are the images that stand out in your mind. I mean what memories do you have that are strongest?**

Well I often feel like they did in World War I. The loss of all those young lives. And that is the price you paid for doing what you think is the right thing. I mean if people don't stand up and

20:30 fight against people like Hitler and even the Japanese you go under and your life will be misery. You've got to be prepared to make those sacrifices and make that effort or else. There's no option in other words and I think I was telling you about World War I, how the Herald

21:00 issued a big sheet and selling it for a penny and the number of people who would be buying it to read to see if any of their relatives or friends would be mentioned in the casualties. A penny. But at least they were spreading it in a practical way.

What does Anzac Day mean to you

21:30 **these days?**

It still does mean that we honour the courage and the determination of all those young men who perished on those beaches and up in those hills and when we look back we see that it was folly in the first place but it took a lot of courage for the fellows to do what they were asked to do.

22:00 I had a friend down the street help me even about buying my block of land. He was from World War I ANZAC [Australia and New Zealand Army Corps]. He was in the 18th Battalion and they were the people who fought the Battle of Lone Pine. I think he was even in the battle and what they did, they tunnelled from their trenches right up to Lone Pine

22:30 and at the appropriate moment they knocked the wall out and in with their bayonets and into the Turks. And I don't know whether he said he was chasing the Turk or someone else was chasing the Turk and he's singing out, "Allah, Allah" "Allah be buggered and ran him through with a bayonet. So that was Lone Pine. They don't tell you much about that.

23:00 They mention there was a battle but nothing else. But that's how it was fought.

So is Anzac Day all about the First World War or do you think about the Second World War and your part in that as well?

No. To me Anzac Day, I know it is honouring the courage and there was a ton of courage of the righting in that rugged country. It was rugged.

23:30 I think all the fighting even in France was horrific, the losses. I remember some years back but not that far back, I remember a General Elliot. There was a memorial to his passing. And

24:00 I think it was the 12th Battalion. Anyway his battalion was sent up to the front. They moved an English battalion out and his was sent in. They were sent over that night into a hail of machinegun fire and he lost practically all of his officers and he sat down and wept. The loss

24:30 of all of those good men so thrown away, he was heart broken.

We have run out of time. So the last question. This archive will be kept for fifty or a hundred years' time. Is there any last comments you would like to put on it for anyone who is watching in the future.

Well at least it

25:00 gives them a little bit of an idea of what's involved and of the prices paid. Eight hundred and fifty six perished, I think it was, perished in the Empire Air Training Scheme in Canada. Nine hundred and twenty perished here in the Australian air force in training and that alone plus all the losses in action elsewhere

25:30 is just unbelievable. I had a cousin who was sent to Canada in Edmonton. They were sent to do the navigation course and out of his whole group he was the only one left alive. The only one. They used to write to one another and he used to learn, you know,

26:00 we've lost somebody, yeah, and so forth. But he finished up the only one out of the whole of that group. It goes to show you what a penalty we pay. And he was telling me that they were doing, checking for German submarines around Madagascar and they were up one night ten thousand feet and they got caught in a down

26:30 draft, plonk. A thousand feet off the sea the plane came to a sudden stop and they were right. They started going up again but they got in a down draft and he said they and all their navigating papers and

everything else were up on the roof until suddenly, boom they clattered to the floor when the drop suddenly ceases. But

27:00 they are the hazards you face sometimes in flying. Like me just getting caught in a sheer wind.

Well thank you for talking to us today and Sheila too. So we will shake your hands and take the microphone off and take a picture and we are finished. That's the end of the tape.

INTERVIEW ENDS