Australians at War Film Archive

Ronald Biddell - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:42 **Thanks for giving us your time and sharing your story with the archives. I'm going to start today by asking if you could just give me a summary of your service?**

Pretty well just over twenty years, I joined in 1961 here in Adelaide, pilot

01:00 training at Point Cook in Melbourne and Pearce in Perth. Following that posted to Amberley to fly Canberras, again I don't know whether this is significant, I heard there was a bit of a delay, I had sat there for three months waiting for the conversion then went to Williamtown for three months and then back to Amberley, did my conversion, had about a year on a squadron and then posted to Malaya which would have been in the middle of '64. Just over the two

01:30 years in Malaya, came home, late '66, back to Amberley, and then went back to Vietnam via Butterworth in March of '67. Back from Vietnam October, '67, to Amberley again.

So sorry, just clarifying those dates, you went to Malaya in mid-'64?

Correct.

And you spent two years at Butterworth?

Correct.

And then you came back to

02:00 **Australia?**

Back to Australia again, back to the same squadron at Amberley in Queensland.

And you first flew to Vietnam when?'

I actually flew an aircraft navigator, I took an aircraft from Amberley to Butterworth, to the old squadron that I'd just come back from, and there was a month of preparation there before we took the whole squadron from Butterworth to Vietnam.

And that was ...?

That was about April, '67. And that was a six-month tour because all the crews on that first

02:30 tour were slotted for the F111 training in America, and all of us had to have done a tour in Vietnam before we went to America. So we only spent six months in Vietnam instead of the normal twelve months. So October '67, back to Amberley again and I then went to Williamtown briefly to do an F86 Sabre conversion, back to Amberley, and then I think March '68 went to America, until about November '68.

03:00 So after that was once again back to Amberley and I stayed there for probably about another 18 months, and I think it was about August of 1970 went to East Sale in Victoria to do a flying instructor's course, and posted from there to Point Cook in Melbourne. I did a two-year tour there, and following that posted to Central Flying School, as the flight commander

03:30 there. I was only there a very short time, I think about five months, and I was posted to New Zealand for an exchange tour with the New Zealand Air Force. And that was from early '73 until I think January, '75. Back to Central Flying School again, CFS, and I was there for then three years, I came back as a flight commander for a year, and then two years as chief flying instructor. Following that

04:00 I was posted to be the aide or PA [personal assistant] to Air Vice Marshall Compton who was the Chief of Air Force Technical Services in Canberra, that was a one-year tour, posting, and from there I went to RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] staff college at Canberra. One year again, full time course, and following that my final posting though it wasn't at that stage anticipated to be my final posting, but I was posted to be commanding officer of Central Flying School again at East Sale in Victoria,

04:30 and I retired from there.

And what year was that?

That was December ’81.

Fantastic. That’s a very long career. And what did you do when you retired?

Well, principally I went to look after my kids, I was a sole parent with three young boys, so we retired to the Gold Coast, I

05:00 had built a house up there, and for something to do, I played around with real estate for about six months, and then I got back into flying, I went back to a flying school and started flying the civilian system at Coolangatta. Did that for I think two or three years, and then an ex-air force friend of mine was a navigator, we bought into a carpet cleaning and pest control business, would you believe, which we ran for a couple of years, and then for about three years was involved

05:30 with fashion boutiques on the Gold Coast. After that I went to live in the Greek Islands for a couple of years, and came back to the Sunshine Coast this time, and did a little bit of casual flying and instructing at Maroochydore, I was renovating a house for about six years, so I got to know the local hardware store owner very well, and quite jokingly one day said, because I was in there nearly every day, and I said, “I know more about your hardware store than

06:00 you do, maybe you should give me a job.” And I was only joking. About a month later he said, “Are you serious? How would you like to come and work here and give me a day off?” So that’s what I did, and worked part time weekends in the hardware store, and got all my equipment at cost plus 10 per cent, which was very handy, and renovated a house. And then after that, that was a marriage split up and I bought a house and had to do something and accidentally – I was doing a bit of training, and I’d been training a

06:30 young guy to be an instructor, and he had to go down to Coolangatta from Maroochydore for his tests, so I always used to go with him, just for the support, so I went down there and accidentally ran into an ex-Air Force friend, we’d instructed together at Point Cook, and he said, “What are you doing here?” And “What am I doing here?” And he was actually the general manager for BA Systems, Tamworth and Parafield, which is the one I work for now, the big flying school, and he said, “How about coming down to work?” I said, “I looked at that business,

07:00 I knew you were advertising,” and I said, “No, no thanks.” And he said, “Look, you should really come down, I’ll provide an airfare for you, come down to Tamworth, have a look, and see what you think.” So I went down there and I nearly fell over, this place was – I was expecting to see old World War II hangars and stuff like that, but there was this fabulous complex, a bit like a brand new Air Force base, it had a mess area, it had two-storey accommodation blocks, about seven of them, all growing out, swimming

07:30 pools, tennis courts, a gymnasium and all that sort of stuff. “Oh, that’s not too bad.” And we talked about it for a while, and he said, “Well what do you think?” I said, “I don’t know,” I said, “When are you talking about me starting, if I decide to? The start of next year?” and this was about September I think, the end of September 2000. And he said, “A bit sooner than that.” And I said, “Well how soon?” He said, “How about Monday?”

08:00 This was the first day. I said, “God, give me at least two weeks to get organised.” So I’d arranged to go down there to work for him, and I hadn’t even thought about whether I wanted to, so I raced home, I had to do something to my house and all that sort of thing, so two weeks later I went back down and started working at Tamworth, so that’s how that happened. And I’ve been with BA ever since. About seven months there, and then came down here, the option was I had the choice of Adelaide or Tamworth, and being unattached, Tamworth’s not a red hot –

08:30 nice town, but not much going on there, so – and my sister, about two weeks before I moved down here, moved down from Sydney, right out of the blue, lived there for thirty-five years, and I’d been trying to get her to move to Queensland, and they said, “No, we’re too old, too old.” And then they actually arrived here two weeks before I did. And my brother still lives here and I had two sons in the air force here, and talked my third son into coming down from Queensland, and he didn’t like the weather so he went back to Queensland after about

09:00 nine months, and I’m gradually losing my kids, my eldest son was posted to Richmond, and now he’s in the Middle East for a stint up there, and my number two son, he’s getting commissioned at the end of this year, and he’s moving into the intelligence community in the air force, and of course he’s going to be posted come the start of the year, so all my three sons are elsewhere now, but anyway, I think it’s my home town so I’ll probably stay, you can’t chase them round the world. So that’s my

09:30 rough history, I suppose.

When were your sons born?

Seventy-one, ’72, and ’75. And I retired from the air force because it was getting a bit difficult, I was a wing commander and my next job was in – I had a posting to operational command in Penrith, and that would have been pretty well impossible for me to do, because my kids were still

10:00 quite young and they still needed to be taken to school and picked up and I would have been living in suburbia and having to probably leave home about seven in the morning and get home at six at night, and that sort of thing. And I couldn't get a full time housekeeper for love nor money, so it wasn't going to work. Plus you can't do both things, you can't bring up three kids and have a pretty serious career in the air force, and do both properly, I don't think, but there's just not enough time. So that's when I retired and went to Queensland.

10:30 **And the airline that you've been associated with in the last few years, the BA?**

It's not an airline, it's British – what used to be British Aerospace, it's now called BA Systems Flight Training Australia Pty Limited. They have a flying school in Tamworth, which is predominantly military training, they do the open air show training for the Australian Defence Force, and there's Parafield, which has two elements, there's what they call the college portion, which trains airline cadets from around the world,

11:00 Qantas, Cathay, Emirates, China Airlines, Australian Air, there's a couple of others. And we had a – well it's a bit like an annexe but it's virtually an autonomous flying school where people can just come off the street, privately funded people, and go through all their pilot training. But it's under the same umbrella of the BA, and they did have another one until recently in Spain as well, but that's been sold to a couple of private guys, a couple of

11:30 ex-Air Force guys that used to run the system at Parafield. So that's where I've been for now – it'll be four years in October that I've been with BA.

Well that's very interesting. Thanks for that. Now what I'd like to do is just take a step right back and ask you about where you born?

Born in Adelaide, 1st of December,

12:00 1939, scrub out the 1939 bit. Yes, grew up here and went to school at Norwood Infants School and Norwood Primary School and Norwood High School, went to work with the government which was the thing in those days, you could just walk out and say, "Excuse me, I want a job," you know, "I've done Leaving Honours," which was a bit unusual in those days, you know, most people just did Leaving and whatever. So yes, unemployment wasn't part of our vocabulary in those days. And my mother had always said, you know, "Go and work for the government, it's secure," and

12:30 all that sort of stuff, because that's what my brother did. So that's what I did. And I worked – I was doing a civil engineering degree part time, and working for the engineering water supply department.

Well before we talk about leaving school and getting a job, where was your family home?

In Norwood, right across from the front gate of Norwood Primary School, where I grew up until I was sixteen, I was in year twelve,

13:00 as a sixteen-year-old, and we moved to Windsor Gardens out this way, about midway through my final year at school. And then I lived there with my folks until I joined the air force.

So what did your father do for a living?

My Dad in the early years was – worked in a grocery store, the old-fashioned grocery stores, he then drove a truck for Woodruffs, cool drink

13:30 manufacturers, that was – my aunty was one of the original Woodruffs, and my Dad's brother was – had a produce round, one of the old-fashioned – you know, the old International closed-in van and he used to take produce around to all the little corner stores and things like that, and then luckily my Dad became the cashier accountant for Woodruffs for a few years, and then worked for a produce – farmers' produce or something,

14:00 in the East End Market, as a cashier there, and then spent a bit of time as cashier for Peters' Ice Cream Factory, which was right across the road from our house in Windsor Gardens. And that's where he retired from.

So did you get any Woodriffs bottles?

Well yes, you could go down – I mean that was one of my favourite things, go down and see my Dad, meet him after he'd finished work, and they used to have all the leakers, you know, the bottles, they used to have those old screw tops with the

14:30 red rubber ring around them, and every now and then one would not seal properly, so they'd have a big ice tray down at the factory with all these leakers in it, and you could always go down and have a drink, and all that sort of stuff. But yes, I guess my Dad brought home – I don't think he got it for nothing, but he probably got it at a good price. So I was always a Woodriff soft drink drinker. Healthy stuff. What used to fascinate me, they had a well in the middle of the factory, the place is still there, it's a big

15:00 storage facility now, down in Sydenham Road, just down at Kent Town, and they used to have a natural well, which used to fascinate me, it was just this hole in the ground in the middle of the factory, and you look down and pumping water out of this spring, in the middle of the factory, down in Norwood there.

That's all old school stuff.

And did he take you on any of his runs?

Oh yes, oh yes, Christmas holidays he used to take me on a big run up to Gawler, I mean here, anything you see

15:30 here didn't exist in those days. Once you got past North Adelaide there was nothing, there was the old abattoirs out on the main North Road, and Paraford Airfield, which in those days was Adelaide's primary airfield, and the pubs on the road out there, that's all there were, there were the pubs, I forget the names of them now, but – and we used to call into all the pubs and provide them with their soft drinks and then we'd go all the way to Gawler, which was a whole day out for me, and Gawler was just a little country town with a race track and a couple of pubs and some delis [delicatessens], and go out there and I'd

16:00 have a ham and tomato sandwich and every time we pulled into a pub I'd have raspberry and lemonade, which was the thing for kids in those days. And in the beautifully painted Woodriff's truck with the gas – which you probably wouldn't know about – gas producers on the side, this was just after the war, and fuel was a problem so cars and trucks had things called gas producers. A couple of cylinders about this high. I was sitting on a trailer on the back of the car or on the running board on the truck, and burn the coke and the gas was used to propel the vehicle.

16:30 You've never heard of those I suppose, have you? You have?

But only from talking to people who I've interviewed.

Oh right, OK. Yes, you're obviously far too young to know about that. Yes, so that was a big day out for me in those days. Anything else as far as – my Dad was – he was – his only hobby was the races and the trots, you know, when I was a little kid

17:00 Friday nights at the Wayville Showgrounds, used to go to the trots, and that was a big night out for me because I used to get a pastie, a Cornish pastie every night, which they were great, at the Showgrounds, and occasionally the races, but he was then pencilling for a bookmaker, he was brilliant with numbers, like – an amazing brain with numbers, as fast as the computer, it still fascinates me to this day, just how quick he was, his mental calculations, it was quite amazing. So that was his hobby basically, and

17:30 something that I never ever grew to be interested in, thank God, because I'm not a racing or gambling man. And apart from that my Mum was just the old-fashioned conservative housewife, mother, you know, cook, bottle washer and all that sort of stuff, but used to follow me everywhere to play baseball, that was my life, and my mother would – when I was at school I used to

18:00 play for the school team on Saturday mornings, and a league team in the afternoon, and then sometimes on Sundays play against Sacred Heart College, down at Brighton there, so I played three games of baseball on the weekend, my Mum would go everywhere, to get to a game of baseball she'd have to get two trams to get there and two trams to get home, and in the afternoon do the same thing, to get wherever I play, followed me everywhere for – while I played baseball, including interstate. She hadn't been interstate until I went in the State Selection School Boys and league and

18:30 that, and then she'd follow me round on the good old train and watch me play baseball around Australia.

And where did your interest in baseball come from?

Probably my brother, I have a brother and sister a lot older than I am, I was a bit of an afterthought, and he played a lot of sport, basketball, tennis, he was sort of A-grade standard in all those sports, and I guess that's where I started off as bat boy for the Adelaide University baseball team, and he was playing for the uni team. I was only eight, which is pretty young in

19:00 those days to play baseball, and I started playing when I was nine, and yes, that was it, that was my – I played cricket as well, and other things, a bit of squash, but baseball was what I basically lived for, and almost didn't join the air force because or it.

Was it difficult for you being so much younger than your brother and sister?

Not difficult, I mean it virtually made me an only child, my sister was

19:30 married when I was nine, I was an uncle at ten. My brother – we were a very, very close family, but I don't remember that much, my brother had his things to do, he played a lot of sport and he was going to uni and that sort of thing, and as I said, my sister was married when I was quite young. She probably had more to do with my upbringing than my mother did, but I don't remember. I can remember certain things because – little things like sending me to Sunday School dressed as a girl, because she wanted a

20:00 sister, and my standing on the corner and bawling, because my hair was all curled up or something, so – I don't actually remember that but she makes a point of telling me. But the other thing I used to remember, just waiting up on the corner on my trike for her to come home every Friday night from work, because she'd always bring me some books or whatever. So yes, I'm pretty close to my sister, my

favourite person in the world. So after that I guess it's –

20:30 I don't seem to think of doing much else except playing sport and going to school, and my Mum was there to provide anything, and my Dad was there and –

And who was the disciplinarian?

Probably my Mum. Dad was just there, you know, my Dad was my Dad and I love him dearly, but he really didn't interfere much or say much, but Mum was the strong hands with all of us.

And did

21:00 **you enjoy going to school?**

Yes and no, I went back – this is where my parents were very good, because I did the Leaving, my brother was an accountant and so therefore I should be an accountant and go and work for the government, and I left school after year eleven, after Leaving, and just went to the government and said, "Give me a job." They said, "OK, what do you want to do?" I said, "I want to be an accountant." "OK." And they put me in the Hospitals Department and I was sitting in there with a whole lot of

21:30 crusty old – I was going to say crusty old farts, but I won't say that, filling out invoices all day every day, and that's why, I was just sitting at a desk doing the same thing, and I thought, this is what – because I mean in those days you know nothing about what jobs are or anything like that, you don't get the information that you do nowadays about careers or whatever, and I thought, "I don't want to do this," besides the next year were the State Schoolboy Championships in Sydney, and I knew I'd get in the team and I was pretty sure I was going to get in the Australian side, so I

22:00 wanted to go back and play baseball. So I said, "I don't want to be an accountant, I want to be an engineer." To be an engineer I've got to go back and do Leaving Honours, because I've got to do maths and all that, so I think Mum and Dad knew full well what I wanted to do, so I went back to school, and I guess I didn't work very hard, but I sure as hell got in the baseball team, and got a job as a draftsman come trainee engineer with E&WS [Engineering and Water Supply]. So schoolwise –

22:30 **I was just wondering: what Norwood High School was like?**

Very good school, and it still probably is one of the best schools in the state. It was a great school, great teachers. Yes, I have fond memories of all the teachers we had, again I wasn't a great academic, I always did pretty well, but I was a crammer, swotter and stuff like that, and so I've never really thought seriously about whether I actually enjoyed school, because you go through life and people say they're the best years of your life, well OK, if that's what you reckon,

23:00 maybe they were. But I enjoyed the school, it was a great school, and yes, I guess for the way young people developed in schools those days, it probably prepared me for what I did as well as any school would have in those days, it's a little bit different I think now with the way they gear people to moving into industry or jobs, or the broader community. We were very much the classic subjects, you either went

23:30 commercial stream or general stream, and if your academics were high enough, in your first year, then they decided whether you were capable of doing the general stream or commercial, so commercial was things like arithmetic and bookkeeping and drawing and stuff like that, whereas I went to the general stream which is two maths, two sciences, two languages – three languages, because I did four years of Latin and three years of French, and English and maths one, maths two, physics and chem. So they were the classic things in those

24:00 days, and of course that then, if you did Latin and you did those subjects, you could do any university – qualify for any university course, unlike the way the system's structured today I suppose. Whether we were any better educated, that same kid's got a harder job now, he's got more to learn and stuff, but I don't know, have to look at the levels at which people go to at school. But Leaving Honours, the subjects there were absolutely identical to first-year university subjects, you could actually get exemptions from some of them if your

24:30 results are … Yes, I think I had a very good education for the day, and looking back on it, it wasn't a drama for me, I didn't hate it. But it was school. But the benefits were the sport.

Well tell us about your sport. You started playing baseball at a very young age, and all throughout high school?

All through primary school

25:00 and high school, yes. I started playing for a league team as well when I was about I think ten or eleven, and then played two games every Saturday for, well the rest of my days basically, while I was still at school. Yes, it was one of those things, I got in my first selective or representative team and I think I was ten, and there was the metropolitan baseball team that went down to Naracoorte and

25:30 Mt Gambier and played down there, and then in Intermediate I was in the state's schoolboy side, I happened to be the youngest out of all the states, I was fourteen I think, and I was also the biggest, whatever claim to fame that is, there you go. And then when I left – well through school, state in

Australia representation there, then I went to uni and got my letters at uni and the Australian inter-varsity selection, and then when I

26:00 was – I think it was 1960, I was selected in the state league side for the Claxton Shield Series in Sydney, and I went away as a catcher, I was only again pretty well one of the youngest ones in the team, and they had pretty experienced people in it, so I didn't expect to get too many games in that competition, but I went away and the first baseman broke his toe in the first game, and they put on first base, I was a catcher. So I – and I played every game

26:30 as first base, and got in the Australian side as a first base, when I was on my first ever representational side. And that haunted me for the rest of my career, because people thought I could play first base, but I couldn't. They kept saying, "Well you got on the Australian side," and I'd say, "I don't care, I'm a catcher." So, anyway… I played – well my baseball career then was sort of interrupted by the air force. I'd applied for the air force and at about the

27:00 same time they had a talent scout for the New York Yankees, watching one of the series and they picked three guys out to present to the New York Yankees for – to go to the summer training camp. They only wanted one, but they picked a guy from Western Australia, one from the Victorian team, and myself, they were looking for big guys that hit a ball a long way with a strong arm, blah, blah, blah. And the air force thing came up right out of the blue, because I really only joined the air force by accident, because I wanted to play baseball, and I joined the air force about two weeks before the answer came out on the New York Yankees

27:30 deal, which was just as well because you couldn't make money out of baseball in those days. So yes, I joined the air force, and pilot's course in Victoria for ten months, and I played part of a season with Victorian club, because they get to know you from the state comps. Then I went to Perth for five months on pilot's course, I played part of the season with a team in Perth, and then went to Queensland. By then I was bouncing around a bit,

28:00 and couldn't fit into a season anywhere, and I played for Queensland University, because I'd represented Adelaide University. How they ever figured that out or work it out I'll never know, but I got in the Queensland University team, Queensland selection, I played twice for Queensland, and then didn't play for four years and then went somewhere else and played a season, then didn't play for about five years, and so eventually I went to Point Cook to instruct and played for a Melbourne team and got in the Victorian side, and that was it – and I

28:30 quit after that, I was the oldest one in the Victorian team and I was the only non-Victorian and you know, we won the Claxton Shield and I got in the Australian side, so I thought, "That's it, time to go." So I quit, that was 1972. So that's my baseball career in a nutshell. But it's a fabulous game, the best.

And just touching on

29:00 **more of your teenage years, you were a teenager during the 1950s, so can you paint a picture of what it was like for you as a teenager during those years?**

Well, coming from I guess a fairly conservative family, I guess the closest I got to the activities in the area was listening to Beatles music I suppose, and you go through these eras where you come up with those bright pink

29:30 ties and pink socks and the – and of course bodgies and widgies, I was never one of those, I tried getting a crewcut once, and looked so horrific that it was the last time I ever did that. Bu t I guess I remained relatively conservative, I wasn't a party animal and I wasn't a drinker or whatever, so again, I would think my baseball – my teenage years as pretty well going to work, going to uni, and playing baseball. I had a girlfriend, my

30:00 parents were again so conservative that I couldn't have a girlfriend. I remember my first date in high school, was halfway through high school and I asked this girl to go to the movies, so we went to the movies and my parents went with me, and her parents went with her, we sat together at the movies, and then went our separate ways afterwards, so that was my first date, so it was pretty exciting stuff. And then I met a girl at – I guess I was madly in love

30:30 with, which I thought was the perfect girl for me, went out together for about three years, and at eighteen she died of leukaemia, and that changed my whole life basically. I dropped out of uni and dropped out of my job and went into private enterprise, went to work Dunlop Rubber Company and then some time later changed from civil engineering to mechanical engineering, and made an absolute beast of myself with my parents for at least a year,

31:00 which they lived with, I admire them to this day for that, how they didn't kick me out of the house I'll never know. But that sort of affected my – again it's timing and things that affect your life. Had that not happened I'd probably still have continued and become an engineer, and married the girl and been a nine to five man with three kids and a mortgage. And so that changed my whole life so dramatically that –

31:30 even to the point where when I went to work for Dunlop Rubber Company, the lady on the switchboard happened to have a son in the air force, and I was talking to her about that, and I said, "You know, I wouldn't mind being a pilot in the air force," and she said, "Well why don't you join up?" To my

knowledge I'd never thought about it before, and she started saying how good it was, her son was a radio technician. And I said, "Oh yeah, it'd be good fun being a pilot," I can

32:00 remember doing national service and watching these miserable sods flying over while I was stomping through the bush with a pack on my back, and these aeroplanes flying over. But anyway, I talked with her at length about that, and I said, "Oh, they'd never pick me, blah, blah, blah," and she kept on my tail until I said, "All right, I'll stick an application in," which I did. And they weren't calling for recruits at that stage – sorry, you were about to say?

Yes, well

32:30 **before you go on and talk about you signing up, you just mentioned that you did some national service?**

Yes, army national service, that was –

When did you do that?

1958, that was the three-month full time, three-year part time, business, and I got smart, I did the full time bit and then came straight out of the full time into a two-week bivouac, because I'd planned at that stage to get all my part time commitment completed in two years, I didn't want to drag it out, so I

33:00 worked my butt off and did extra camps and extra nights and all that sort of thing, and worked my three years off in two, just in time for them to cancel national service training, so I shot myself in the foot there, I could have got out of a year's worth of stuff that I'd crammed in, and got away with it. But that was – I became quite interested in the military, and in fact I applied for Duntroon after that, when Duntroon was the principle military college –

So while you were

33:30 **doing your national service, was this while you were going to university?**

Yes, still working for the engineering water supply department, that was '58 to – sorry, '58 and '59, I probably had just about finished it when I left the engineering water supply department and went to Dunlop Rubber Company, around about that time I'd changed over and finished my national

34:00 service training. But I applied to Duntroon and went through the whole system, up to the point where I guess, might have been the final interview or something, my brother got in my ear and said, "Have you thought about this, have you thought about that, and what about this"? And I said, "Oh, yes, maybe it's not a good idea." So I said, "OK, I won't go to Duntroon." But I found out probably only about five or six years ago, my sister told me, that an army major had come

34:30 out to my home to see me and say, "Why aren't you joining?" Because I was virtually in, and my Mum never ever told me. And so I was quite surprised to find out about that, some years after she died. But I'm glad I didn't, because you know, it would have been a good career but the air force was so much better, particularly as a pilot because I wouldn't have been in the air force for any other reason than to fly, so that was the process through the national service and –

Well where did you do your national service?

At Woodside, here,

35:00 the weekend or the fortnightly bivouacs and things were at El Alamein, up near Port Augusta. And the depot was down near the Southern Brewery, I was in the 27th Infantry Battalion, Scottish Regiment would you believe? All the guys at work that were balloted for it applied for exemption on the basis we were going to university, and only one of the guys got exemption, the rest of

35:30 us lost out and had to go and do it. But because we were doing engineering, when the part time stuff was finished they posted everybody – put everybody in Ramey [RAEME, Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers] down at Torrens Playground down there, the engineering regiment, but a friend of mine and myself were put in the infantry, which – how come we got the infantry, not only that it was the Scottish Regiment, so we had to wear kilts to parade every Monday night, walk through the middle of town in a kilt, with all the

36:00 other guys from all the other regiments, and I think we could have picked a fight any Monday night if we'd wanted to. Apart from the fact that my friend was only about five foot seven, and I'm six foot four, you can imagine what we looked like going through town in kilts. But that was good fun, yes. And a bit of a challenge.

But it was a little bit embarrassing?

Oh yes, can you imagine me in a kilt? So, anyway, all part of the

36:30 rich tapestry of life.

Did you learn anything from your national service?

Oh, probably, I had a fairly disciplined upbringing, so I didn't find the discipline in national service particularly difficult, it was difficult for some, and it was fairly rigid because a lot of our drill instructors

and so forth were Korean veterans, and they were very, very good, you know, in those days a corporal if he said “Jump,” it’s the old story, you know, sort of, “How high, corporal?” Because they

37:00 were almost God, but it’s different nowadays you know, I don’t think there’s the same level of – I think discipline and maybe respect, I shouldn’t be quoted here I suppose, but I think it was a little different and whether I was – because I was only eighteen, and a lot of the guys doing national service somehow had gone past that stage, and a lot of them were twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. It was good in

37:30 that out of the whole battalion they picked about a dozen guys, how many of us, twelve or sixteen or whatever to get additional training, so out of all the platoons they formed what they called “special platoons” and there were a dozen or sixteen of us in that, and we had a Duntroon graduate officer training us, and we did extra stuff like we learnt how to instruct and do, you know, a better standard of drill and more ground school stuff, and whatever. So

38:00 that was a bit of an advantage, and then for the graduation parade we held all the key positions on the parade. So yes, that was I guess in a way a confidence booster, extending people a bit beyond what they would normally achieve. Likewise for the air force for me, I think that’s probably the biggest thing I would have got out of the military, is it made me do things that – and achieve things that I never thought I could have, you know,

38:30 “Hell I can’t do that,” sort of thing. And I suppose after, again apart from national service, my years in the air force you eventually come out and say, “Well hell, I can do anything I want to.” And basically you can because it’s a broad development process, you develop a broad education process, although, I don’t know, the army’s probably a little different to the air force, the air force you’re not necessarily trained in land management skills, a lot of it is by

39:00 example, example, by developing a self discipline rather than a formal discipline, I think the formal discipline in the army is probably the bigger one of the two, whereas the air force, I think it’s much of a self discipline, and you know, integrity and standards, and that’s one of the things you get out of it. I saw a lot of guys in national service –

Just be mindful of your microphone there.

Oh, I’m sorry.

Sorry?

My – a lot of the guys that were in national

39:30 service with me, I actually knew. One of them went way back to when I was in primary school in, I don’t know, about year five or six or something, was one of the more disadvantaged kids that would always come to school with boots on, and black socks, whereas we always wore shoes and that, and the long gaberdine grey trousers, down below the knees and the boots up to here, and lunch, a vegemite sandwich wrapped up in newspaper, and that sort of thing,

40:00 and in the opportunity class because… a slow learner where there wasn’t much of the – I don’t know too much about it nowadays, but what we used to call “special opportunity” is probably “disadvantaged education” and that sort of thing. And he was in one of those classes, and really never ever got anywhere, probably left school as soon as he turned fifteen and then went out to be a jackeroo, and was in jail for a while, and all those sorts of things, and wound up, many years later here he is,

40:30 bingo, in the same platoon that I was. And being sort of organised and disciplined and actually doing it and enjoying it, and that probably would have been of some value to him. So, that’s the start – seeing different people and learning to live with different people and finding out what discipline and responsibility and all that sort of thing’s about. So I think discipline – national service was the greatest thing that most of us would ever have done, and I’m probably

41:00 like one of those voices in the wilderness saying we should be doing it again now, best thing we could ever do for the younger generation, particularly all these kids who are looking for a purpose, and no jobs, and no education, national service would be brilliant in my view.

OK, well our tape has just come to an end, so we’ll just change it.

Tape 2

00:32 **So Ron, after school you were attending university, which university did you go to?**

Adelaide Uni, initially, and then I changed from Bachelor of Engineering to a Bachelor of Technology, it was a new degree they brought in, which meant you could get a degree, but instead of taking, you know, eleven or twelve years part time, you probably only take about seven or eight. So that was the, what did they call it then, the South Australian Institute of Technology,

01:00 think, just on North Terrace there. Still went to the same lectures at the uni, and sat for the same exam,

in fact that's when I got booted out of the university baseball team, they said you're not going to university any more, so you can't play. So I went back to my old club at East Torrens. So that was – I did three years with E&WS, a big mistake going to work for the government actually, because I fell into the groove with all the other guys, if they didn't feel like going to lectures they didn't,

01:30 and if they didn't feel like sitting the exams they didn't, and I did that for a couple of years, and woke up to myself. But I was still doing maths and chemistry, and maths and chemistry, so I changed and did maths and engineering drawing design, and that was the year where I think I was doing reasonably well, and going to all the lectures and sitting for all the exams and whatever, and that's the year my girlfriend died, so it all fell apart. And then the Institute of Technology for a

02:00 little under two years with Dunlop Rubber Company, but I really wasn't overly interested in it, I was doing a degree, and even in those days I figure you really needed to get a degree to get anywhere, so I picked what I thought was the best of a bad bunch. I didn't want to be a doctor, I didn't want to be a dentist, I certainly didn't want to be a lawyer. Engineering, I was always interested in drawing and stuff like that, so I thought yep, and maths, I enjoyed maths, so that's what I went for.

02:30 Whether I would have, if I'd not joined the air force, completed it, who knows? It would have taken me a long time, whether I had the patience like all the other guys, I doubt it.

And did you have a car at any time during…?

I bought my first car when I was 19, a little Austin A40, contrary to my Dad's better judgement. He said, "Look, there's a block of land just down the road for two hundred and

03:00 fifty pound, buy that." Because I was riding pushbikes still, you know six miles to work each day, and playing baseball, I was riding five or six miles to play a game of baseball, ride home again, change my uniform, and then ride the same distance to play a game again in the afternoon, then the same thing on Sunday mornings for baseball practice, and take my girlfriend out, ride my bike to her place and we'd other hop on our bikes or a tram and go out on Saturday night. I need a car. "No," he said, "buy this block of land," and I felt like saying – well my

03:30 Dad had never owned a house because they'd never had the money, they'd always paid rent, we were living in a housing commission house, and he said, "Buy the land," and I thought to myself, "What does my Dad know, you know? I want this car and I've got enough cash to buy this car." And of course being a second hand car I just never stopped spending money on it, I think about a week after I bought it the gearbox fell apart, and things like that. And the block of land, which I could have bought for two hundred and fifty pound, twelve months later was worth twelve hundred and fifty pound, so you know – and my sons are

04:00 doing the same thing to me, you know, "What does Dad know?" and they're doing some ludicrous things with their money, but yes, what does Dad know, you know? So I had a car, and then kept after that upgrading, then I had to do it on hire purchase, which was a big mistake.

So what sort of things did you and your girlfriend do for entertainment?

Saturday nights was about the only thing, you know, it was the big night

04:30 out at the Regent Theatre in Rundle Street, you know, where you'd put your suit on, and she'd put her glad rags on, and that was the big night out, because we weren't nightclubby or whatever, you know, the café scene in those days. The rest of the time, go to the beach, the old traditional Sunday drive, yes, that's about it. Not a lot of activity during the week because we just didn't have the money to go and do things, I'd probably go down to her place and sit around on the lounge and talk to her, while her Mum and Dad sat out in the kitchen.

05:00 It was fairly traditional in those days. What else? She played basketball and was sporty so yes, beach activity, movies, sitting at home chatting, fairly conventional.

And did religion play any part in your growing up?

Yes and no, this lass was a Methodist and the family were

05:30 regular church goers. I initially was in the Baptist Church, and at some stage later changed to Methodist and did all the traditional things, you know, Sunday School on Sunday mornings and then some other function in the afternoon, and then church on Sunday nights, and then the Junior Order of the Knights on Monday nights, and all that sort of stuff, and it was about Intermediate, I was fourteen and coming for the first of the big exams in the Intermediate and my Mum said, "You've got to stop this church rubbish all the time, it's taking up too much

06:00 time, you've got to do some study towards the end of the year," so I quit going to church for about six weeks or so I think, up to the exams, and then I was too embarrassed to go back, hadn't been for so long, and I never went back again. So that was my religious education, yes, that was it. Haven't been there since. My brother's fairly well into it, he has the faith and is a

06:30 pretty, you know, just a Protestant denomination, so he's been fairly loyal to the church for many, many years, still is, all that sort of stuff, deacon of the church, been trying to convert me for years, buys me bibles every now and then, and gets annoyed with me when I challenge him about things and say, "Hey,

explain this. Do you really believe that?”

07:00 **And the event that changed your life, your girlfriend dying, did that come out of the blue?**

Yes it did, it was basically about five or six days. It was the Monday when she noticed she had some bruises on her arms and legs, couldn’t figure out where they came from and went to a doctor and he said, “Oh, you’re anaemic, we’ll do some tests.” On the Tuesday, he rang her mum and said, “It’s leukaemia,

07:30 and your daughter’s probably got between six months, maybe eighteen months to live,” put her in hospital that day, she didn’t know, nobody else knew except my parents, myself and her parents, put her into hospital, and I think if my memory is right they had some fairly radical treatment for it, some new French treatment that had come up, but I think it was one of those kill or cure things. I actually – they let her – she was

08:00 feeling not too bad by the weekend and at that stage I didn’t have a car, but I borrowed my mate’s car, he had a broken leg so he didn’t need his car, and I picked her up at the hospital, took her to a drive-in [outdoor movie theatre] and we had to come home halfway through the movie, because she was haemorrhaging, cerebral haemorrhage, and was so violently – or so much in pain she started to vomit, and I had to carry her inside, said to her parents, “Hey, we’d better go to the hospital.” “Oh

08:30 no, we’ll get the doctor here.” Eventually went to the hospital and nobody there to meet us, eventually into a ward, and then some Indian intern came wandering down the passageway, smoking a cigarette, not that he could have done anything anyway, but by about one o’clock in the morning, she was dead. Just like that. So yes, it was pretty sudden. Eighteen years of age,

09:00 never had a bad word to say about a soul, bright, happy, always smiling and bingo, gone like that. So yes, that was pretty devastating for the whole family as well, of course. Took me a while to come to grips with it, a year at least. But you know, what it did to my life at the end was quite dramatic, you know, what

09:30 my life has been is just so much better than it would have been I think, had I stayed. A lot better from the point of view I would have you know, had a special person, and you know, a family which is pretty important, so not trying to negate that side of it, but what I’m saying is, where my life went is so totally different to what it would have been had she not died, that’s basically it.

And what do you

10:00 **think you were really struggling with during that year after?**

Look all I can think is that I pulled into a shell, didn’t talk to my parents, would just disappear and go somewhere for a drive, or go to bed at 7.30 at night and just lock myself in the room. I

10:30 don’t know now really what I went through. I can recall playing certain records over and over and over again and just going to work and playing baseball and coming home and closing down. Whether that’s a particular way of handling something, I don’t know, whether I felt sorry for myself or I guess my view after that was that look, mourning is just feeling self pity, because the person’s gone and you’re only feeling sorry for

11:00 yourself, and you know, get on with it. But at that point I’ll say well I’d be happy if I never ever went to another funeral, people should just be taken away, you know? I’d like that to happen to me, and say to my kids, “Look, don’t worry about it, just throw it through the furnace and let them dispose of whatever’s left,” don’t want any grave, because you know, people – you go back to visit gravestones and you pay your respects and all that sort of thing. I go back to it, when I’m

11:30 sad, I go, I was very close to my Mum and Dad, and they’re buried here, but I don’t go there regularly, I would go once a year, and I miss them, as old as I am and you know, they had a good life. But the other bit, and I suppose I’ve been criticised when other people have lost their – I’ve said, “Look, you know, they were lucky,” they might have died quickly, had a good life, and

12:00 they’re at peace, you know? You’re going to miss them, but don’t say, “Why does it happen to me, why should I ….” And I must admit I felt that way, and I lost my first son as well, and I said, I remember, “Why me”? You know? “Why me”? But at the end of the day that’s really that self pity bit is something you’ve got to get over, I suppose. Maybe that’s being a bit callous. So

12:30 I can’t give you a very definitive description of you know, really how I felt or what I went through I suppose, but it was a lot of that, you know, “Me, what have I lost?” And I’d boil up, but as I said before, how my parents put up with me, I’ll never know, never know. We were a very close family, but I – I wouldn’t say I treated them like dirt, but I didn’t treat them very well, and I snapped and I argued

13:00 and you know, I was nasty, and it wasn’t necessary.

Well you were struggling with your own pain during that time. So eventually you were able to move on and pick yourself up, and you have told us how you had that conversation that propelled you to think about joining the air force.

Yes, I just

13:30 went through the motions and said, “OK, OK, I’ll stick it in,” so I put an application in and then promptly forgot all about it, and I don’t know, some weeks later I get a letter saying my initial application has been accepted, and to appear at such-and-such a place, probably down at Currie Street, for an aptitude test, a psych interview or something, and I thought, “OK, I’ll play the game, I’ll go along” so I went along and there were I think at that stage four other guys there for the aptitude test,

14:00 and I’d made up my mind I wasn’t going to make it then and there, because one of them was a flight lieutenant in the Citizen Air Force and he was doing an electronics degree and working for a weapons research establishment, and we did the aptitude test and he said, “It’s all really quite easy, isn’t it?” so OK, you know, I said – I went back to this lady and she said, “How’d you go?” And I said, “That’s the end of me, you should have seen this other guy.” I thought, “If that’s what they’re looking for, there’s no way in the world am I going to get into this thing.” I had the

14:30 interview with the psychologist and – should I say on camera, I don’t have a lot of time for psychs, but that’s another story. He asked me a whole lot of questions and didn’t look me in the face once, and that really pinged me off anyway, and whenever I gave an answer he just grunted, and I thought, “I’m not impressing this guy very much.” And went through all that business and then forgot about it again. And then I get another letter saying to come in for a medical, and something else, it might have been a medical and the

15:00 psych interview, after the aptitude test, and I said, “Oh, OK, it’s still going” so I went in and did that, and that was fine.

And where did you do these tests?

In Adelaide, I think down in Currie Street, the old recruiting centre, I think it’s still there. And forgot about it again, and the next minute I’ve got another letter saying to come in for a selection board. The other four guys were still there, there were still five of us out of – I think they had about three hundred applicants for that particular course that year, and only

15:30 five got through at that stage for Adelaide. And we were sitting outside all in our suits and ties and being an idiot I said, “Wouldn’t be funny if it’s like it’s in the movies, you know, you walk in and there’s a big leather armchair in the middle of the room, and a table with seven guys sitting behind it with hats on, ha, ha, ha,” and alphabetically I was first cab off the rank and I opened the door, bingo there it was, the leather armchair, and I nearly turned around and walked straight out again, I went, “Aagh” went and sat down and they all

16:00 took it in turns and I thought, “I’m making a hash out of this” you know? And I think one guy might have been on my side, I remember he was a navigator, a squadron leader navigator, and he said, “You’re doing uni maths two, aren’t you?” And he said, “That’s a fairly difficult subject, isn’t it?” And you know, “How are you going with it”? I said, “Yes, it’s pretty hard, but you know ….” We’re doing all right here boy. And then he got onto sport, and because I was captain of a league baseball team, I was fourteen and I was captain of this team, and one of the guys was forty odd, so

16:30 I’m thinking, this’ll be another feather in my cap, you know, it’s leadership and all that sort of stuff. And we went through that, and I thought this guy was really good, he was on my side, so that was the only highlight of the interview as far as I was concerned, and it took half an hour or so, and I walked out and thought, “Geez, I made a prize idiot out of myself in that lot” and I said to these four guys, I said, “So fellas, you won’t see me again, I blew that,” and went back to work and he said, “How’d you go?” And I said, “I just made a total idiot out of myself in that interview, you wouldn’t believe the

17:00 things I said, and whatever, that’s it.” And again, “OK, I’ll stay where I am, I’m happy, keep working.” And I was sitting at my desk one day and somebody dropped a telegram on my desk, I opened it up and it said, “You have been selected for pilot training, you have to be in Point Cook in two weeks’ time, subject to a final medical examination.” I said, “What? Two weeks?” And I raced down to the lady and I said, “What am I going to do? I’ve been accepted. What am I going to do?” She said,

17:30 “Join.” I said, “I don’t know whether I want to be pilot, I’ve never been in an aeroplane in my life” you know? And I went home to Mum and Dad and I said, “What am I going to do”? They said, “It’s your decision, boy.” So I thought, “Oh God.” And because I’d pulled out of Duntroon, I said, “Well, stuff it, this time I’m going to live dangerously, I’m going to make a decision. I will go, whether I want to, I am going to go.” So I did, and

18:00 two weeks later I drove up to the front gate of – and I was the only one left, the other four didn’t make it, which also amazed me, I’m thinking, “What’s happening here?” Drove up to the gates at Point Cook and said, “What am I doing here, why am I here?” Because I knew nothing about it, I really didn’t, but recruiting in those days, the guy at the recruiting centre, as far as I was concerned, the pilot’s course was ten months at Point Cook, and that was it, and I knew nothing else about it, really. But it was ten and a half months there and another five and a half months in

18:30 Pearce in Western Australia. So I drove through the gates and the first three months nothing but ground school, eight lecturers a day, and an exam, I think we did something like sixteen-odd different subjects in the first sixteen weeks with one, between one and three exams in each subject or whatever. So I’ve

gone over there, probably over-confident in one respect, so like I can play any sport reasonably well, and I can drive a car, therefore I should be able to fly an aeroplane. OK. But I'd better get stuck into the academics, because I'm a cram

19:00 swotter, and I was working two or three hours every night of the week, never done that in my life, and I was topping academics. Oh, hello? Probably just as well, because I couldn't fly, I think I was the second last one to go solo on the Winjeel and probably my academics, my doing so well there, was the reason they probably persevered with me, but anyway … So I got through that and went to Pearce and things reversed over there, I was one of the first to go solo and eventually came

19:30 out about, I don't know, second or third on the course. But that's really a pretty shaky way to join the air force.

And did your mum and dad give you any kind of advice when you left to go to Point Cook?

I know my Mum didn't want me to go, but she didn't say anything, they didn't say anything, they just, "Oh, OK, that's what you're doing." And my brother didn't offer any – because he was in the air force at the end of the war, he joined up for pilot training, but it was so late

20:00 that they actually stopped the pilot training and he transferred into the meteorology section and went up to New Guinea, he was in New Guinea in the later stage of the war. But – so he didn't say much and yes, basically it was, hey, they've accepted me, oh, OK, yeah, I'll go, dammit, you know, I'll make a decision for once in my life, and that's what I did. But when I first got there I mean, with no flying, it's just all classroom stuff, and thinking – the thing that motivated me then was

20:30 I don't want to fail, I don't want to go home to see my family and my friends, because I'd never failed anything in my life, and go home and say, "I've failed," and that's what kept me going until we started flying, and then yeah, this is pretty good, I wanted to do it because I wanted to get through that thing. I still didn't want to fail, because the mentality was in those days, as far as I was concerned every day of my pilot's course I thought was my last, because I was going to get scrubbed the next day, because people were dropping out all round you, traditionally I think it was about a 50

21:00 per cent scrub rate over the years over pilot's courses. On day one they said to us, on the first day one of the officers said, "Righto, at the end of this course, statistically only half of you will still be here," on the first day, so wow, you know? And a few other things, but you know, that was probably – probably one of the hardest things to handle,

21:30 that fear of failure and the fear of being suspended. And when – you'd talk to your course mates and they'd come back and they'd say, "Oh, I just did this and I did that," and you'd think, "I can't do that." And the next day that guy's scrubbed, you think, "Wow, he can do all that and he's scrubbed, and I can't do that and you know, I must be next," and that's the way it went. But you know, having said that, it was a great training – it was a very good system, training system,

22:00 the time I went through, the combination of aeroplanes and the standards and instructors and things, that couldn't have been better, as far as I'm concerned, it would be one of the best pilot training systems you could ever get your hands on.

And did you do any flying at Point Cook?

Yes, oh yes, after the first three months we flew from – started in the January, I joined up in August and in January we flew through till about the middle of the year, and then I went to Western Australia, I drove across the Nullarbor, before there was a road there.

Well I was just wondering if you can tell us about

22:30 **that first time that you went up, in a plane, at Point Cook?**

At Point Cook? Probably very confusing, all of a sudden you're operating three dimensions instead of two, and there's a lot of things happening and you know, instructors talking to you and you've got to watch where you're going and look for other aeroplanes and it's not like being in a car for your first time where you've got a designated track, you know? I think trying to absorb all the information and just

23:00 the orientation in the air, and that's an ongoing problem, is to get yourself spatially orientated and be able to all of a sudden start using your hands and your feet together, and using throttles, using controls, using rudders, changing radio frequencies, transmitting, listening to the instructor, listening to outside instructions, and all that sort of thing, it's a fair workload, you're multi-

23:30 tasking I suppose.

And what plane did you fly?

That was a Winjeel, that was an Australian designed and built aeroplane, and fabulous training, probably one of the best training aeroplanes ever built, it was first class. So I got to fly it, and I instructed on it, and I taught instructors how to instruct on it, so I have very fond feelings for the Winjeel: it's a big aeroplane for a training aeroplane, it's – you know the local aeroplanes people fly like Cessnas

24:00 and Piper Warriors and things, were less than half the weight of the Winjeel, it's a four and a half thousand pound aeroplane with a four hundred and fifty horsepower radial engine on it, so yes, it's a bit daunting for a lot of people.

And you mentioned that you were the last on your course to go solo?

Second last actually, saved me that one, second last. So I think if I hadn't gone solo on that day then I probably would have been history, you know?

And what was that feeling like?

24:30 Well I didn't know much about it, I got airborne and was concentrating on doing everything, and you had to do two circuits, and I did the touch and go and I was climbing away on the second one and I said, "Cripes, I'm by myself," you know? It took that long to sink in, so yes, but that's pretty good, I've achieved it. But it was I guess the – I can't look back on it and think, "Oh, it was absolutely ecstatic and jumping over the moon," I was probably as much relieved that I'd managed to get there, but the focus was on,

25:00 you know, doing everything and getting everything right, so that the euphoria of being first solo, I don't think was that huge for me, I'd done it and I had to concentrate a lot, so, yes.

And did you suffer any airsickness at all?

Not ever, no, I've been lucky. Other guys did but yes, that's good. I get seasick, if I can't see the horizon, if I'm down below,

25:30 no, I get seasick, but I can spin and aerobat until I'm blue in the face, and I'm really [not] sick, but put me in a boat – I'm OK if I can get up on deck and have a look around, I can handle that, or if I lie down. But no.

So you passed out at Point Cook after – was that a twelve month …?

No, no, Point Cook was about, I think ten and a half months, and the

26:00 graduation was at Pearce in Western Australia, went over there to fly the Vampire, it was a jet aeroplane which was pretty magical in those days, because airlines didn't have jet aeroplanes even, and here we are learning to fly on a jet, which was pretty special to me anyway. And that was – I think about five, five and a half months or so. But we were pretty lucky, because the Duke of Edinburgh was in Perth for the Empire Games that year, and they asked if he'd like to come out and present the wings to a whole bunch of graduating

26:30 pilots, and he came out and got photographed with the Duke of Edinburgh putting my wings on, so that was special. Pretty lucky there.

Well you mentioned that – were you the only one to go from Point Cook, or were you – did you travel over to Pearce by yourself?

Oh yes, I drove over, a lot of folks flew over, I drove my little Austin A50 across the Nullarbor, what an experience that was. No road, just – I think just outside of Whyalla was just a track where people had driven, there was no road

27:00 made or anything, and here am I in a little Austin A50 across the Nullarbor and it was about a thousand miles of dirt road, and I think it's bitumen again just outside Kalgoorlie or something like that. And that was an experience of a lifetime, I tell you, that was something different. I wouldn't do that again. Sold my car over there after I got there.

I was wondering if the Austin made it?

It made it, it made it, but yes, I thought no… Because there's so much

27:30 bulldust there it gets into everything and you never ever get it out, and it had taken a fair pounding on the way over. Don't know whether you want me to go into the details of that? But it was an interesting drive.

Well how did you find flying the Vampires after the Winjeels?

Very cramped. No, when I got there I hopped off and looked in the cockpit and looked at all the

28:00 instruments and said, "God, how can you fly that?" But you know, the system, the training system is such that you get all the instructions and the guidance and that once you get in, and you very quickly feel quite at home with the system. The only problem I had with the Vampire was my size, you know, I've had that problem with most of the aeroplanes I've flown. My first flight was – the instructor was nearly as tall as I was, but sort of bulkier than I was, and I had to

28:30 hang out the side of the cockpit like this, while he strapped himself in, and then he tried to do the same thing, because you know, strapped in an ejection seat for the first time, and fortunately the control column, the top of the control column used to move like that, not the whole control column left to right, if it was a conventional sort of thing I wouldn't have been able to fly it, because there wouldn't have

been enough room. So I had special dispensation to fly in those soft desert boots, instead of flying boots, because I couldn't use the rudder to keep the aircraft straight on the

29:00 runway, without applying brake, because I couldn't get my feet, couldn't bend my feet back far enough, I needed the flexibility of soft boots, so I had special dispensation to do that. I just had bruises on both elbows and both these bones back here, because to take off the undercarriage retraction handle was down here, and I had to push my elbow back between the ejection seat and the side of the aircraft, and get the toggle and pull it up, and then pull my arm out again, and the pressurisation wheel was in between the seats there, and once you

29:30 know, I had to push my arm in there and turn it on like that, and sit in this thing with my head up against the canopy. So that was the biggest problem. Apart from that it was, yes, an interesting little aeroplane to fly. Good fun.

And where did you do circuits at Pearce, where did you fly?

All the – well Pearce was the military air force base, I can't remember now how far out of Perth Airport it was, but it was right adjacent to the

30:00 controlled airspace for Perth, and there was a little satellite airfield called Gingin, but we did all our circuit training at Pearce, they had cross runways there, and the local training areas were just up to the north and west of Pearce from memory. And of course all the navigation exercises, we did a lot of nav training out around Western Australia and out to Cundanin and Kalgoorlie and Albany and places like that. So yes, all local area

30:30 stuff, occasionally you'd go across to Perth, but we didn't do very much of that, mostly it was just around Pearce, which is quite a big air force base.

And what other sort of aspects of flying were you learning during that particular time at Pearce?

Other aspects?

Well, you were learning to fly the Vampire, but what other kind of…?

Well, really the Winjeel and the Vampire,

31:00 you don't learn – you really shouldn't just learn to fly the Winjeel or learn to fly the Vampire, those two aeroplanes are your tools to learn how to fly. So you should be taught in a very generic sense about aviation in general, and you use those aeroplanes, sure you've got to learn how to fly the Winjeel or the Vampire, but once you know how to handle those, then it's all the basic airmanship things and principles of flying, which includes instrument flying, formation

31:30 flying, aerobatic flying, navigation, night flying, everything that pertains to getting a qualification, get a set of wings on your chest, and you know how to fly. But as I said, when I graduated, you know, you get a commission on your shoulder and a set of wings on your chest, and they say, "Don't think you know how to fly," I mean you've just got the basic tools, you've got the basic qualification, now you're going to go out there and you know, learn what it's all about, you get out on the operational squadron, because there's just so much to learn, and you can't do it all in a

32:00 couple of hundred hours on a pilot's course, it's just the basic grounding. The purpose of that is when you go to fly the operational aeroplane, but you're not going to be taught another pilot's course on that aeroplane, it's a conversion onto the aircraft type, you've go the basic principles of flying, and you'll apply those principles to that aeroplane. You've got to be very careful that you don't teach somebody to fly that aeroplane, and then move onto the next advanced planes and teach them how to fly that, and give them a set of wings and

32:30 say, "OK, now we're going to fly this aeroplane," and find you've got to actually teach them how to fly on that aeroplane, not how to fly that particular machine. So there is a subtle difference there in my view, yes. So you get as much broad grounding of principles and handling and all the facets of flying that you can on a pilot's course.

And did that include aircraft recognition?

A little bit, a little bit in the theory, I think we probably did that at Point Cook in the early stages, yes.

33:00 But not a huge part of it at that stage, I guess, because what would it be, peacetime environment at that stage? But then of course you get things like confrontation with Indonesia, and we were virtually on a wharf in Malaya, then yes, you get into the intelligence side of things and learn not only just aircraft recognition but all the performance parameters of those things and stuff like that.

33:30 **And your wing – you mentioned that the Duke of Edinburgh came to your wing ceremony. Did your – were your family present?**

Well Mum was, she naturally followed me, she'd never been in an aeroplane in her life, and absolutely terrified and was a Vickers Viscount in those days, and she flew from Adelaide to Perth, and yep, and met the Duke of Edinburgh and she was ready to die on the spot I think, because you know, in terms of

social skills

34:00 at that level, I mean they don't exist for the average working class family and stuff like that, so she was absolutely terrified and – and he spoke to her and you know, so I guess – and that was pretty exciting for her, at the end of the day when she was able to relax and go home and talk about it. But she came home with me and we drove to Kalgoorlie and put the car on the train, and picked it up at Port Pirie, because I wasn't going to cross the Nullarbor again, and she wasn't going to fly again, so that was good, to have her there, it was a

34:30 big thing. My Dad wouldn't go, because he wouldn't get in an aeroplane, not ever, never been in an aeroplane in his whole life.

And was there a ball or a dance that night?

What did we do? Can't even remember. How bad is that? I was just happy to graduate, we probably did. We had one at Point Cook when we finished there, we had a – well the cadets' mess was

35:00 separate from the officers' mess, so we actually had a ball or graduation in the officers' mess for that one. We probably – we had a dining out night, that was probably – I think that's probably what we did that night.

And what rank were you at the end of …?

Pilot officer, which is equivalent to second lieutenant in the army, you're probably not familiar with all the ranks in the

35:30 air force, are you, or at this stage you've probably done enough to get it all in order? Yes. So a pilot officer for, I think what it is, two and a half years, flying officer two and then flight lieutenant – so that's the automatic through to flight lieutenant.

And when did you find out about your posting?

That –

36:00 I'm not sure whether that was before – once we passed all the tests and everything, they might have told us then, I don't know whether we got it then or after we had the graduation parade, I'm not sure, can't remember, but it was all within about a day, I actually graduated on my birthday, which was another highlight. All I know is that I was surprised at the posting because it was the only place I wanted to go, and it was

36:30 flying Canberras, and the Canberra was a pretty special aeroplane in those days, and I'd applied for it, and they said – the instructor said, "You're wasting – " For your preference you get a form to fill in what you like to fly, and they said, "You're wasting your time, you don't get posted to Canberra straight off pilot's course, they just don't do it, you've got to go and do a tour on some other aeroplane before they put you on those aeroplanes." I said, "Well I don't want to fly any other ones, I want to fly that one," so my first preference was for Canberras, I think my second preference was Canberras, and my third preference was Canberras. And they

37:00 said, "You should put down something else, because you know, you might as well go for your next best choice, because if you say that they might put you somewhere you don't want to go." "Nope, I want to go to Canberras," and bingo, the first time, three of us off on a post to Canberras, so we thought we were absolute Christmas because we'd heard all these rumours you had to be an ace instrument pilot and all that sort of stuff, so of course as soon as we got this posting, we thought, "Well, we must be pretty good," but it was magic, it was

37:30 just exactly what I wanted, I just couldn't believe it, you know, for about seven years.

And why the focus on the Canberras?

The performance, the role, the look, no propellers, jet engine aeroplane, probably better performing than anything around at that time in terms of range and height and speed and all that sort of

38:00 stuff, it was a great aeroplane. And as I said, it was a very appealing aeroplane to look at, and that's why I wanted to fly it. And I was pleased I did, it was good.

And as a young sort of air force rookie, had you been through any – what I'm interested in exploring before we move on, it just whether there was any culture around the

38:30 **cadets, sort of being an air force cadet, and was there any kind of rite of passage or anything like that?**

Well yes, it differed because there was the air force academy, which is the upmarket – a bit like Duntroon in those days, and direct entry cadets, we were cadet air crew, and you were probably, you know, lower than the belly of a snake basically, but lower than an LAC [Leading Aircraftsman],

39:00 even though you were a cadet officer. Our course was the first to actually combine academy cadets with the direct entries, as a trial, and we – I guess there were about fifteen or more direct entries on our course, and we inherited six academy cadets. Now they'd already been through three years of the

system, and going to degree training as well, and then they came off in the final twelve months with us. We all got on pretty well, we expected the problem

39:30 because – and so did everybody – because of the status of the academy cadet versus the lowly direct entries, they'd had a culture structure like the junior year one cadets, who would polish the boots and clean the webbing of the senior cadets, and they had under officers and all that sort of thing, and I guess they had a lot of the sledging and bastardisation or whatever, but hey, you know, part of the deal, and I don't think anybody complained about it in those days.

40:00 Part of the development, development of a bit of character and a bit of strength, and stuff like that. We didn't have much as direct entry cadets, I can remember the – probably the first week we were there, the senior cadet course of the direct entries, I think at one stage they were up three courses passing through, staggered at any one time, and we had our own cadets mess, and they got us one – we were all up in the cadets' mess and they isolated

40:30 the new course and one at a time they'd drag us in for this three-man lift, they used to call it, and they had bets going on whether this particular guy, they picked the biggest guy out on their course, could lift three people. And we thought, "Oh come on, you've got to be kidding." And what they'd do, they'd sit the new cadet in the middle, and then like in a toboggan, and one behind with his arms around him, and all linked in like this, and this cadet had to put his legs around and hold the bloke in front, so

41:00 that this fellow that's lifting it up, you'd all be one bundle that he could, you know, could actually control. And meanwhile the guys are all sitting there with fists full of pound notes, ten pound notes, and a ten pound note was a lot of money then, and they've got all this money going round, and people are throwing bets in, and this bloke comes and gives a bit of a try and of course, you're sitting there and you're thinking, "They can't do this," you know? And so he says, "Righto, take the strain," and as soon as this

41:30 guy – you brace yourself, the guy that's going to lift you up just comes down and very politely undoes your belt, and your fly, pulls your pants down, and pours a jug of water in your lap. So I mean, that was the worst thing that happened to you. I mean you can't really complain about that. But one guy …

Well our tape has just finished, so we'll just

Tape 3

00:30 **Before we swapped tapes then, you were talking about the initiation or the bastardisation that you did come across, and you came off quite easy, but you started talking about someone who didn't.**

Yes, there was another young fellow, he was I suppose reasonably immature, he actually came on the course with me from Adelaide, I drove him across from Adelaide, but he'd been selected for a previous course but was too young, so they back-coursed him and he was actually on a course with me, and for some reason or

01:00 other he wasn't in the mess – the cadets' mess the night we had the initiation, and it was some two or three weeks later they caught up with him. And he wandered over to the mess, and they conned him into this thing, and I wasn't there at the time, and I was back at our quarters, and he came running back to the quarters in tears, and he thought everybody hated him, and everybody was picking on him, and

01:30 he was saying things like, "My mother's the only one that loves me, and I'm going." What had happened, he hadn't known of course that the rest of us had copped it, and they got him, and he reckons they'd poured a jug of beer over his one and only suit or pants or something or other, and he was absolutely devastated, and he was into his room and packing his bag, and he was going to go home to his mother because she was the only one that loved him. And I can remember grabbing him by the shirt and going, "Whack, whack, put that case back, you're going nowhere,

02:00 sit down, shut up and stop your bawling," or something like that, "They didn't pick on you, everybody's got it," so he stayed. Whether you can call that bastardisation, it's probably another form of it. But anyway, he graduated, so I don't know what would have happened if he'd packed his bags and headed off. I said, "Mate, it's only water," "No, they threw a jug of beer on me." "Go to the dry cleaners, it'll come out." "Everybody hates me."

For some people it might have been a bit

02:30 **daunting having to go through that, but …**

Oh, yes, I guess so, particularly a young guy, maybe with some sort of complex.

But compared to others, that was fairly harmless.

Yes.

So you mentioned that Canberras, you had a huge fascination with the Canberras, where did that start?

I was aware of the aeroplane because that was one of the aeroplanes that used to fly over us while we were slogging through the bush while I was doing national service,

03:00 and they used to come in, the occasional aircraft would come in in transit via Pearce and so forth, and I just used to look at these things and say, "That's it, that's for me." It's a bit like if you're looking at Jaguars, I've got a desire for a Jaguar, I haven't got one, but me and Jaguars should go together, I'm working on it.

Well you got posted to Amberley with the Canberra bombers; what was the base like?

A great place, yes, it's still –

03:30 or now it's probably about the biggest base in the air force, and they've done millions and millions of dollars worth of development since those days, but we were in the old World War II buildings and the officers' mess was World War II stuff which had heaps of character, two old timber style buildings with I suppose you'd call it a courtyard with a tree growing up the middle, and a fishpond around that, and it was just oldey worldly and everybody used to mix well in the mess,

04:00 you know, we had Army there as well, and the air traffic controllers and the equipment officers and everybody would mix very well in that old mess. We used to have possums that lived in the tree, and they'd come down every night to the bar and raid the supper tray, and you'd sit at the bar having a bit of toast and vegemite or something and they'd get all the bits and pieces, and next thing you see they bring their family down, and bring the babies down, then the next generation would get used to flogging the supper tray, so it

04:30 was a nice base, it's all very attractive, gum trees everywhere and lawns and whatever. Great climate, great aeroplane, so yes, it was good.

And what were the barracks like?

They were fairly new, if you look at them today I can't believe – you look at what airmen even live in nowadays, they're ten times better than what we had. But we had a two-storey complex, but the room was probably just big enough for a single bed, a little

05:00 desk, about a metre desk, and a chest of drawers and some built in robes, and that was it. They were quite small and no washbasin or anything in your room, it was just community showers and stuff.

And what was your daily routine on the base?

Probably, you know, a reasonably early get up, we'd have to be at a briefing at I think probably quarter to eight in the morning, and you'd

05:30 know what the program is from the day before, and you'd go in with your crew, plan the trip and put your flight plans in, might be a bombing mission down at Evans Head or a navigation exercise with simulated targets around Queensland or in New South Wales, that sort of thing, and the rest of the time you'd be involved with other duties, you don't just fly aeroplanes, you get secondary mess appointments and you get appointments on the squadron, you might be in charge of

06:00 the lockers, or somebody else in charge of keeping publications up to date, I can't remember the others, but you had other things to do. Because primarily, one of the things they said to us when we first joined the air force, again on about day one, they said, "Look, you guys are here to be officers who we're going to try and teach how to fly, don't think you're here to be pilots who we're going to try and turn into officers," and we said, "Couldn't care if I was an LAC, as long as I'm going to fly an aeroplane, that's fine." But it's true, the bulk of your development is the officers' side of it, so a lot of that comes into your day-to-

06:30 day activities, and watching what other people do. There's times when you'd sit down and have a game of darts or play a game of chess or something, but it's updating yourself all the time, keeping to the manuals, and whatever other duties you've had apart from flying.

So when did you first get to go up in a Canberra?

Not for quite some time, it was probably another six months, because when we first got there they also posted in the new OC [officer commander] of the base, and the OC of the wing and stuff like

07:00 that, and the size of the courses is limited, naturally, and they put those on the next conversion course so we boggies, 'bograts' as we used to be called, were stuck in base operations, you know, filing flight plans and doing all that sort of thing, and after about three months of that, they said, "Well this is not good enough." So once you come off pilot school and you don't fly, you regress, I mean you forget it all unless you sort of move and then keep going, at that early stage when you've only just got that qualification. So they sent us down to Williamtown

07:30 where they had the fighters, the Sabres, but they had Vampire squadron or flight, which was a transition flight. Now we'd flown Vampires on pilots' course, so it was logical for us then to go down and keep our hand in flying the Vampires at Williamtown, which we did for another three months, and did

some extra stuff as well, started to do weapons work and a few other things like that, and more instrument flying, and then eventually came back to the Canberras some six months after I graduated, I think it was, at least six months.

So when –

08:00 **just before we talk about flying the Canberra, when you were in Williamtown flying the Vampires, what sort – what kind of exercises were you doing?**

We'd go up and do instrument training, the Vampire flights, it's probably only about an hour's flight anyway, maybe navigation a little bit longer. And go do some air to ground gunnery or air to ground bombing and stuff like that, just additional training exercises. I mean that's the nature of being in the air force in peace time, what do you

08:30 do every day, unless you're flying a transport aircraft and carting stuff around and that's your role, if you're in the strike or fighter role, you can't go out and bomb people, you train for it, the bulk of your life is training and getting your skills up, and do joint exercises with other air forces and also with the army and the Navy, we might go out and fly around and be a target for navy gunners, or something like that, or go and do simulated

09:00 ground attack exercises up at Shoalwater Bay, wherever it might be, or Tin Can Bay or Singleton, places like that. So a lot of combined exercises with all the forces, because they've all got to be able to work well together, and understand how each operates, or what each one's particular requirements are. So there's all sorts of things like that.

And when you were doing your own target training, what would you use as a target?

Well it depended, if say flying Canberras, they

09:30 would have pyramid-type markers or cones in the bombing range which you'd be able to identify, you know, painted white or orange or something, and use that as a simulated target. With the fighters they probably had a couple of big poles with a mesh target marked in the middle of that, the air gunnery they'd have one aircraft towing a big banner out behind the aircraft which they used for live firing.

10:00 Other places, you might have an old tank or something in a weapons range, whatever they could get. Some places they'd have – like out on the roof, they might have an old wreck, which we'd use as a target.

And how were you with your weapons training?

Bombing wise I was pretty good, the limited exposure I had to fighter

10:30 stuff, you know, with air to ground gunnery, I'd come off the Canberra which was old technology, you know, conventional controls, and then in the Sabre it had power controls, you know, like three thousand pound of pressure on a ram which moves you – very very sensitive and hardly any pressure. And my problem was, every time I did air to ground gunnery, every time I tried to pull the trigger I moved the control column, kept shooting like that so I didn't hit it too many times with the first couple of efforts. It requires a lot of concentration not to move that control column, and I've got

11:00 great big fingers with a glove on, and trying to pull the trigger, that you don't put that little bit of pressure on the control column as well. It took a little while to get used to that. That's the biggest problem. Apart from that it's good fun.

So after Williamtown you went back to Amberley, and finally got to go off in a Canberra bomber? Can you tell me what it was like the first time you flew it?

Well it's a bit like flying a Vampire, the old-style English

11:30 design, because really the Canberra, for the performance standard that it had, it was still World War II technology, so instrument layout, it was pretty awful, you know, stuff shoved everywhere. And once you got used to the plane and that … of course the other thing is two engines, instead of one, so you've got lots of things to look at. But I admit when I flew it, it just seemed to be initially like a big Vampire. I thought it was – at that stage I thought it was relatively easy to fly. And many years

12:00 later when I went back in a testing role, and testing the instructors on the aeroplane and got back in a Canberra, I thought, "God, how did I ever fly this," you know? So it's just what you grew up and what you got used to, if you're brought up on old machines and old technology you adapt to it, if you get in the stuff that's got a glass cockpit and all flash stuff, well that's what you see and that's what you get used to, so I didn't find it a particularly onerous task or difficult, because I always enjoy myself too much, anyway.

Well you were

12:30 **saying when you were flying the Vampire, the difficulty of being in the cockpit. Did you have any size constraints with the Canberra?**

The Canberra? I did actually, I probably shouldn't have flown it, my thigh length was probably about an inch too long for the aeroplane, which meant that if I ever had to eject I probably would have been

kneecapped, but apart from that, not too bad except my head was always pretty well up in the canopy, to get the controls and not get

13:00 constrictions with the controls, the higher I sat, the less constriction I had, so that was probably the biggest problem I guess. And it's a bit interesting in turbulence, and you were rocking along at high speed in turbulence and your head's banging against the canopy, but you've got a helmet on anyway, so – the state of my brain, it wouldn't have done too much damage.

Did you have any aches and pains when you first started flying the Canberras?

Look, I'm

13:30 now a recipient of a Vet[eran]s' Affairs [pension] because of my neck. But what is more, I've got deterioration in the disc because of pulling a lot of G, my back is probably worse than my neck, but it's one of those things, I mean if I got out after three or four hours in the Canberra, I'd have to go oooh and straighten up. And sitting – I never ever had an ideal posture in the aeroplane, I always had a curved spine, and any sort of turbulence or G, then the strains on your spine and

14:00 stuff are probably not that good. And now I think I'm bearing the brunt of that, but it's not recognisable by Vets Affairs anyway because it's – they're things we would never complain about, you don't go to medical because you've got a stiff back, and say, "I've got a stiff back," and you wouldn't think like forty years time I'm going to have a problem, I mean that doesn't cross your mind. Or if we had a stiff neck, if you'd been pulling G and looking for a fighter behind you or whatever, and rick your neck and have a stiff neck for a week, you lived with

14:30 it, you didn't go to the doc and say, "I've got a stiff neck," and get grounded, because you put up with it, you worked fine. But that's the legacy I have now. So yeah, not a comfortable aeroplane to be sitting in for a long time, it didn't have an autopilot – the guy who made that decision ought to be tarred and feathered – but it had all the provisions for it. But we never ever had it in our aeroplanes. And the Canberra on a long trip at forty-eight thousand feet for four or five hours,

15:00 was a pain in the butt. Very uncomfortable, the seats – sitting with the original Mark I c-ejection seat or something, and a combination of that plus the air conditioning at high altitude, it just didn't work, cockpit temperatures where you'd get ice building up on the metal parts and stuff like that, and again the posture and stuff like that, yeah, not particularly comfortable.

15:30 **And did you do any air combat training in those early days in Amberley?**

No, no, not at Amberley. We did a bit in Malaya, because that was a hostile environment, and a Canberra, it didn't have any protection basically, we had no radar, you couldn't see, the cockpit was quite streamlined, this round cockpit, and even with your head right up, you could probably see back to about, I don't know, seven or eight o'clock, and maybe three or four

16:00 o'clock there. The fighters, traditionally they're coming behind, you can't see them, so you'd never see them coming, you wouldn't know until it was all over, basically. So we used to fly in pairs, about two kilometres apart thereabouts, so you see ten miles behind your partner, and likewise, we used to cover each other's six o'clock position, and then we had certain tactics if you got bounced by, you know, a couple of fighters or half a dozen fighters, then we would just manoeuvre, you didn't have much choice, all you

16:30 did was just pull the turn as tightly as you could, just keep going round in circles, as long as you could, pulling as much G, because they can't then pull lead on you, then actually shoot you down. They'd probably get you eventually, or our hope was that we could just stop them from getting their lead, until they ran out of fuel, then we'd go on. But we had no defensive arm of it either, but we used to do a little bit of that, we used to do it with the Royal Air Force as well as using our own aeroplanes to play the

17:00 part of a fighter, the Royal Air Force used to have Javelin squadrons up there which would bounce us occasionally, and we had our own Sabre squadrons, we had two squadrons of Sabres there that would do these combined exercises with us, and play around like that. But our main defence, the only way we would have survived in that confrontation was usually the fact that we flew probably below tree top level at very great speed, and then just popped up fifteen seconds from the target and tried to find it, hit the

17:30 target and then break and head off back into the weeds and go home again, because there wasn't anything much else you could do.

Well, how long were you at Amberley before – what did you know about the base in Butterworth and Malaya before you left?

Not a lot. I had I think – I think I probably had one visit up there on a training flight from Australia, up there and back. And the rest of it is a big learning curve when you get

18:00 there, basically. You know how to operate the aeroplane and its systems and how to bomb, but then in Butterworth the whole role changed, instead of being a high level bomber as we were training for in Australia, they reverted to low level stuff, so you've got an aeroplane that's designed to fly at forty eight thousand feet, and drop bombs from high altitude, where you've got an actual indicated air speed, or pressures on the controls at around about one hundred and eighty, two hundred knots, and all of a

sudden we're flying

18:30 down at low level. We're flying at four hundred and fifty knots, in an aeroplane, it's then really hard to manoeuvre, it's very heavy on the controls. And instead of having a computer controlled bomb aiming solution, it was a fixed sighthead, where you had to fly that much more accurately, and didn't have very much time to track the target, so it was quite a different concept of bombing, and quite a challenge actually.

So when did you –

19:00 **how long were you at Amberley before you were given notice that your squadron was moving to Butterworth?**

Oh no, it was a different squadron, we had three campus squadrons, 1 Squadron, 6 Squadron at Amberley, and 2 Squadron in Malaya, and I was with 6 Squadron. After the conversion I think I only had about eleven months at 6 Squadron at Amberley, but it was the middle of the year, and the CO [Commanding Officer] walked into the crew room one day and said, "Who wants to go to Butterworth?" Thinking they're

19:30 planning the turnover at the end of the year, and my nav didn't want to go then, but another nav said, "Yeah, I'll go," and we put our hands up and said, "This'll be good, next year, a couple of years in Butterworth," and we went on doing whatever we were doing, and half an hour later the commanding officer came back and the crewman said, "You, you, Butterworth, two weeks." "What?" So that's how quickly it happened, so we packed our bags, and off to Butterworth.

Did you have any pre-embarkation leave?

I don't think

20:00 I did, I think I just rang my Mum and Dad and said, "I'm going to Butterworth."

And did you have to get your affairs in order before you left?

You mean like wills and a whole lot of stuff like that? Probably not, we'd had the normal military next of kin advice and all those details, I don't think I had a will in those days, anyway. But it was fairly straightforward.

20:30 Look, things were quite different than they are today, quite different, the amount of effort and support, I mean I get letters all the time, where my sons were, both of them have been in the Middle East now, and you get all these support mechanisms and meetings at bases, and that didn't exist in those days, you just went, and you came home, and that was about it. The same for Vietnam, I remember when we went to Vietnam, I was – actually I'm getting ahead here, I probably shouldn't –

No, that's fine, yes, you can hold off –

21:00 **So what was – you knew you were going to Butterworth, but why? Why did you think they were looking for – ?**

Why did I want to go to Butterworth?

Well, that's a good question, why did you want to go to Butterworth?

Well it was an operational tour, and like any overseas tours in those days, they were things that people wanted to do, you're going to operate with different

21:30 air forces in a different country, and in an operational role, and that's what you're there for, that's what you do your training for, and you sit in Australia and just go out and practice, practice, practice every day, at some stage or other, you like to be able to go and apply those skills in a real operational role, and classed as an operational squadron, and in those days I guess two Sabre squadrons and the Canberra squadron were the only operational squadrons, real operational squadrons in the air force. I mean

22:00 any squadron's operational once you've got the capacity to do the role, it's a fully operational squadron, but in real terms that was during the whole period of confrontation that I was there, and so yes, that was interesting from that point of view, because there was a lot of high level, top secret intelligence that you became involved in, with targeting and so forth, and it was serious business and people were – there was – well call it 'pressure', I suppose, a lot more pressure to

22:30 be that much better and that much more professional, and then you had the capacity to develop in Australia, because a whole lot of different parameters you've got to operate to. Military training and flying, traditionally people are taught to fly to the aircraft limits and to their own limits, which doesn't happen, certainly doesn't happen in the civilian world, so if you're spending your whole time operating to the limits you know in your environment, and you go to a different environment, the limits change,

23:00 and that extends you a little bit further. Even simple things of operating in a different air force, and other forces, that adds another element to the whole thing, another dimension. Yes, it's interesting and you know, living in the tropics and all that duty free stuff. No, it was a fairly attractive proposition, and it was interesting, much more so than staying where we were.

And what did you know about the Indonesians and the Malayan

23:30 **conflict?**

Well, politically at that stage I was a pilot officer, and I suppose I didn't get too deeply involved in the total politics of it. I mean we knew what the Indonesians were thinking about Malaya and Singapore and stuff like that, we were there to protect Malaya, it's got nothing to do with Australia, we were part of the Malaysian Defence Force, we couldn't go and operate anywhere else, we couldn't support operations and go and operate

24:00 out of Malaya, and go and drop bombs in Vietnam or go into Thailand or anything like that, it was part of the defence set up for Malaysia, and of course Malaysia was under threat. So our role was to – yes, there's a possibility that Indonesia will attack Malaysia, or Malaya, we're there to protect them, and what do we do? And as a strike force, our method of defending Malaya would be to strike at

24:30 Indonesia and stop them from getting the aeroplanes across, and those sorts of things. The fighters, different, then they would protect Malaya on its own territory. So different roles for different aeroplanes. And we were, you know, I guess concerned with being very clear with our individual targets, because each crew was allocated a specific target, and you had to know that inside out, and there was also one major target which belonged to the whole squadron, the squadron would go en masse.

25:00 So I guess that was our focus and what was happening, and the differences between the British attitude and the Australian attitude as to what should be done in terms of you know, whether you're going to do pre-emptive strikes or you're going to wait till they hit you first, you know, you don't shoot until they shoot at you first, so all those sorts of things were probably being mulled around at the time, but I wouldn't have been more involved than that, not being a student of politics or strategic studies, just fly aeroplanes.

25:30 **So did you fly yourself over to Butterworth?**

No, no I flew over civil air – all the aeroplanes were there. I did when I went to Vietnam, I actually took an aeroplane from Amberley to Butterworth to join the squadron, that was an extra aeroplane they needed, but normally no, we'd go up there by boat or by civil air.

And what were your first impressions?

Oh, amazing, I

26:00 mean, I had been there but it's just the whole atmosphere of the tropics, and the base was just a very good base, a very good operational base, and excellent conditions and facilities, and really the whole thing was – just the whole ambience of Butterworth and Penang and the tropics and the aeroplane that I was flying was still a magic aeroplane to me, and the ones we had in

26:30 Malaya had more powerful engines as well, it was the later model of the aeroplane, so they performed even better, and I guess just the overall feeling of excitement of being in a top squadron in an operational role, and learning all about the country, flying around it, getting to know it, I mean I knew Malaya like the back of my hand, I could pretty well fly over the whole Malay Peninsula without a map, because we did it so much, you were so familiar with everything. And that,

27:00 that feels good when you can do that, when you've got the confidence that you rock into Singapore any time you like, or if you have to go up to Hong Kong you can just – and that was the beauty again of the Canberra, because from the time you started flying it, it was a single-pilot aeroplane, you and your navigator, and you can go anywhere in the world. So almost from the time I started my operational role, I was captain of an aeroplane which could go anywhere, and that was the beauty of the aeroplane and the role. So didn't have to go up

27:30 through the steps of being a co-pilot for x-number of years and working your way up, which is necessary of course when you get your multi-engine aeroplanes, multi-crewed aeroplanes, you get two pilots, then you've got to do your co-pilot, but with the Canberra, captain straight off, and that was another interesting facet of it, advantage, as far as I was concerned. You're your own boss, in conjunction with the navigator. Can't upset your navigator.

Who was your navigator?

The original one was a fellow called Brian Gribble, I think you

28:00 might have already spoken to Brian, I called him Gus, he doesn't go by the name Gus anymore. But Gus was originally on my pilot's course, and he missed out, so he went from there and did the navigator course, and his course graduated the same time as my pilot's course, both posted to Canberra so we teamed up as a crew and did our conversion together. But when I went to Butterworth, he wasn't interested in going at that stage, so that's when we split as a crew and I joined up with this other guy, but when he was injured, then Gus came

28:30 up and we flew again as a crew while my nav was recovering, for about four months.

What was the process for crewing up?

Well it's not that complicated, you've got – on a conversion course you've got three pilots and three navigators to do the course, and you probably all know one another. I knew one of the other navs as well, he was on a pilot's course before mine, but missed out and became a navigator, and

29:00 yes, it's just how it falls, because it's still a relatively small air force I suppose, and when people are on courses for training you tend to know a lot more people, not everybody on the courses but there's probably part of a system where whoever's doing it saying you know, "Yes, well we're going to crew you two, or we're going to crew you two," but you have an input, you say, "Well Gus, we were on the pilot's course together, how about we crew up?" "Yep, that's fine," and the hierarchy will probably say, "Yes, we're

29:30 happy with that too, we don't see any reason not to," they don't get heavily into the psychology in assessing characteristics or whatever. That happens later on when you get experienced crew, an inexperienced navigator or – and they'll team up specifically an experienced navigator with a brand new pilot, to help guide him through and develop him. But we were I suppose lucky in that we were both pilot officers together, learning the game together. Some other people had it differently.

And

30:00 **what – in those early stages, when you did crew up with Gus, what quality appealed to you about Gus, that made you want to have him as your navigator?**

Well there probably wouldn't be too many different qualities between any of them, because they've all been through a selection process to get in the air force to start with, they've been inducted into the air force, they've done their training and they

30:30 know what is required of them, so they're already conscientious, they're all going to have an acceptable personality I suppose, basically, you don't get too many oddballs getting through the selection process, or strange people, or dogmatic people, or even over-confident people, so the chances of not getting somebody you're going to get on with, are not that high. So it's a matter of what that

31:00 imponderable is, or between the two that you just sort of maybe click, or say yep, that's fine, that's – it's like I suppose a whole bunch of people saying, "We're going to play volleyball," and they're twenty-four people who you know, so "Yeah, I want you and you on the team," there's probably an element of that in it as much as anything. But you know, Gus was good at what he did, and he had a brain, I mean I'd known him from pilot's course, he was a very good – he developed into a

31:30 very good navigator, I mean we were both brand new in the game, so I had to develop as a pilot, he had to develop as a navigator, we did the initial part together and we got on all right, personality-wise we didn't have a problem, and we both enjoyed the flying and both probably carried on like we shouldn't have, irresponsibly, as young people do from time to time with aeroplanes, but if you learn from that, if you don't make too many mistakes and you

32:00 survive, well hopefully you'll learn, if you don't do that again.

Did you go to Butterworth a single man?

Yes. And I came home a single man.

So what were your first impressions of the base at Butterworth?

Brilliant, gorgeous mess, old, oldey worlde English style mess and nice gardens, all

32:30 grassed around the place, and frangipanis growing everywhere and everything was finished off, there weren't junky gutters and rubbish lying around, it was well maintained, and although the buildings were old they were good, well looked after, substantial, the runways, the facilities, the hangars and the crew conditions were all good, basic but good. We weren't stuck in huts and things like

33:00 that, all permanent structures. It was very pretty, it was right on the coast of Georgetown, and Penang Island in the background. Almost idyllic, I suppose.

You have painted a very beautifully picture of the frangipanis and the …

It was, and the airfield side of it was the same, the mess and the accommodation was on this side of the road and that side of the road was the mess, and they had – what did they call them? –

33:30 but all the local Malay guys that were in the – probably I imagine it was still the RAF regiment or whatever, which in other words the ground defence people, roughly equivalent to an Army-type person, so you'd have the Malay guys in their shorts and their white belts and their black spit polished boots and little white gators and stuff like that, that were looking after the gates and security. So there was a bit of olde worlde charm about it as well. And all the local,

34:00 all the indigenous aides and helpers and workers and – not slaves but – we had a Malay driver for a crew van, and we had a Malay guy working in the crew and looking after the kitchen and stuff like that, and we all had room boys that made our beds and polished our shoes and ironed our clothes, and I'd go out and iron my uniform and polish my shoes after he'd finished, because I had tramlines down my shorts, and he couldn't spit polish properly, so it didn't matter much. They were nice

34:30 people and yes, it was good.

Did you still pay him?

Oh, he's paid by the air force. But you know, give them things from time to time, and I'd pat him on the back and treat him nicely, they were nice guys, they were lovely people. Not necessarily all that strong with the English language, but yeah, they did their job and typical of a lot of people in the tropics, they move slowly, but that was good fun.

And you mentioned

35:00 **that when you were at Amberley, aside from – sorry, I've just got to get comfortable – aside from flying duties, there were also other responsibilities on the base. In Butterworth, did you have any additional responsibilities?**

Let me think, we had the normal appointments to the mess because they would pick officers from all the squadrons to have mess appointments, like the mess member who

35:30 is responsible for making sure people are happy about menus and stuff like, and then there'd be the social committee members and so forth, duties on the squadron, there'd be the programming officer and – I can't think of all the individual jobs now, can't remember what I had, probably nothing, too junior to do much of any significance.

And what kind of social activities were organised on the base?

A good mess life, just the fairly traditional winter ball, summer ball, or midyear ball and

36:00 end of year ball over there, because there's no winter or summer basically. Barbecues, buffet nights, apart from that, a lot of the social activity – because the married people lived in married quarters on the island, and so there was a lot of social interaction between people, just dining at other peoples' homes and stuff like that. For single people, no television in those days, so a lot of bar

36:30 activity, and heaps of movies on the island and heaps of brilliant restaurants, I ate like a king while I was over there, I've never eaten so well in my life. My mouth waters every time I think of it.

We were talking about mess life, and how you ate like a king while you were there.

Mess food was good, but the food on the island was brilliant. I would eat probably two or three times a week on the island, I would go to one of my

37:00 favourite two Chinese restaurants, one was the Mandarin, the other was – it usually rolls off the end of my tongue, but one was Cantonese cooking, one was Mandarin cooking, and I mean you could absolutely gorge yourself for about the equivalent of ten shillings or whatever it was, you know. Beautiful Chinese food. Probably on a Friday night I'd go across to the Penang Sports Club and have a nice New

37:30 Zealand fillet steak with baby fresh peas and beans and mushroom sauce and then ice cream and chocolate topping, and – oh, French fries with the steak of course, and fresh lime juice and lemonade and then on Sunday mornings I'd go across to Penang Swimming Club and play water polo and then sit by the pool, and have the little man bring me a fresh lime and lemonade, and then go and have a curry lunch. Curried prawns, or whatever,

38:00 so it was nice. I'll have to stop talking about that food; it was so good. But as well as I ate, I kept fit, I didn't get fat. That's the other thing, I used to play a hell of a lot of sport, we would have played every sport imaginable, I was opening bowler for the base cricket team, I played a good hour's squash four or five nights a week, in non-air conditioned squash courts,

38:30 and that's pretty solid in the tropics. As I mean it's A-grade standard squash and water polo Sunday mornings and a bit of badminton, I used to run up the beach each night and swim forty-odd lengths of the pool, so I was pretty fit, so I could eat what I liked, you know?

What was the social life like on the island?

Well that was about it, that's the sort of thing, I met an absolutely delightful lady there that I went out with for about a year, my last year there.

39:00 A lot of expats, a lot of Pommy, Dutch, Australian civilians there, in all the big commercial enterprises, you know, working in the big banks and stuff like that. They had a bit of a social scene, places like the Eastern Oriental Hotel was their gathering point, there was also a whole bunch of Australian school teachers over there and nurses. The Australian Air Force and the British Army had nurses at Butterworth, they closed down

39:30 the army base at Ipoh, the British Army base, and then the British Army nursing sisters came to Butterworth, and they were all based at Butterworth, in fact my nav married one of them, Gus married one of the British Army nursing sisters. So really, if you were lucky enough to get invited to some of the parties that they had, yeah, fine. People used to throw parties in some of the married quarters, if they

didn’t have The Beatles music, you didn’t want to go to the party. So yeah, that was about it. I mean I can remember

40:00 going to three movies in a day, you know, I’m a bit of a movie buff, and they’d have these movies running all day and all night, and I’d go to all of them, walk out of one and straight into another one, and that was about it. What else did I do? That’s about it.

So music was quite a bit thing when you were in Butterworth?

Absolutely, they had these lovely little air conditioned music stores, and you’d just go in there and stick the headphones on and play all those LPs [long playing vinyl discs] I showed you before, which were

40:30 Ray Conniff and Andre Costellanis [?] and all those – and the Supremes, and the Beatles, and the things that were all in vogue, and you could sit there for hours in these music shops and play those, and then go home with armful of LPs at the end of it. Another form of entertainment, I suppose.

Did you have a record player?

I bought one, a lot of – in those days, the big thing was to get up there and buy all these all-singing, all dancing, they used to have the reel-to-reel tapes, and all this beaut

41:00 stereophonic gear at dirt cheap prices, but I was sort of saving my money for other things, I had bought a little portable stereogram which even in those days were pretty nifty, you know? Double speakers and all these woofers and tweeters and whatever, but that was enough, it sounded all right to me, I didn’t want stuff stuck all over the room and speakers attached to the wall, and I was just going to take that home with me. Yes, that was good enough. But music was a big thing, people had bought all sorts of

41:30 super-duper gear, of the era.

Right, we’ve got to do a quick tape change.

OK.

Tape 4

00:33 **Just talking about life in Malaysia, how did you – in Malaya at that time, how did you cope with the heat?**

I didn’t have a problem, I thought it was great. It took me five minutes to adapt to it. I did notice when I arrived, I stepped out of the aircraft in Singapore, and it was like walking into a brick wall, the smell and the thickness of the air

01:00 was like, you could almost that wall over, I still remember that, that was quite amazing. Mind you, in those days Singapore had a real air about it, and it was fabulous, I mean Singapore had character in those days, you had all the monsoon rains and the old colonial style buildings, it was fabulous, I mean you’d walk along and there’d be dead dogs floating in the canal, but it was all part of the character, which they’ve eliminated now, but apart from that, the first impact, life was great, I

01:30 love the tropics, swimming every day of the week, and if you wanted to go swimming after a party at two o’clock in the morning, it’s like hopping into a warm bath, which was great, you know, and all the sport, the – sure, it was uncomfortable at night, because we had to – in those days we had to go into the mess after six o’clock at night, you’d have a long sleeved white shirt and a tie on, every night of the year, and by the time – you’d

02:00 have a shower, and while you’re drying yourself off, it’d start to run off you again, and you’d just sort of keep towelling yourself off, until you put your clothes on. We didn’t have air-conditioned quarters, our rooms just had an overhead fan, which was great, just leave that on the lowest setting, let it waffle around all night, under a mosquito net, and that was fine. When you think about playing squash in the tropics, you know, the first five minutes of the game then it’s just dripping off

02:30 everywhere, the same thing for cricket, as a fast bowler in a cricket team, you’ve only got to get through half the over and you’re pretty well saturated. But that was not significant to me, I thought it was great, you could do anything you want any time of the day or night, all year round.

And did the heat affect your flying ability, or the planes in any way?

Yes it did, you had to be a bit careful because on the ground,

03:00 when you hopped in the cockpit, they had little canopies they put over the – over your own canopy, and they had these big air conditioning machines with a pipe about this round, and a little door down the side where you hopped in, they’d just crank it up and shove it through the door, and blow this cold air into the cockpit, until you got the – when you’re ready to start the engines, and of course when you started the engines, they had these cartridges, like a big shotgun cartridge about so long and about that round, and when you fired that it was just – all this gas was exhausted

03:30 into the starter system, and wound the engine up to about seventeen hundred RPM [revolutions per minute] and then that was the minimum speed at which it could light up itself and start running. So – it's a long way round getting to it, but while you were in that start cycle, they had to close the door, because all the fumes from the starter cartridge would come into the cockpit, pretty awful. So once that door's closed and the engines are running, the air conditioning doesn't work on the ground, doesn't work anyway, but the cockpit temperature was invariably up round one thirty, one forty degrees

04:00 Fahrenheit. So you know, you'd just sit there with the sweat dripping off your elbows, and your whole flying suit would be just as though you'd just jumped into a swimming pool. And you had to be pretty careful, if you were on the ground for any length of time, one guy nearly passed out after take off one day, from just heat exhaustion. I didn't notice it, not too many other guys that I'm aware of it noticed it, you sort of got used to it, but yes, you had to be conscious of it.

And the heat that's generated on the ground,

04:30 **dissipates, well, when you're up in the air, so how do you cope with that transition in the temperature?**

Look, it's pretty gradual anyway, and the air conditioning system – bear in mind most of the time we were operating at low level over there, so the cockpit temperature's going to be pretty hot all the time anyway. The air conditioning didn't work until the engine RPM [revolutions per minute] got up round about six and a half thousand revs or whatever, and you didn't get to that stage until you were, you know,

05:00 on the take off roll, the power climb. But it was a Brit aeroplane, it wasn't designed to fly in the tropics, it was designed to fly in Europe, but it didn't work for there because navigators when they first had them, had to sit when they were flying high level, sit in the back seat with a blanket around them, it just didn't work, you know? And at low level it just stayed hot basically, the whole time you were there. But not a hundred and thirty, I mean the air conditioner was enough probably to drop it back to a hundred, or something, I don't know, we

05:30 never ever measured it. But you'd sweat most of the time, and yes, get out of the aeroplane and your flying suit would always be pretty well saturated.

And what training did you undergo at Butterworth, if any?

None really, well when I say 'training', it was just continuing with our operational role and just – but each flight was a training flight, but you're on the aeroplane, you know how to do all the things, you have your instrument ratings, and you know

06:00 how to use the weapon system, so you just go and apply it in a different environment, and use slightly different tactics. And once you've adapted to the tactics, then that was it. There was no more dual instruction or anything like that, you just went up there and you were briefed and told what to do, and you went and did it.

Well what were your operations?

Well predominantly navigating around Malaya at low level

06:30 at high speed, and using simulated targets, we might – we had a number of bridges and things around the Malay Peninsula which we would use as targets, and we'd have a different route each day, a different target, and we'd go round and operate a pair – see that takes a lot of coordination as well, for two aeroplanes, because sometimes you can't even see the other aeroplane in your battle formation, and the camouflage was so good, that you both had to do – you couldn't just follow the leader, you had to do your own thing as well, but you were still following the

07:00 leader. And every now and then he might just pop up above the skyline and you'd see him, yep, he's still there sort of thing. And then as you got to the turning points you had to do a particularly type of crossover turn, because you can't both turn around the corner like this, because you'll wind up like that. So you'd wait, this aircraft – if the leader was out here and he was turning left, he'd wait, he'd turn left, and you'd keep going, and then you'd turn left, so that as you both rolled out you'd be abeam one another again, but you'd just swapped sides, so the battle turns and –

07:30 so you know, that takes a little bit of judgement and coordination and just keeping on top of everything, keeping your proficiency at a high level, because that's all flying is in the military, in a strike aeroplane, is just going out and doing what you do, as you roll every day, to train and keep your skills up. I mean you get to a certain level, and say, "Yep, I can do all that perfectly now," so we don't train any more, but you can't do that, you find that it's like anything,

08:00 people get very concerned when you get budgetary restraints and all of a sudden your flying hours, an individual might fly three hundred hours a year, and all of a sudden he's only flying a hundred and fifty, so your proficiency's not going to be there with that sort of level. And they do that with the fighter world nowadays, the more experienced pilots, and the more capable ones, get less flying than the blokes that are learning. But they find that it's very hard to maintain your skill levels

08:30 if you don't do that regular training and get the appropriate number of hours. A lot of its replaced with simulators nowadays, but we didn't have simulators, and so you budget the number of hours – the

squadron gets an allocation of hours for the year, to do the job, because a lot of it is spent during exercises, you don't just go and operate as an individual squadron every day, and do your own thing, there'd be combined exercises with – or you might get a visit from the Royal Navy, they used to come in from time to time, the Ark Royal would

09:00 come in and berth offshore, and the Royal Navy aircraft would come and land at Butterworth, or we'd do an exercise with the Royal Air Force over Singapore, and then the next thing would be an exercise with everybody, and you'd get a squadron of Royal Air Force Javelins, you'd get a squadron or two of Australian Sabres, you'd get a Kiwi squadron of Canberras, a Pommy squadron of Canberras, and an Australian squadron of Canberras, all in this coordinated exercise, simulating war over Singapore Island, which is twenty miles long and eight miles wide, aeroplanes going everywhere, you can't just hop in and go and do that, unless you've been

09:30 continually practising all these things, and the coordination, with other air forces and systems. So yes, it's just a full time training occupation.

And what were these training operations preparing you for?

For your role, whatever the squadron role is, as a strike squadron, to go and bomb a target in Indonesia, or when we went to Vietnam we were

10:00 already prepared, I mean, we'd been doing all that training, so we just flew to Vietnam and did the job, the day after we got there, we were doing the job, in a war environment. So whatever your role is, if your role is to drop bombs, then that's what your training is, to practice dropping bombs and navigating accurately and finding targets in difficult situations, and then delivering the weapon load onto that target. We didn't have – in those days we didn't have all the magic technology we've got nowadays, with laser-guided bombs and radars

10:30 and infrared sourcing and all those sorts of things, didn't have it, it was all visual stuff.

And were you performing strikes on Indonesia?

No we weren't, no we weren't, we were training for it, but it didn't eventuate, because we didn't go to war with them. But if they'd decided they wanted to go to war, well yep, then we would have been striking targets in Indonesia.

There was conflict at the Borneo-Malaya border.

Oh yes, I mean there were incursions into

11:00 Malaya while we were there, we had landings of insurgents on Penang Island on the coast, just near Butterworth, they had landings further down the Malay Peninsula, there were other things that happened there that people didn't know about, paratroopers and whatever, so yes, it was – you know, you had to watch what you were doing. I've been out at night off the coast of Malaya at a thousand feet over the water, and saw a light go underneath me and it wasn't one of ours and it wasn't one of the Brits, and nobody

11:30 knows what it was. So it was probably an Indonesian aircraft, we don't know, you can't identify them, as I said, we didn't have radar. And the ground base radars weren't quite as sophisticated as they are today either, so there we more chance of aeroplanes being able to get in unheralded than perhaps there is today.

And the incursions that were at Butterworth, what can you recall of them?

All I know, I mean I didn't know much about

12:00 them at the time, but there were a couple of boatloads of insurgents that landed on the coast, and I guess the Malay Defence Forces and the army found them.

Did the security on the base change? Did you see a visual change in the way the base was operating?

Not really, because a base is a very difficult thing, it's such a huge area, and it's one of the hardest things in the world to defend, so all you can have is ground guys, defence guards, patrolling the perimeter, you

12:30 can't put a big fence up all the way around it and electrify it all or whatever. So no, nothing was particularly noticeable. There were – the Australian Army had anti-aircraft batteries installed around the base as well, and I guess they probably just upgraded security with whatever, dog patrols or normal, you know, military patrols around the place.

Were you ever encouraged to carry arms?

We had to, we had to during

13:00 confrontation, we did in Vietnam as well. So yes, it was just a personal, just a personal side arm, just a 9 mil[limetre] pistol and some bullets, which basically if you get caught, shoot yourself with. Yes, we were all trained in weapon work, apart from pistols, we were all trained to use rifles. But the likelihood of us

ever using those – and we had to be competent at it, but the likelihood of using a rifle was probably pretty remote, whereas a pistol, different

13:30 story, you know? You had to have some sort of defensive armament if you ever got shot down or jumped out.

And were you involved in any reconnaissance?

Yes, because one of the roles of the Canberra, it had a reconnaissance camera, or several of them, we had a big – I think it was called a K52 or something, was a big vertical camera, you could take pinpoint shots or you could take

14:00 stereo pairs and mosaics and stuff like that, so we could do that, we could do mapping photography, or we could do intelligence shots as well. But we weren't involved, the Royal Air Force did all of that stuff in Indonesia, all reconnaissance photography and stuff, we didn't. We had the capacity to do some of it, they had purpose-built aeroplanes for reconnaissance, some of which were Canberras, but they had an entirely different set up, they had bigger or more

14:30 powerful engines, they could fly higher than we could, and they had all the reconnaissance equipment in the thing, and they probably had electronic counter measure systems as well, which we didn't have. That's how they gathered the intelligence, the photographic or the aerial intelligence was done by the Royal Air Force.

And it was in your time at Butterworth that you were actually hit, by an eagle?

15:00 Yes.

Could you talk me through what happened there?

Well again, we were on one of our low level training exercises, and we were coming up towards a target so the navigator was down in the prone position in the nose where the bomb site is, and we were I think around about three hundred and fifty knots, we were number two of a pair of aeroplanes, another – one of the more senior guys was leading the formation, and while we were flying along – you've got to keep your eyes open for birds all the time anyway, because there's a hell of a lot of them there,

15:30 and I saw what I thought were two birds, two big sizeable birds, well in the distance, just above the horizon, and I kept my eyes on them, and one just disappeared, because you never see a bird, once it goes below the horizon at that sort of distance, you just don't see it again. So I kept my eyes on the one that stayed about the skyline, just to watch where he went, and I watched him as – because there's no point in manoeuvring, because you don't know which way they're going to go, you just keep going as long as you can. And then I watched him and he

16:00 disappeared over that way, he whistled off past the aeroplane over that side, and just as I looked back, the other one was right in front of us. And I didn't even have time to call out to the nav, all I did was just duck like that, but it didn't hit the canopy, it went down, and went straight through the nose cone, and of course that's where the nav was, and it hit him in the arm, broke his arm in two places and cut his arm open, and knocked the bombsite off its mounts and knocked his oxy mask and damaged that, and –

16:30 well the nose cone was two layers of Perspex, probably about that thick, it went right through all that, and the remnants of the bird wound up between my feet, in the rudder pedals. So there was Perspex pieces everywhere, and the nav was in pretty bad shape. I didn't know how badly, because his face was just covered in blood and so was half the rest of him, and he staggered out from the nose in the walkway next, because there's a little narrow walkway which goes

17:00 from the nose back to his seat, behind the pilot, and he sits underneath the fuselage. And I sort of really didn't know what was wrong with him, and he started to pass out, and I said, "Don't pass out, because I won't know whether you're dead or alive," there's no auto pilot so you can't do anything, and he's down there and I'm strapped in this ejection seat still trying to fly it, so I just full power on both engines and pulled back and sort of trimmed it to keep going

17:30 uphill and tried to look after him, because you can't get out of your seat, and I can remember pulling a handkerchief out of my pocket, because I could see all this blood coming out of his arm, and trying to tie a tourniquet around so he didn't bleed to death before we got home, and the hankie wound up down around his wrist somewhere, so that was pretty useless. And it couldn't be worse, because we were right at the furthest point of our nav, right back in the middle of the Peninsula, and we had to turn around and go all the way back to Butterworth, and at reduced speed as well, because you know, a big hole in the

18:00 nose and a lot of noise. And yes, got him back, but he stayed conscious but I still didn't know how badly injured he was, because he could barely talk, well he didn't have a headset on anyway, his mask was all broken, and I just got out, we had an ambulance waiting for us when we got back and – that's what that photograph you saw, you can see the hankie around his wrist, it's still there – and carted off to hospital, and he was out for about four months, because he got an infection while it was healing, he was probably pretty lucky he

18:30 didn't lose his arm, it was pretty serious for a while. His arm was never a hundred per cent again, but at least it was his left arm, he was right-handed.

And how difficult was it for him to breathe without his oxygen mask?

We were at low level, so it didn't matter. It's normal ambient pressure inside the cockpit, he was breathing normally.

Without any auto pilot, how were you able to

19:00 **coordinate the aircraft and dealing with him?**

Well you've got electric trims, which trim the elevator and ailerons and rudder, so you know, you can trim it out fairly accurately and it will just hold, you put it in the attitude and trim it out, and just leave the power and just let it go, and it's pretty stable and it'll just keep going. Once the speed stabilises, it stabilises at a certain speed, you can just trim it to that attitude and it'll just keep going at that speed, while I tried to do something, but I mean it was

19:30 hopeless to try and do much for him, there's a first aid kit in the aeroplane but you've got to be able to get out and get it anyway, and he wasn't capable of doing anything, so yes, he was in a reasonable amount of pain as well, and he was absolutely ashen faced, and that's what first – when he came out, he was just so white, apart from the blood, and just ready to fall apart. And it was pretty hard to tell, it was hard to imagine also that a bird coming through could kill somebody, but you don't know, it

20:00 depends on just what damage had been done to his face, because I couldn't see anything because of the blood.

Did you have any shock or pain?

No not really, I mean saw it coming and I saw it hit, and my main – well my only concern was my nav, because he'd been damaged. I'd had it once before with another nav, we hit a seagull down at Evans Head, but he wasn't badly hurt, it punched through the nose and broke his mask, he had a couple of

20:30 cuts up here, and there's also a photograph of that in the scrapbook out there, and that was about all, but this one was reasonably serious.

I can understand an eagle making a fair amount of damage, but a seagull doesn't …

Look, it's amazing, just to digress a little bit, when were doing the F111 training in America, they showed us – the F111 when you eject, the whole module with these detonating cords, is cut out of the aeroplane, it's got a big

21:00 rocket motor underneath, and you still sit in the cockpit and the whole cockpit goes with you, so they had this module on a rocket sled, on some rails, and they were going to rocket this thing about four hundred knots along this track through a gantry, which had a couple of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s hanging on strings, at about windscreen height, and they had two dummies in the seats, and they rocketed this thing along, so that the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s hit the windscreen, and these WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, not frozen WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, they went

21:30 straight through the windscreen, took the heads off the dummies, and punched holes in the bulkhead behind, at four hundred knots. And we went – and this was a low level aeroplane, and in fact that was what killed a friend of mine in a 111, they hit a couple of pelicans I think it was, down at the bombing range, it just went straight through the windscreen and took them out. Subsequent to that they've put would you believe it, gold foil in the windscreen and strengthened it, so they don't go

22:00 through any more.

I mean when you saw the bird on the horizon, you said you just kept going, but if they're going to be that much of a hassle to you, how can you avoid the situation?

Well you can't, I mean, when I say I saw them at a distance on the horizon, by the time you pick up a bird and you're doing three hundred and knots, they're not very far away, so really you know, initially you just look and say, "Yep, there he is," and you just that way. That's

22:30 OK, you know, you've gone past, and I always watch. And once they're about over here somewhere, you're pretty safe, because they're not going to be able to get back in front of you quickly enough, but still, you make sure he's out of the way, you're not going to hit him, then just looked back in time to see the other one right in front. Because there's no point in trying to go anywhere when they're out there, because you don't know where they're going to go, because the angular displacement when you're this far away, they don't have to go very far to still be in front of you, sort of thing. Anyway, that's –

23:00 we used to operate very close to the trees, you know, treetop level, and we very rarely had bird strikes at that level, because unless they were airborne, you'd be past before they'd hear you basically. So you'd be past them, and then they'd be freaked and they'd get airborne. But it's when you start getting up a little bit higher, about a hundred, a hundred and fifty feet, I reckon that they will hear you a little earlier, and the chances are that they're going to be airborne by about the time you get there, that was

23:30 my theory. And we had a commanding officer that insisted that we start flying a bit higher, and that's when we started getting more bird strikes.

I'm trying to envision the inside of the Canberra, to see the difficulty of the situation that you were coming across. How much space do you have around you, and how big is that walkway that's next to you?

Well, it's not really – if you imagine sitting in an ejection seat and the side of the ejection seat is here, and

24:00 your instrument panel is pretty well underneath here, because the canopy is very close to you, the start of the canopy is quite close, and between there and this other instrument panel there, there's a little hole about that wide and about that high, that goes down to the nose, and between – say the edge of the ejection seat is here, the side of the cockpit is about there, there's a little seat that used to fold down about that wide, it would just fold down between the side of the cockpit and the ejection seat.

24:30 So that's the amount of space the guy had to get from there back behind you, there's a bulkhead about here, near the ejection seat, and then he'd go round the ejection seat behind there. So it's not a lot of room. They couldn't – the nav could lean on your ejection seat, stand and sort of stoop, he couldn't stand upright in that thing, he could bend down and just lean, when we were doing low level navigation they would stand next to you and do the navigation, or they could pop the jump seat down and just sit on that.

Quite cosy.

25:00 Yes, fairly tight, yes, not a lot of room to move.

So when you were doing low level flying at the treetop level, what were the hazards that you had to really be aware of?

Well keep your eyes open for birds, but you had to pay attention to how you were flying the aeroplane because you – you had to be even more careful over water, because the water in Malaya most of the time was glassy, and murky,

25:30 and judging your height above a surface like that is very, very difficult. There was a New Zealand guy that actually flew into the water in a Kiwi Canberra, just flying low level over the water and hit the water, and the biggest piece of the aeroplane they found I think was a wheel, he was probably doing three hundred and fifty knots at the time. You have to be pretty careful from that point of view. Likewise if you're flying around the jungle, and dead trees are pretty hard to see, that sort of thing,

26:00 and judge rising ground. And one of the other hazards was if you were say flying into the sun at low level, and wanted to fly over a hill like this, you could see the ridge line there while you're looking through the haze, it was always a bit hazy, but if there's another ridge line down here, you wouldn't see it, you could hit that little ridge line before you started to pull up over that one, so you really had to be careful with what you were doing, and keep your head out of the cockpit all the time.

Were there many operational accidents?

26:30 Not in our squadron, no. We didn't have any. There were plenty of accidents over there, in my time probably more aircraft – the only time I'd actually seen aircraft incidents in the whole of my air force career I think, was at Butterworth, they used to happen on a regular basis. But there was a guy over there doing tropical trials, a Royal Air Force guy doing tropical trials in a Strikemaster, and found some Army guys out in the bush somewhere and in the process of flying around these guys

27:00 flew into the ground and killed himself. But most of the others were problems with aeroplanes, Javelins coming back with one stuck up and having to do a landing in a delta wing aeroplane on one wheel, which is always interesting. Saw an American Navy A3 Intruder I think they were called, it was a big twin-engine aeroplane, operating off carriers, and came in to land one day and they need brake chutes to slow down,

27:30 and he touched down beautifully and he deployed his brake chute and this little parachute bundle just fell out on the runway, didn't open, it went boomp, he just slowly sailed off the other end of the runway and started to sink in the mud. Little things like that happened on a regular basis.

Did he get out?

Oh yes, he just didn't – he just wasn't able to pull up on the length of the runway, he ran off the far end, because his brake chute just dropped out in a bundle on the runway. So lots of things like that happened, every time the Royal

28:00 Navy arrived at Butterworth, the airfield was closed, because they'd prang an aircraft on the airfield somewhere, blown a tyre or run off the side, or had a brake failure. One day they had three aeroplanes, a Scimitar came in and I think he must have landed with his brakes on, blew his tyre and ran off to the left, and then a little later a Scimitar came in – a Sea Vixen came in and blew a tyre and ran off the runway that side, and then a Gannet came in and lost all its brakes and went off the other end, so there's

28:30 three Royal Navy aircraft on the airfield, waiting to be recovered. So it was, you know, the spice of life.

What was the reaction when you heard the Navy were coming in?

Oh, we said, “Close the airfield, get the rescue trucks out,” and we’d drag them out of the mud again, you know? We did have one incident where one of our guys actually lost a brake on one side and ran off the runway to one side, but I mean

29:00 that’s not too dramatic except that being in the tropics and all the rain you get all the time, the ground’s quite soft, even though it’s all grassed, and within an hour the poor old Canberra had sunk down, the wings were resting on the ground, the undercarriage had sunk into the soft soil on the side of the runway. We would have had one of the highest qualified engineers in the world at that stage, in terms of getting aeroplanes out of the mud and rescuing them. It was quite regular.

What

29:30 **was the relationship like with the navy pilots?**

Oh yes, that was fine, I mean they’d come in and they’d have a good time, they didn’t do too much in terms of exercises, I don’t recall doing any exercises with the Royal Navy, they just used to come in into port, call and come and bring the aeroplanes ashore, and we’d have a chat with them and talk about a few things, and then they’d head off again. There was quite a variety of stuff going on there, because the Royal Air Force had a series

30:00 of transport aeroplanes there, they had four-engine Hastings, they had the Pigs, called the Vickers Varsity, and Valetta, two horrible little twin engine cargo aeroplanes, and they had a squadron of Javelins, we used to get Vulcan bombers there, and the Victa [Aircrusier] tankers. The Brits used to come through with training aeroplanes, because they used to do a lot of pilot training with the Malaysian Air Force at Attol Star [?] which is up north, and they’d fly through occasionally in their little

30:30 training aeroplanes. They had Bristol freighters and the Belfast, all used to come in. So it was just a huge variety of aeroplanes coming into the place all the time, it was a pretty busy airfield. Plus Singapore’s just down the road where there four airfields on Singapore Island, Tengah, which was the big fighter and strike base, and Changi which was a transport base, and Temple Hill and Soleda [?] and – or Soleda which – I’m trying to think of the name,

31:00 Byonlapasna [?], whatever, but the international airport was there was well. So there were four military airfields there, one of them was only quite small, but Singapore was a pretty busy little island for aeroplanes and airfields, when you consider it’s only twenty miles long, it’s pretty interesting going into there. One of the few places we had to be checked out on, before we were allowed to go out by ourselves, because it’s so tight and congested and you know, procedures and frequency changes, so we’d just go down as a

31:30 passenger and just watch what the bloke did, and next time we’d go by ourselves.

And you had the army guys on the base at this time as well?

Yes we did, yes.

And what was the relationship like with them?

It was fine, yes, we didn’t have a lot to do with them as such, I’m just trying to think whether they had quarters anywhere else, I can’t even remember now. But there were a lot of Army quarters and things around the

32:00 base, whether they actually lived on the base or lived on Penang Island, I can’t remember, I can’t remember. Whenever they were in the mess they were just like any other part of our defence force, I mean it doesn’t matter if was Army, Air Force or anything else, you know, we’d probably take the mickey out on one another in typical fashion as we always do, call them “grunts” or something. No, we always got on pretty well with the army. Used to do – not only in Malaya but back in Australia, a lot of co-op exercises

32:30 with the army. A couple of stories I could tell you which I won’t, but anyway…

With the operations with the army – were you doing any operations with the army in Malaya, in Butterworth?

No, no, they just had their anti-aircraft batteries around the perimeter. We used to exercise, and the Sabres

33:00 used to go up and do simulated strikes on the airfield so they could track them and train themselves, and we did one ourselves one day with the Canberras, and just did a surprise strike from the other side, and popped up below the palm trees, and went through and frightened the living daylights out of everybody, and didn’t get shot. No, that was about it, we’d just exercise the gunners for them by just providing flights at various times to simulate ground attack from the Indons.

33:30 **And I’m just – as you said just frightening the hell out of everyone when you were doing these exercises, that exercise that you described over Singapore where you had squadrons from New Zealand and British – when did that –was that a day operation or a night operation?**

Yes, all day operations, all low level over Singapore Island. Yes, interesting. Which was realistic, nobody

was playing games, nobody was playing games in those days, because that's what would happen, so

34:00 if you've got to work your system to be efficient against it and see if it – well see if it's going to work, then you've got to have exercises as realistically as you can and within, well, and keep them as safe as you can of course, but I mean it gets pretty busy when you've got a whole bunch of aeroplanes chasing one another and trying to strike targets and all over this little island, and low level at the same time. I mean it's not gung-ho just all go in there and do this. I mean it's planned and

34:30 everything is documented, you'll have an operational order written out about it, and it's all coordinated, it's all controlled by FEAR, Far East Air Force. We were controlled basically by the Royal Air Force from Singapore, "Headquarters Far East Air Force," it was called. We were an autonomous squadron, but under the auspice, the overall control, of Far East Air Force.

And how did the briefing – what was the process for the

35:00 **briefing for these operations? Can you walk me through how you'd find out about the operation and through to the execution?**

Well many of the operations would be planned and developed by the air staff in wherever the headquarters would be, and once they'd planned the exercise and coordinated it and had all the input from the various organisations, they'd write out an operational order, an exercise plan or whatever, and then they would be disseminated to the squadrons and the wing headquarters, whatever and then you'd

35:30 sit down in the major briefing room and they would brief on the targets, they'd brief on simulated enemy intelligence, and say, "Look, we're the strike force, the defence force against us today is 74 Squadron," which is Royal Air Force Javelin squadron or whatever it might have been, and you'd have all your safety perimeters laid down, they brief you on your fuel requirements, the sort of weapons you would be simulating, and the targets, your

36:00 time on target and coordinate it with the fighters if they're going to go in first, and do a ground attack before you actually destroy the aeroplanes on the ground, before you go and bomb the targets. It's a huge business to plan it and execute it, and then of course it's very comprehensively debriefed afterwards, so you learn from it, they make sure you fix up any gaps that people haven't seen or identified in the first place.

And the formations that you fly in, how much practice or

36:30 **training would you have with those formations before you go into a big operation like that?**

Well that's an application of the formations we use all the time, predominantly operated in pairs of our squadron all the time, occasionally it would be a whole squadron in formation, but that's the stuff that goes right back to your pilot training, when you learn to fly formation on pilot's course, it's a skill that – well a basic skill that you have to achieve, and then you just apply those skills

37:00 to whatever role and whatever aeroplane you're flying. You don't have to be taught formation flying in the Canberra, all you say is, well look, you know how to fly formation, and what we use as reference points to stay in position, this is what we use in this aeroplane, and if you fly formation in a jet aeroplane you know how to handle the engines, and the anticipation required versus flying formation in a piston engine aeroplane, because you get both of those things on your pilot training, so you should be able to hop into the aeroplane and do it, without being taught how to do it again.

37:30 So when you come to an exercise with nothing new, you're not having to come up with new skills or anything, to fly that, you apply, and that's what your whole training has been geared towards, your operational role and how you're going to use this aeroplane, and how are we going to attack target, so when it comes to the exercise, yep, that's what our target is, this is where our time is, and this is where the – and we're going to do that the way we always do it, so nothing changes, you know, you can't just go in and think up a different tactic while you're halfway

38:00 through an exercise or whatever. So that's where you get back to that training we were talking about before. You've got to do that all the time, so you've got the skill levels that you can do the thing efficiently, and in the real case come home with your butt in one piece and in the practice case still come home with your butt in one piece, because you haven't made a mistake and run into somebody, or done something stupid.

Well how high was the risk involved in those operations?

I wouldn't class the risk as high, I mean anything

38:30 you do like that, in a military operation, even when you talk about The Roulettes, like aerobatic flying, as being dangerous, formation aerobatics as dangerous, yes it's dangerous if something goes wrong with the aeroplane. It shouldn't be dangerous because of what you're doing, because you have your parameters, you have your training, you have the guidelines, you have the skills, to do that job. So yes, if something happens to an aeroplane, then it can become dangerous,

39:00 but you then also prepare for that event, and you have an escape clause, if this goes wrong, this is what

you're going to do, this is the bug out procedure or whatever. So I never ever liked the word 'dangerous' related to any of these, but by normal civilian standards or whatever, yes, yes, it is different and it is more dangerous. So we don't get danger money for it, maybe we should.

Did you have any superstitions before you

39:30 **went out?**

Nope. I think, going back to confidence now, I think, if you're confident in what you can do then I think superstition doesn't really play a part, in some peoples' lives it's always going to be a part of everything they do. I mean I didn't carry a rabbit's foot around with me or anything, or wear the socks each day so that, you know –

40:00 my safe socks or whatever, good luck socks. There are changes I think, in levels of confidence in different people, a bit like the old Walt Disney cartoon, you know, Mr Wheel and Mr Walk, if you can remember that, you know, Mr Walk was a mild sort of a man with his bowler hat, and when he gets behind the wheel of a car all of a sudden the fangs come out and the hair goes like this and he becomes Mr Wheel, and you know, and he's maniac. But there are people who become over-confident when they get in an

40:30 aeroplane, and that's dangerous, because you've got to be conscious of your own limits, and the aeroplane's limits as I've discussed before. So you've got to watch pretty carefully what peoples' reactions are, what they're like in an aeroplane, and again it all comes back to the level of training that you have, and the discipline that's instilled in people with your training system, and that you're really sure that this self-discipline is going to be there, and the integrity and that discipline,

41:00 is going to carry through with you when you get into the aeroplane. And discipline breaks down for a lot of people, when you're young and you go and you decide you're going beat up your girlfriend's house, well you know, every man and his dog's been tempted or has done it over the years, and a lot of people have come unstuck doing it. If you learn what your limitations are, and you maintain your discipline, well the chances are you're not going to do anything dangerous in your life.

We'll

41:30 **pause there, and do another tape change.**

Tape 5

00:33 **So Ron, how did your time in Butterworth wind up?**

How did it wind up? Just a normal – it's a normal two-year posting, and I had gone – I was just a little bit past that two years, two months, two weeks and two days, actually,

01:00 and just the normal posting back to my next squadron. They normally tried to – most of the time, rotate people at the start of the year, the calendar year, for two years, but for various reasons people get shifted at different times, there might be a requirement of a guy on a squadron back in Australia, so they might drag somebody out at a different time of the year, or they might have particular personal reasons why they need to go home, or they've had enough or whatever, medical reasons. So I wound up going home in September, so

01:30 having gone in the middle of the year, I'd expected to be posted out again in the middle of the year, but it just dragged on a little bit longer before I went home, actually. So I mean I wasn't in a hurry go get home or whatever, I was quite happy to stay, but that was just the normal posting rotational cycle.

And were you sad to leave that posting?

Yes I was, actually, yes I was, I – yes, I had a delightful friend that I'd been going out with for a year,

02:00 and it was a bit hard to leave, for various reasons, going home by myself. I shed a tear actually when I was on the aeroplane, which surprised me. But this lass's family were just gorgeous people, just the most delightful people you could ever come across, Eurasian family and Catholic religion and all that sort of thing, but the sort of people that would give their soul to anybody, they were just gorgeous people, and it was pretty hard to walk away from.

02:30 But as far as the role and – yeah, I probably could have stayed on, I knew that I'd be going back to fly the aeroplane in a squadron back in Australia again anyway, so it's still a similar thing, and I guess you become – you have a mindset that it's a two-year job, now onto the next one, and that's two years, because on average that's what you

03:00 do as air crew, it was a very – not unstable but a moving business.

And where did you go to when you came back to Australia?

Back to Amberley again, back to 6 Squadron, back to the one I'd left. And what happened then? That's

when – the Vietnam deal came up then. Actually I was home

03:30 on leave, I'd come home from Butterworth in September, and then I was home on – actually on Christmas leave down here, and the announcement was made that 2 Squadron was going to Vietnam, so I panicked, I thought, "Oh God, I'm not going," I mean I'd just left the squadron about three months and now, if I just could have stayed there that much longer I could go with the squadron to Vietnam.

04:00 So I think I rang up from Adelaide and rang Amberley and said, "Hey, I want to go, what about me? Don't forget me." I was down on Christmas leave, and surprisingly I actually got posted to Vietnam, so I was very lucky, and I was the only one that – another nav and I, a different navigator this time – actually flew an aeroplane from Amberley to Malaya to join the squadron. So we were pretty lucky, so we went up, had a month in Butterworth working up to Vietnam

04:30 and then we went across to the squadron.

So even though you'd been home on Christmas leave, you found out that they had been posted – 2 Squadron had been posted…?

I found out yes, 2 Squadron was going to Vietnam, and I thought, "Whoops-a-daisy, I want to get on this one." I wasn't very hopeful, because you can't just ring up and say, "Hey, what about me? I want to go," particularly if you've just been posted out of the squadron, but I guess part of the deal was there were a number of people in the squadron in Butterworth who didn't want to go to Vietnam, so they needed to be replaced by somebody,

05:00 and being single and a whole lot of other things, and wanting to go, maybe it was easy. Unbeknown to me at that time the people going to Vietnam had been preselected for the F111 program, and I guess that might have been another reason that some of the people on the squadron in Butterworth weren't selected for that training, because they were being, well I guess fairly selective in terms of it was a pretty sophisticated aeroplane, we'd been flying aeroplanes with World War II

05:30 technology, and here was the state of the art which was so far ahead of its time, so you know, I guess they look at it – overseas training – they look at fairly carefully, so I guess I was lucky in that a few people either weren't selected or – and I didn't know I'd get selected, but to get the thing – all I knew at that stage was "You beaut, I've got it, I'm going to Vietnam." So we went back and –

And what was the work-up before you – ?

Nothing much than –

06:00 some of the people that were actually going to go with the squadron had come from Australia and they were checking us out on our ability to fly a bombing run at night at thirty thousand feet, because that's what we were going to be doing, and that was a cake walk for me, to do that sort of thing we'd been doing, the stuff we were doing at low level was infinitely harder than it was flying a level bombing run at night, plus at that stage I'd been doing it for about three or four years anyway, and yes, so that was basically it, getting our heads up

06:30 on the system that we were going to be using in Vietnam, the bombing systems, because it was going to be radar bombing using the ground radar, which had never been done before, we hadn't done it. So sort of as best we could, working up and understanding that principle. But really all it came down to was being able to fly an accurate bombing run, which as I said, we could do standing on our ear, basically. So it wasn't an horrendous thing. And I don't remember much more than that, probably a

07:00 little bit about the USAF [United States Air Force], that was the operating – USAF control, and a little bit about Vietnam, a bit about the bases and stuff, that was about it. And briefing as we went along, one of the photos in the scrapbook you see was the actual briefing prior to the departure to fly up there.

And did you have any personal apprehensions about going into a war zone?

Nope, I was looking forward to it because it's

07:30 what I've been trained to do, for years, and I think, "OK, this is what I've been trained to do and our military is involved, so now we can go and do the job that we're supposed to do." And we're professional military operators, aspiring to some pretty high – we had pretty high standards on the squadron and we're going to go and employ those skills and standards in the real world, doing what the Australian Government and the Defence Force want to do, I suppose.

08:00 I mean I don't have any grandiose aims or anything like that, it was a job that I trained to do, and that's what I was going to go and do.

And how did you and the squadron travel to Vietnam?

We flew the squadron, the whole squadron went up in formation. It was quite a big issue actually, because on arrival we had – there was Meyer, somebody Meyer, General Meyer was the top

08:30 general, general in Vietnam at the time, was there, the top military generals from the Vietnamese forces, all the Australian, the highest, the new commodore, a group captain, I think a brigadier, and they're all lined up on this platform, TV, not TV, newsreel cameras and all that sort of stuff. And yes, and a big arrival ceremony, we all landed and parked and lined up, and

09:00 once again, there's another photograph in the scrapbook, and that was a big issue.

So just take me through that again, the whole squadron flew – how many planes are there?

Eight aeroplanes, eight or nine, eight. And we'd just fly past, eight aeroplanes came in and landed, taxi in, took our helmets off, lined up in front of the aeroplanes, and that was the big reception ceremony, and all filmed and whatever. We were the

09:30 first aircraft to drop a bomb in anger since the Korean War basically, and the squadron was there to – I think we virtually replaced two squadrons of F100 Super Sabres, because we had a – we'd probably carry double the pay load they could, and we were designed to do the role, the aeroplane was designed to do just exactly what we were doing.

Well that's a very big fanfare of

10:00 **reception that you received, that you've just described. How did that feel when you touched down?**

We weren't aware that that was going to happen anyway, but I guess we're small minnows in the overall scheme of things, so I wouldn't have seen it as too much of a big deal as far as a squadron of Australian Canberras going to help with the war effort in

10:30 Vietnam, considering the size of the military – American military presence there – but politically and symbolically it was probably pretty big, you know? And there's the personal pride side of it, and we've rocked up and this is the Australian squadron. We had helicopters and Caribous there, but now here we had a strike squadron there and we were I suppose confident and proud of

11:00 what we had. Our aeroplanes by that stage were getting fairly old, they had them since about 1954, between '54 and '58, probably the aeroplanes we were flying were the more recent ones, probably about '58 vintage, they were nine years old which in those days is starting to get fairly old. Although the Canberras were in service then for probably thirty-odd years at the end, but they were still performing well but

11:30 not like the state of the art stuff the Americans had with their F4 Phantoms, and even the Super Sabre and a whole lot of things like that. But it proved to be a pretty good workhorse. I don't know that the Yanks had very much confidence in us, certainly we had to prove ourselves in the radar bombing we were doing from high level at night, because we did all the night operations. We knew that we could bomb very accurately from low level, but see they used dive bombing aircraft for that

12:00 sort of thing, and we were going to be doing it from level flight.

Well where were you based?

Phan Rang, which is sort of up from the Australian Province where they were, and the Phouc Tuy Province and probably about midway between there and Cam Ranh Bay. Quite a big base, probably about, I don't know, five thousand-odd personnel, the ROK battalion was

12:30 based there, the Republic of Korea soldiers, they had F100 Super Sabres, they had B57s, which is the American copy of our Canberra, slightly different cockpit arrangement and had American engines in it, didn't perform quite as well as our Canberras, but transport aircraft in there as well, so it was a big base. The commander of the base had responsibility, financial responsibility for it of course,

13:00 unlike what we do, and his budget to run that base was probably as much as our budget for the whole of the Royal Australian Air Force, just to run one base.

And you said that there was some scepticism initially from the Americans when you arrived?

The first day – we didn't do any day bombing until quite… till the last few weeks we were there, and we were only allowed to do it in the Australian area of responsibility,

13:30 and we had forward air controllers were marking the targets with smoke rockets and things like that. But I think we proved to them that we could just walk a stick of six one thousand pound bombs right through the middle of the smoke, very accurately and very consistently, and this was from heights up to about from five thousand feet and thereabouts, and below. And then eventually I think after we left, after the first push left, they started doing more of the daytime operations and more widely spread round Vietnam.

OK,

14:00 **well I'd just like to ask you then, how quickly was it before you went out on operations?**

We arrived, I think we had a flight around the countryside ourselves, just to have a look around, just navigate around the place and see what it looked like, and then we had arrived in the back seat of a Super Sabre, F100 Super Sabre, on a night mission, to see what it was all about, which basically was as useless as tits on a bull,

14:30 but that was our check out. And then the next day I think it was, the whole squadron went out on a

strike, all eight aeroplanes went out and bombed a target, so within a couple of days of learning the country we were – and every night from then on, eight flights a night, every night of the week. So it was pretty quick. We had – I mean there was nothing else set up there for us, we had to build our own – well not build our own accommodation, but we had to build our own crew rooms and stuff like that, we just

15:00 had a shell of a building, two-storey timber frame things, with nothing in them, the walls weren't lined and the windows were just fixed timber louvres and stuff like that. So we – with all night operations it was getting pretty hard to get any sleep during the day, because there were still all road works going everywhere and dust and noise and whatever. So we scrounged plywood panelling from the Yanks and we lined all our rooms ourselves and

15:30 scrounged the air conditioners, chopped a hole in the wall between two rooms, and put on air conditioner in to service two rooms, and painted the things ourselves, and built our own mess, built the bar, and tricked all that up, and laid our own concrete footpaths around the place, and built our own bunkers and stuff like that. The crew, same deal, I don't know where we got them from, but we got

16:00 all acoustic tiles and lined the roof and the walls and scrounged furniture from Butterworth, and lined the walls with that and painted all that ourselves, and got our briefing room and our boards up, so that was all happening while we were out there doing the job, so you know, it was fairly basic. I grew a lawn out the front of our accommodation, I found a couple of runners, a couple of couch runners out in the boondocks [remote area] somewhere and put these couch runners in and had a pair of nail scissors, and as they reared, I trimmed this and eventually I

16:30 had a lawn, and they brought me a hand mower from Butterworth. I thought I was pretty special. So I had a green lawn to sunbake on out the front of our block. All different.

Well, we might come back to talking about living on the base a bit later, but I just want to spend some time talking about the operations. Just tell us first a bit about what your targets – how you were briefed

17:00 **to begin with?**

We were issued what they called a "frag," frag order, eight of those every night. They would be target coordinates, a hand off point, in other words a start point, and some details, I can't remember the exact details now, what our bomb load was going to be and what time we were to be on target. So that would be in our ops room, that would be up on the board, we'd be briefed,

17:30 we'd get the update on whatever intelligence was required for whee we were going…

Do you want to have a sip of water?

I might just do that. And where the friendly forces were and what our limits were, and stuff like that, and which way we'd go if we got shot down, or had a problem, and go out and contact the appropriate radar site that we were going to use, and go and drop the

18:00 bombs and come home again.

What was the payload that you had?

Well it varied, we – the normal load for the Canberra was six one thousand pound bombs in the bomb bay. The aeroplanes were modified before we went there, and they put – there's a station on each wing tip for fuel, extra fuel tanks, drop tanks, those connections they put a rack on there, and they put another bomb rack on each wing tip,

18:30 so we could then carry, it was I think eight five hundred bombs, six one thousand pound bombs, or we put six five hundred pound bombs inside, and one on each wing tip. So our payload varied between those two figures. I think later on they might have used seven fifty pound bombs as well, but I can't remember. Most of the stuff we used our thousand pounders were old World War II stock I think. And yes, so that's – and that was pretty standard. Eight trips every night of the week,

19:00 which we basically achieved, we had an exceptionally high serviceability rate. I don't think I – well I can't recall us missing out on a sortie the whole time I was there, for weather or anything else. Our ground crew guys were amazing. The armourers and yes, the maintenance

19:30 guys were – they really worked their butts off.

And what time of night would you set off?

Any time between about 7.30 and maybe four or five in the morning, the first sortie at night was usually about 7.30, and the CO would always take that one. And probably the last one, I'm guessing now, probably about four or five in the morning, I don't recall

20:00 doing a landing in daylight for – until almost the last few weeks there.

And how long would you be out for?

Anything between about an hour and a half to three hours, thereabouts. We used to – our operations were restricted to just South Vietnam, we couldn't go into North Vietnam at all, and we were – any

targets, anywhere between the DMZ [de-militarised zone] and the – in other words 1, 2, 3, 4 Corps would use targets in whichever, whatever was required,

20:30 and there were several radar sites that we were able to use for the bombing. The system they used was an old system of practice bombing, which they reversed the process to use, it was quite amazing really how they use that.

Well tell us how you did work with the radar, the ground radar.

Well it was based on an old what they called an RBS, a radar bomb scorer, many many years ago in the early stages, flying Canberras at Amberley, they had this thing set up in Queensland,

21:00 and what it is, it's a radar room with a big plotting chart, and they've got a spot on the chart which is where the target location is on the ground, and they – the navigator knows, can find this particular spot as his target, and does his normal bombing run on that. And what we used to do is, once you were established on the bombing run, the navigator used to throw a switch which transmitted

21:30 a thousand cycle tone through the radio, and a pen would plot onto the chart, and the pen would plot your track, the radar would be plotting your track across this chart towards the target. And when the navigator decided it was time to release, because he'd have to work out all the bomb ballistics, the height and the winds and stuff for ground speed, using his Doppler radar, and he'd put all the figures in, and when he reckoned it was time to drop [from] the cross hairs on the target,

22:00 he'd push the bomb release button, we'd have these bombs on board, he'd just push the bomb release button, and that would switch off that radio transmission and lift the pin off the trace. So then the people in the radar control room would look at that point, and they'd have probably a ground speed read out, and look where your track was and what the drift was, and they knew the ballistics to bomb, and they'd plot where that bomb would have fallen had you dropped it, and then they'd come back and say, that would have been a twenty metre bomb, hundred metre bomb, whatever

22:30 distance, and they'd give you a range and a bearing from the target where the bomb would have fallen. It was a very cheap method of practicing your bombing, and a very accurate representation of what would have happened. In Vietnam they reversed it, they had the target coordinates, they had a track plotted on there, and they had ground speed lines, we had to achieve a ground speed of three hundred and fifty knots, so the navigator would work that out. And

23:00 they would then plot you along that line, and if you drifted off that line they'd say, "Turn left heading one seven five, one seven five, one seven five, right one seven six, one seven six," and they'd try to get that trace going straight along that track that they'd drawn towards the target, and when the plotting pin hit the appropriate – they'd have a ground speed read out, a digital read out of your ground speed, and when the pin hit the appropriate – if you weren't – you know, might be three hundred and forty nine or three hundred and forty eight knots,

23:30 that's how accurate they were, they'd tell you to drop the bomb, so you'd just release the bomb. And it would continue on. So you could hear them in the background while they're talking to you, giving you the heading and stuff like that, and you could hear another guy in the background saying, "Three fifty, three fifty, three forty nine, three forty nine, three forty nine, three fifty," because there's big changes, the wind varies, and we're at say thirty thousand feet, and the radar controller who's giving you the heading information, would then have to judge a

24:00 call such that he gave you a five second, or five countdown, to release, so he's trying to anticipate when that pin is going to hit the ground speed line on the chart, that matches what the blokes were reading out. And he'd have to say, "Five, four, three, two, one, hack," and he had to say "hack" when the pen hit the appropriate line. And they were looking for accuracies in the vicinity of about forty metres, which is quite amazing. And they could achieve it. Of course

24:30 we – and this is not being smart – but we could do the job a lot better than the Yanks could, because they didn't want to do it, single-engine aeroplanes and their tracers would go down the plotting chart like this, whereas ours were pretty well rock setting. Because they had some pretty tight limits on what we were doing, we had to fly a height within plus or minus twenty feet, and twenty feet is a graduation about that far – thirty thousand feet, you know, heading plus or minus nothing, you had to be right on the heading, and our heading

25:00 pointer was one degree wide, so – and they were giving us half degree heading changes, nothing unusual, just turn right, one seven five and a half, which is unbelievable. And our air speed had to plus or minus nothing, sorry, plus or minus one knot, they put special air speed indicators in that they took out of the Sabres, so the parameters were pretty tight, and it was a fair bit of concentration, it was an old aeroplane with not really good instruments, and to fly it that accurately was a bit of a challenge. But the results

25:30 were there, and they knew that we could fly the thing, otherwise they wouldn't give us half the reheading zones if they didn't think, if they didn't know we could fly it that accurately, and that's what the blokes were doing.

So the success of this system really depended on constant radio contact with the ground?

Yes, yes, we were being controlled by a radar – pardon me, a radar controller on the ground. What I was

going to say, it's amazing how you can

26:00 turn around an old training system and make it operational in a theatre of war. What it meant was, that with an aeroplane without its own radar and sophisticated bombing equipment, you could drop accurate bombs on the enemy twenty-four hours a day, so you're not going to be able to go to sleep too much.

And what sort of intercom system or was there – actually in the

26:30 **cockpit on the Canberra?**

You always, we have a switch on our mic, you can turn it off, but you just leave that on and you can just talk between your navigator and yourself all the time, you didn't have to push buttons or anything like that, you just, you know, hot mic and you just talk all the time, if you wanted to. But most of the time you'd leave it switched off because you'd get a bit of background hash, you know, a bit noisy, typical sort of thing.

But this accuracy that you're describing really depends on

27:00 **very good guidance from your navigator?**

Oh no, the pilot's flying it at that stage, I mean the navigators used to do most of the navigation themselves around the countryside, I pretty well did all that myself anyway without being unkind to my nav, who – it was probably a bit beyond him, and I used to use the tack hand and radar navigation system and do the bulk of that, so really, try and work myself so that I actually hit

27:30 the appropriate hand off point at exactly the right time on the right radials and the right heading so that when I rolled out the radar controller didn't have to give me a heading change. That was my little challenge each night just to – otherwise it was pretty boring, it was just flying from A to B is pretty straightforward at night, and then the focus on the bombing run, you might get two bombing runs in a night, sometimes you drop the whole load on one target, sometimes they split it between two, but for that short period of time you're actually

28:00 concentrating on exercising your skills to achieve the intercepts and yeah, do it all yourself and –

So sorry, what was the term that you used then? Tack handler?

Tack hand, it's a tactical air navigation system, it's the Americans who devised it, gives you a bearing and a distance from a radio navigation site. So your hand off point might be on the three six zero radial at four two, DME [distance measuring equipment],

28:30 four two miles so the radar, or the radio beacon, the navigation beacon's there, and they want you over here at three six zero, so in other words to the north of the station at forty-two miles, and you've got to intercept that point, and then they'll – or you have a pre-planned run in heading for your target, so what I used to try and do is try and get precisely over that point on the run in heading, which takes a little bit of, I guess, practice and finesse. But that was my little exercise, and then of course flying

29:00 a very very active bomb run if you could, so I used to get good results at the end of the day. The result that you wanted was to get the bombs exactly where they wanted them.

And this is high flying, so you're flying…?

We were usually thirty thousand feet or more, yes.

I mean what I'm thinking is, when you're flying so high it is really difficult to get very good accuracy.

It's a bit harder to fly the aeroplane because it's –

29:30 it's a very stable aeroplane but it's hard to describe without getting heavily into the dynamics of the things, but it's just a little bit sloppier at high altitude to fly it than it is down low, no auto pilots as well so it's got to be hand flown. Instrumentation wasn't all that good, pretty antiquated instruments in the aeroplane—

But just in terms of

30:00 **achieving target accuracy with your payload, when you're flying so high, what were the main challenges?**

Well, the things that you – the ballistics of the bomb, you know, your bomb ballistics are not totally precise, when you've got a lump of iron floating through the atmosphere from different heights and that, you've got all the charts that you can work out you know, the speed at which and the design and the drag and a whole lot of things like that. The other problem is, are there are any

30:30 variations in wind? Because if your ground speed changes, I mean the aircraft's got inertia, and you could be punching through the air at a certain rate, and if the wind changes, then the speed at that stage is going to change depending on what the wind does, the aeroplane's still going through the air at the same rate, but in terms of your movement across the ground, as the wind changes, that's going to change a little bit. So that if you're – if they tell you to

31:00 release the bomb when the pin hits the three hundred and fifty knot line and you're only doing three hundred and forty five, well your bombs going to be, you know, another five knots worth of – at that time of fall and whatever, so it won't be as accurate. I mean that could be worth a hundred metres for your bomb.

And who would release the bombs?

The navigator, had the bomb release button. The pilot could do it, he could release it as well, but the navs used to do the release,

31:30 because all they'd do is sit there and focus on that bloke's countdown, because at times they'd say, "Five, four, three, two, one, hack," you know because things would change and he had to give you the countdowns to get to that point, and at other times they'd say, "Five – four – three – two – one, no bomb, no bomb," because it hasn't worked out properly, right at the last minute, and you've got a navigator with his thumb over the bomb release point, "Turn it off." And a couple of them, you couldn't stop it, because they – they were anticipating it, five, four, three, two, one, no bomb, it's too

32:00 late, it's gone, sort of thing. So he may have just stopped it because, you know, the ground speed wasn't matching up with the pen, you know, there wouldn't be any other reason, probably at that late stage to all it off, there wouldn't be somebody who said, "Don't drop those bombs, we've got friendlies there," that's probably not likely to happen.

And what was the methods used to check where your bombs had dropped?

32:30 Ground reports the next day, and at one stage we – didn't tell us where the bombs fell but the Viet Cong used to get the explosives out of any bombs that didn't go off, so they decided we're dropping thousand pounders and they're fairly significant, and they get the explosives out of one of those, they can fit a lot of booby traps and stuff like that with it. So once we dropped the bombs and you knew how long your time of fall was, and the navigator would time

33:00 it, and just when he'd time that the bombs were going to hit, we used to have to roll the aeroplane upside down, and count the flashes on the ground, to make sure all six bombs had gone off, because if they didn't we'd have to then report back and say we had one UXB [unexploded bomb] Not only that, it's less efficiency on, you know, destroying the target, if you're consistently getting bombs that are not going off, they need to know, so if they're not going off they've got to look for the reason, why aren't these bombs going off, let's check the armoury mechanism, let's check the

33:30 fuse, let's check something else. So yes, we did that for a while, counted the bombs, but that didn't tell us that night whether we hit the target or not, unless you've got a secondary explosion, if you'd hit the – you know, if your target was an ammunition dump or something like that, then you might get a bigger explosion and say, "Ha ha, we hit that one." Otherwise they'd try and do reconnaissance the next day and they might very well say, "Yeah, well we knocked over a dozen enemy and that, and you hit the target," or

34:00 whatever. Or we've unearthed you know, a couple of miles of trenches and stuff like that, tunnels, that sort of thing.

What sort of danger was there in flipping the plane over and hanging around like that?

Well at night it's not a really good idea, I mean the guys had to be I guess pretty proficient in what you were doing, but one of the guys actually lost control one night and recovered at twenty thousand feet later, so they stopped us from doing it from then on. But it's

34:30 another story, but probably he wasn't as competent as the rest were. But again, you know, you don't do aerobatics or things at night. But yes, if you know what you're doing and you're careful, and you select the right attitudes and you know, you put it up there, it's not necessarily a brilliant idea to do it, but it needed to be done, for the reasons I've just said, so we did it.

But that would also involve flying

35:00 **back over your targets?**

Oh no, no, no, because your target's here and you're flying here, and you let the bombs go and the bombs just keep going like this, and they're just going to be a little bit behind you, but by the time they've gone off you start to roll, at the point of which you know they're going to hit the ground, the nav's timed it and said, "Now," you just roll upside down and you're still – at thirty thousand feet I mean you can see a hell of a long way, in any direction from that altitude, you can see behind you if you needed to, so you could always see where they fell, and you could

35:30 see the flashes as they went off, and count them.

Did you have any photographing methods on board planes?

Yes, we didn't mount them in Vietnam but we had that reconnaissance capability, there was a hatch down the back end of the fuselage where it used to mount the camera just above that, taking vertical shots. And later on

36:00 after that they had oblique cameras and other things, because they converted the camp into a

reconnaissance outfit and they had better cameras and stuff like that, and we had … We did have a reconnaissance role the whole time anyway, but we didn't use it in Vietnam, there was not much point trying to use those sort of cameras to take photographs at night, because you probably wouldn't see a thing, in terms of flashes and whatever, you know.

And when you did flip over and check, was there any danger from

36:30 **the flak coming up?**

Not at thirty thousand feet, no. No, the danger height for thousand pound bombs was only fifteen hundred feet. We had to consider that in Malaya because our tactic was to drop the bombs from six hundred feet there, in which case we had to pop up, push it over, open the bomb doors, track the target, drop the bomb, and then immediately break away, just break back the other way so that the bombs continued that way and you went this way, because if you kept going at six hundred feet, you'd stand a good chance of blowing yourself up, because you could get shrapnel damage up

37:00 to nearly fifteen hundred feet.

So that was the low flying that you did in Vietnam?

Well no, they didn't drop bombs from six hundred feet in Vietnam, that was a tactic we were going to use in Indonesia, where we were striking, you know, sizeable targets and airfields and stuff like that, the usual things, but these were just level bombing, and I would say they probably wouldn't have gone much below three thousand feet, which to us is low level bombing, in level flight. I can't remember, I'd have to look at my log book, I'd have to

37:30 have a look and see how many day missions I did, but I didn't do very many, might only be three or four, I'm not sure now, but right at the end.

And when you would drop your payload, would the plane respond differently, was there any …?

Not particularly noticeable when the bombs – when they left the aeroplane, you really didn't notice much, much change, not much of a pitch change.

And what about hung bombs?

38:00 Happened occasionally, yes, a couple of guys had the bombs – actually one fell off and rolled around on the bottom of the bomb bay, and fell off in flight while the bomb doors were closing, just dropped down and was sitting there. We had a couple where the ones on the wing tips dropped off one night, just by themselves, but it's typical of anything you've got in, you know, older

38:30 aeroplanes I suppose, and older aeroplanes where – I mean you're always going to get – even in modern stuff you still get glitches every now and then, and computers don't work perfectly every time. Well it was the same there, you get a minor electrical glitch and something untoward might happen.

And did you find that the Canberras easy to fly?

Well I did, yes, I thought it was, yes, I didn't have too many problems with it, I quite enjoyed flying it, I could pretty well make it do anything I wanted it to do, and

39:00 treated it like any other aeroplane, fly it like a fighter or whatever. It was hard work at high speed, because the controls were so heavy, it wasn't designed to do that, and you're doing four hundred and fifty knots, you want to turn around in a Canberra, it's like, you know, it pulls. It's quite heavy on the controls. And when we used to have exercises with fighters, you know, bounce us, and we'd – I'd try to out-manoeuvre them and try and pull four or five G on a consistent turn, I

39:30 mean I was as fit as a buck rat in those days, and I'd have to hold the control and try and put around it and hold it like that, and if you're doing that for ten minutes with a fighter, I mean, I used to be [emulates heavy breathing] at the end of it, which I wouldn't even be like playing sport, so it was pretty strenuous in that sort of thing. Because it just wasn't designed to be flown like that at low level. It was a strong aeroplane, and it could do it, but by geez, it was hard work, you needed to be pretty fit.

40:00 **And what sort of I guess – you're doing all these night operations, did you rely very much on visual sighting of your target?**

Oh no, you couldn't, no, it was all radar, it was all completely radar control, you wouldn't see any of your targets, thirty thousand feet at night, you're not going to see anything underground, it's not lit up with anything, it's just targets in the jungle and stuff like that, so maybe that's it. It's

40:30 purely radar controlled, and that's why I suppose you had to – I mean the only contribution you could make would be to fly the thing, you know, as accurately as we did, to achieve results, because you know, if you had your own system, your own radar, well you know, you've got total control of it, but all you can do is just do what that fellow says, you know, that's your heading, and we knew what height and speed we had to fly, but yeah,

41:00 basically controlled by that guy.

OK, well I think that's a good place for us to stop.

Tape 6

00:30 **We were talking about operations, and I just wanted to know, what was your procedure for crash landing or capture?**

Crash landing, well hopefully we didn't do that, you've got ejection seats, it's not a good idea to try and land a jet aircraft on an unprepared area somewhere away from the airfield. Landing was just – apply whatever jungle survival skills you'd been taught, escape

01:00 and evasion and whatever, basic use of your emergency radio, when to use it, when not to use it, and I don't think you'd have to think twice about whether you used your gun, you know, when you're one person with a pistol and you decide that somebody's about to shoot you, what do you do, give up or shoot them? I think that's a decision you've got to make on the spot, because if you shoot one, there's bound to be a hell of a lot more, so you're not going to win in the end anyway. Basically

01:30 survival was, you've got a map, you go to an area you know where the friendly territory is, and if you can, you make your way towards that, and at an appropriate time turn on your survival radio, and try and talk to somebody. Which generally speaking you could contact aeroplanes monitoring those frequencies, and we used to monitor the emergency frequency in aeroplanes all the time, every aeroplane monitors the emergency frequency, so if anybody calls up, then somebody will pick it up.

02:00 **So what kit were you given in case of that happening? What was in the kit? Like was there an emergency kit?**

Yes, there is, there was a kit in the ejection seat that came with you as you went down, pretty basic stuff, I guess – I can't remember now, there's probably a helium raft, signalling, some sort of food ration – twenty-four hour ration pack, maybe a small amount of water, desalinisation

02:30 kits and maybe some nylon thread, some waterproof matches, it's a long way ago, I can't remember a lot of the stuff now, but probably the sort of – oh, a block of chocolate or whatever, something that you would survive on for twenty-four hours, and after that it's catch whatever you can or whatever. Solar stills in some of the survival kits, but I've been in so many different situations that each set up is a little bit different, so

03:00 there is a survival kit as part of it, and that's about it.

And that escape and evasion that you just mentioned, where did that training occur?

That starts pretty early in your career, once it was the general rule, pretty well as soon as you've finished your pilot's course you went to – we used to go to Canungra in those days, in Queensland, the army base at Canungra for the jungle survival course for two weeks, and the second week part of it was an evasion exercise, the army were out to try and capture you, you

03:30 were dumped in a certain place and you had to get yourself from that place, usually in pairs, obviously for safety and those sorts of situations, you don't want to have somebody breaking his leg and falling off the side of a cliff or something by himself, just for the sake of training and practice, so you operated in pairs, then go down whatever route you decided was going to safely get you into the survival area. And most people used to follow creek lines, and of course the army knows you're going to find the easiest way down, so they just sit at the bottom of the creek and wait for you and catch you. So

04:00 yes, so that's part of the deal, and how to live off the land.

Were you given any specific preparation for Vietnam?

Not specifically in the way of survival, no, just briefings on the area and how the search and rescue system worked. But it's one of those things, you're in a hostile environment, you've got a certain amount of survival gear and you've got a radio, you know, it's not the Indiana

04:30 Jones and all those things you see in the movies, yes. I guess you – there's not a lot you can do, try to avoid being detected and try not to go too far if you're obviously close to your downed aircraft, it they're going to see anything they'll see that, then again I guess the enemy's always going to find that and look for you around it, so you toss up about how far you go and when you use your radio and stuff like that. But that would have all been covered

05:00 at the time, on the best method of survival in that country, and what facilities and survival systems were available to you.

And did you ever come across enemy fire from the ground?

Yes, only coming in to land at Phan Rang, I hadn't noticed at any other stage, probably had fire a couple of times coming in to land, wasn't aware of it, someone else told me, there was another aircraft lined up ready to take off and

05:30 saw the tracer or whatever being fired at me on the way through. Beyond that no, two of our aeroplanes were lost through missiles, but I think those missiles were probably fired out of Laos. One crew they rescued, the other they never found, to this day don't know what happened to them, so they just disappeared off the face of the earth somewhere. So they're out in the jungle there somewhere.

How vulnerable was the base?

06:00 Well reasonably, because again you've got a fairly huge perimeter around an air force base to defend and protect, and it's a very difficult thing to do. In between the base and the beach where they had a sort of a recreational area, that was regularly utilised by the Viet Cong to destroy the fuel lines that came from the

06:30 beach for supplies and stuff like that. I think we only went to the beach about once or twice, and then it was stopped because it was too high risk, just to get from the base down to the beach, because the Viet Cong were active in the area, active right up to the fence line, probably had some penetration into the base, a little bit more active after we left, it became – they had a few – probably mortar rounds going into the place, and rocket attacks and stuff. But while we were in there, nothing specifically that I can remember that was an immediate threat to us. There were occasions

07:00 where we were told that we should wear our tin hats to work each day, but that was an edict by the CO, and none of us did it, we carried them, because we didn't want to be embarrassed being seen to wear tin hats as we walked down to the flight line to go flying. The CO wore his, and Gus was his navigator in Vietnam and Gus was supposed to sit next to him with his hat on, and the CO would sit in the car and Gus would drive his car for him, and they'd have their tin hats on and Gus was so

07:30 mortified having to do that, but yeah, we didn't do it. I think at one stage somebody stole the CO's helmet, he wasn't impressed. Did something with it, I don't know what. Maybe made a trophy out of it or something, I can't remember the exact details, it might come to me later. But I know something happened with his helmet.

So aside from the tin hats, was there any other protection that you had?

We built our own bunker just outside

08:00 our living quarters, you know, sandbagged the thing up in case of a rocket or mortar attack, we could just dive into that, that's about all, nothing else. And the aeroplanes were placed in the revetments, parked in between those all the time. Once again, if one aeroplane gets hit it needs to be isolated from the one next door, or you take the whole lot out. What else? Nothing else.

And what about enemy aircraft

08:30 **and any air combat?**

Not in South Vietnam, they had that in North Vietnam but there was total air superiority in the south, so we didn't have a problem with that. One of the biggest problems was actually not running into another aeroplane at night, you know, even though it was a complete radar environment, you had to be pretty careful, I had a couple of incidents up there, one I had to actually – I was on a bombing run, and concentrating on the run, and I saw a red light out of the corner of my eye and of

09:00 course at night it's hard to tell when it's a distance away whether it's above you or below you, or whatever, because you can't see any horizon, and lights on the ground blend with stars and that sort of thing, and you know, you're radar controlling it, I could see this light and I it go and let it go until I could determine – and quite late in the piece actually, physically pulled it up as hard as I could, because it was a civilian airliner going into Saigon, it went straight past underneath us, and I just sort of went – hoped we didn't hit it. So I don't know whether he was

09:30 away from where he should have been, which he probably was, because they know there are bombing areas there, designated areas, and their people were advised about it, and you don't go anywhere near it. But again, he would have been on radar, but we would have been on a different radar, we would have been on bomb control radar, and the other one would have been on the area surveillance radar, and maybe a communication breakdown between the two, I don't know, but that was a pretty close call. That was the most likely threat, was running into another aeroplane, not either getting shot down or get an enemy fighter

10:00 or whatever. The other one we were going one night and there was one of the American B57s, which were going into North Vietnam, they were painted black, and it went past me at night, it was so close that I actually saw the outline of this black aeroplane, and I called the radar and said, "Hey," "Sorry sir, didn't see that one." So even at night you had to keep your eyes open, sort of thing.

Quite risky, night bombing missions. What were your targets?

10:30 Well not really risky, not from – not the heights we were bombing at night, as I said, we were over thirty thousand, thirty three thousand, things like that, so the targets could be anything, they could be a supply route, maybe a whole lot of vehicles and stuff like that, they might be troop concentrations, they could be supply dumps, ammunition dumps and stuff like that, tunnel complexes, bridges, any variety of things.

And

11:00 **were you supplied with any photographs of whether you had a successful bombing mission or not?**

No, not bombing, no. I don't know whether we ever got to see, we might have seen one or two results of bombing missions, whether they were ours or the Americans or not, I don't know, but not as a rule did we get any information. We'd get a bit of – if the intelligence was available we'd get a bit of feedback as to the success or the accuracy of the strike or whatever. I think in one of mine – I got

11:30 a report on one of my missions, I think it was, not that you want to talk about it, or count people, but there are I think eleven Viet Cong that were wiped out in one of our strikes, but that didn't happen very often, you didn't get those reports very often.

So we've touched on what the base was like and you mentioned

12:00 **the grass that you grew, but when you got there, what was the state of the barracks?**

They were just two-storey long wooden blocks, billets or whatever you want to call them, timber-framed things with probably I think Hardiflex or cement fibre shedding on the outside, and all the windows were just you know, this big, timber louvres fixed, that was it. And not lined. Concrete

12:30 floor down below and just a timber ply floor upstairs or whatever. And the surrounds was just dirt and rocks and stone, that was it, nothing, no footpaths, no roads, the road was just – had been graded, just this rocky dirt thing and they just used to spray oil on it, probably sump oil or something, just

13:00 to keep the dust down and seal the road, that was it. That was my running track, I used to run on it to keep fit while I was up there, just on this rocky dirt road, nothing flash. We had our own cinema, which was built by our airfield construction squadron, they built a stage and a screen and a little projection house, and so we had movies occasionally and every now and then the entertainers from Australia would pop up and use that stage we had, or a couple of visits from entertainers I think, in the time we were there. We had a separate mess

13:30 hall, again that was fairly basic, but it ran pretty well twenty-four hours a day, so you could actually get something to eat, there was usually a cook on duty at some stage or other, so if you came home at three o'clock in the morning and wanted a meal, you could get a meal. And a lot of it was food supplied by the Americans which was pretty awful, powdered mashed potatoes and bacon, which was just little thin strips of fat and all that sort of

14:00 horrible stuff that they eat. But we were lucky because we still had, you know, not that far away from Butterworth and we had support runs going down to Butterworth and we'd bring back a bit of fresh meat, and fresh fruit occasionally, and that sort of thing, so we probably ate a little better than the Americans did. But by and large it was chips and eggs and a bit of steak if you could get it, I think, from what I remember.

Well with the night operations, I mean

14:30 **how would you prepare for that? When would you have your meal and how would you – what time would you set out, those kinds of things?**

Well I was probably the only one that handled it this way because it probably goes back a long way to my days going to uni part time and letting your metabolism settle down and doing everything on a regular basis. I used to stay up until I had to fly, if it was four o'clock in the morning I didn't go to bed, because if I'd gone to bed at eight o'clock to get a bit of sleep I'd probably wake up at ten o'clock and not be able to go back to

15:00 sleep again, and then you know, I wouldn't get the appropriate rest, so I'd just go fly and if I got back at seven o'clock in the morning I'd go to bed then, and stay in bed until I woke up, and then get up and just write letters probably, most of the time. And do whatever other basic administrative stuff needed to be done, and maybe read or just write more letters, when it's time to go fly the next time then I'd go fly again and come back. So I did most of my sleeping

15:30 sort of in the early hours of the morning or daylight, but always in one hit to try and get one regular batch of sleep every night, that sort of thing. I'd try and keep my meals to a regular sequence, probably goes back as I said to my uni days when I was extremely fit but getting time off during the day to go to lectures, but having to work back at night to make it up, so I'd have – Mum would have dinner in the oven for me when I got home, I might have dinner at eleven o'clock one night and eight o'clock the next

16:00 night, and then go over and have a pie floater at the GPO [General Post Office] pie cart another night, and by the end of the year I felt quite lethargic, and I really felt – and I don't get tired, but I felt washed out, couldn't figure out why, because I was still playing sport, riding my bike and all that. And the next year I did national service and I think the first three weeks I thought I was going to die, because they weren't giving me enough food, eating about a quarter of what I normally ate, and I lost weight, and

16:30 then I started – well after three weeks they opened the camp up, and of course my Mum and Dad arrived with chickens and cake and biscuits and we sat under a tree and just ate this food, and I said, "I'm saved, I'm saved," you know? But after that, you know, I ate the dreadful army food, but we got up

at six, we had breakfast at seven, we had lunch at twelve, we had dinner at five and lights out at ten, every day of the week, and as I said, running up and down the side of the hills and all that

17:00 sort of stuff, eating a minimal amount compared with what I'd been used to. But at the end of that three months I felt so good, and not only had I regained the three pound I lost, I was then the heaviest I'd ever been in my life, I put about another six pound on, and I couldn't figure out what it was. So it was, you know, small amounts of food and lots of exercise and running round, how come I'm putting on weight? But I guess it was a bit of muscle here and there maybe, but the secret at the end of the day was the regularity of it, everything was

17:30 regular, and the metabolism was able to handle it a lot better, so I've tried to sort of give my kids the same sort of clues, and not be all over the place, but try and be consistent, you know, when you're overseas on their tours, or when they do a lot of night operations and stuff like that, sort of try and keep your day as regular as possible, and that's what I did in Vietnam.

So how would you keep your day regular if you were sleeping for big chunks like that?

Well, the big chunks, I'd probably try and have my morning meal at around about the

18:00 same time. See if I came home at 7.30, then I would have, you know, a meal then as a breakfast, and then go to bed, and then later on in the day I would have you know, a lunch meal and then a meal appropriate before I went flying, so that I'm still having three meals a day, and sort of trying to space them reasonably evenly, but that's – I mean under the circumstances you couldn't really get a very regular process, but I made it as regular as I could, and more specifically to get whatever

18:30 sleep I got just in one hit, rather than sleeping for two hours, hop up, go fly, come back and get another four hours sleep, or something like that, which would have worked for me if I have two hours, then that's enough, I'm wide awake, I'm not a person that needs ten or eleven hours of sleep a day. If I – and I'm no different now, in those days if I was to go to bed and have two hours sleep, I'd feel exactly the same as if I'd had eight hours sleep, it sort of – I don't have a wake up problem

19:00 basically, so I guess I'm lucky in that respect.

And how did you cope with the heat there?

Not as bad as Butterworth, it was still tropical and humid, but as I said, I didn't have a problem with that. We had air conditioners in our room for sleeping, I'm not a great fan of air conditioning, but no, I didn't notice it, but as I say, I enjoy the tropical climate so … The only thing I couldn't do was go swimming, there was no sport, you couldn't do anything, so I just used to run

19:30 to keep fit, because there was nothing else to do.

How did you go with that restriction, because sport had played a very big part in your life, and then you were suddenly restricted when you got to Vietnam?

Not much point worrying about it when you were actually there. No, I was just conscious of doing something just to keep fit, so I just replaced sport with running, and I'd try and run every day if I could, not a great distance, because there wasn't very suitable

20:00 areas to go, so I'd probably run, I don't know, about a mile or something like that, but try and run it as fast as I could and instead of making up for a longer slow run, I'd do a shorter faster one and hope that it had the same effect.

And did you have any house scouts?

Yes we did, yep, useless as a pocket in a t-shirt basically, but they'd wander around and wave a duster around, or a broom. But

20:30 not very good workers. They were supposed to make our beds and do our washing, and I can't recall, I think I used to do my own washing anyway because if they did it, there's a fair chance it'd walk out the front gate, so anything that wasn't bolted down went for a walk. Not a lot of washing was needed, just drip-dry terylene shorts and short sleeved

21:00 shirt, and a flying suit, and you didn't go anywhere, so that was it, you lived your life in a uniform and a flying suit.

And what about when you left the base, did you go out in civvies?

You couldn't leave the base, there was nowhere to go, so you didn't go anywhere, unless you were on R&R [rest and recuperation], when that came round I think I had an R&R to Da Nang for a couple of days, and I think maybe –

21:30 where'd I go, Bangkok for a few days, three or four days and I actually took an aeroplane back to Australia for a service, and brought another one back, so that's it, you're stuck there the whole time, there's nowhere to go. You can't cop out and go touring.

Well how did you quell any boredom?

Reading and mostly writing, writing letters and stuff, but yeah, that was it. And normal –

22:00 call it normal mess entertainment, just guys getting together in the mess and the Red Cross girls or whatever they used to call them, I can't remember what they did, they probably used to come round and play some music, and it'd be about two girls and twenty-four guys and you might have a five second dance with somebody or whatever, but beyond that, there wasn't anything to do. We had a PX [Postal Exchange - American canteen unit] on the base, so you could go down and you could even borrow a brand new Ford

22:30 Mustang if you wanted to, and get it delivered back home, so the Yanks never missed out on anything like that, you can always go and buy your stereo gear and your records and you know, all this duty free stuff. In the middle of a war it's all there.

Yes, we have heard some great stories about the PX store and what you could get there.

Oh yes, oh God yes, you could buy anything there, yes.

What did you pick up from the PX store?

In Vietnam? Probably not a lot, because I'd done all my duty free shopping in Malaya,

23:00 I can't recall much that I bought in Vietnam, probably not a lot. I bought more in New Zealand when I was over there, because they had a PX there in Christchurch where I was based, to support Operation Deep Freeze, which was the operations in the Antarctic, and because I had duty free privileges on an exchange posting, I eventually convinced the Americans that it was the same duty free privileges that they extend to their people through their PXs and they

23:30 very reluctantly but eventually gave me approval to use the PX. So I was married at that stage so I bought a nice Sankyo crockery set, which – that important stuff, and you could order out of catalogues and that, that arrived from Japan, and a nice marble chess set and some stereo gear and records and bits and pieces like that.

Well you just mentioned the Red Cross girls

24:00 **that were there and you could have a quick little dance, but what would you do about female company?**

Nothing, there wasn't – well I guess a lot of the guys, you have a base like that and all of a sudden a little brothel pops up on the outskirts of the base, you know, you get the little shanties on a dirt road, having not been to one I don't know what the facilities were like, but what I heard, what I imagined is it must have been pretty

24:30 awful things, with a tin shed, probably a dirt floor or something, and all the troops used to go and visit those people. So no, there was no female entertainment.

Well not implying yourself here, but was there much incidence of VD [venereal disease]?

I don't know, not amongst our guys that I was aware of. I guess yes, quite a bit with the Americans, because they had their army

25:00 troops, and that's a different level again. I don't recall any of that, even in our ground crew guys, I don't recall, there may have been one or two, I don't know, I assume some of them did pay a visit down there. We had to – before we came home we all had to have full blood checks and the whole – the works, to make sure that we weren't taking anything home. But as far as the rest of the Americans – because I mean

25:30 we were only a unit of – just a small unit, you know, eight or ten, well let's say a dozen crew, so that's twenty-four guys, plus our ground support people, so not huge, on a base with probably at least five thousand personnel on it, you know, a big organisation. So there probably would have been a fair bit of it spread around the rest of the base, perhaps.

You made a point earlier about the Americans being a bit sceptical of you guys when you got there. At what point

26:00 **do you think the relationship began to change?**

Well, careful about 'relationship', I think for what we had been sent there to do, I don't think there would have been any doubts about it, because we were into the game virtually five minutes after getting there, and we had a very quick and nasty ride in the back seat of an F100, which really did nothing for us, I mean as far as I was concerned it was a waste of time, just to ride in an

26:30 F100, and I got a certificate at the end saying that I had been supersonic in an F100, which wasn't right either because we didn't go supersonic, so that was just one of those things, just a square that had to be ticked, and the rest of it, well I guess they had enough experience with Australian air crew over many, many years and exercises, that yeah, we were just give the job to do, and off we went. But it was a different role, this low level role where they're so

27:00 accustomed to having fighter-type aircraft, ground attack aircraft doing the job, and we're in an

aeroplane that does level bombing, and they say, “Well you can’t be as accurate in aircraft doing level bombing as you do for dive bombing, because dive bombing’s the only way to do it, and put the metal right on the target.” But we could do it pretty well. And as I said, after we flew a few exercises then it expanded, and I think they moved, after we left outside the Australian taskforce area, and

27:30 did that sort of thing anywhere where there was a forward air controller who could mark a target, then we could go in. The call sign was ‘magpie’, we were always magpie, two four or whatever it happened to be. I think it was just a concern or doubt about a specific role or type of weapon delivery that they probably had reservations about, and that was all. As far as competency and professionalism

28:00 and that, I don’t think the Yanks would have ever doubt that anyway.

How did you get along with them, on one to one?

OK, look I’m not – a lot of our guys really went out of their way to you know, form up relationships with the Yanks and stuff like that, I’m – maybe I’m not gregarious enough, but I go to know them, I didn’t – some guys sort of formed friendships with some of them, I guess as much as anything it’s probably a

28:30 personality thing, not being a drinker to start with, it cuts out a lot of the association, because most of them – it’s really the real drinking type activity that sort of attracts people more than anything, if you don’t drink beer then there’s not much interest there because you know, they want to drink the beers and get into it, and stuff like that. But probably not much different to the whole of my air force career, because I never ever drank, and –

29:00 no, not really, because in the air force I could mix it with anybody, just drinking lemon squash all night and it didn’t make too much difference basically. But over there I think it was a different thing, the socialising was really via the bar, and that was it.

Well how did you unwind at the end of an operation?

Didn’t think I needed to unwind actually, it’s just – you just go fly the exercise and come home and all I’ve got to do –

29:30 “Is there any mail there for me?” or write some letters, that’s about it. What else did I do? Well there wasn’t anything else to do, there’d be the odd, you know, we’d have a movie night every now and then, I can’t even remember how often it was, whether we had it once a week or twice a week or something, go watch the movies. I’d always try and see that, if it was on when I wasn’t flying. I didn’t have a requirement to

30:00 unwind, it wasn’t one of those things to get all fired up about, or need to do anything.

Well did any of those operations get really hairy for you?

No, I don’t think so. I look back on you know, a couple of things I did and I think – what was that, what did I just lose, just my pip – a couple of things that – I went for a ride in a little 01 Bird Dog, a little Cessna forward air controlled aeroplane, pretty basic

30:30 aeroplane, and we were out all over the jungles marking targets, and I look back on that and I say, “Why did I do that?” you know, you’re just in this little aeroplane, very vulnerable, but didn’t think anything of it at that stage, I think, just young and stupid and an optimist thing, and off we went, on the target-marking exercise, and you know, I’d certainly think twice about it now, but at the time … That was probably I won’t say the hairiest, but I don’t

31:00 know, maybe the most outlandish I became up there. Apart from that, a few other little things we did which were nothing to do with the enemy at all, but doing things, flying the aeroplane over at night and stuff like that, and actually it’s quite funny, one of my – the young nav I had that I was flying with at one stage, we were on the way home from a mission, way up north somewhere and it was very early hours in the morning, two or three o’clock in the morning and it was fairly quiet, and he was standing next to

31:30 me on the way, and he said, “How about doing a barrel roll?” and I said, “No, aerobatics are illegal in this aeroplane, you can’t do aerobatics in a Canberra.” It’s quite capable of doing them, but it’s not permitted, and certainly not aerobatics at night. And he kept on and on and on, so I said, “All right,” and I did a barrel roll. He said, “OK, keep going, do another one.” So we just about barrel rolled all the way home, but you know, you don’t tell people those things.

32:00 So yes, if that’s the most exciting thing you do, it’s not a very exciting business, is it?

Is this with Gus?

No, that was with a fellow called Juley Wills, Jules Wills, he and I did a lot of travelling around the States, we were on the 111 training, he wasn’t my nav but we wanted to do things, so on weekends while we were over on the 111 training we hopped around and went to a whole lot of different places. Another few good stories I could tell you there too about, but never mind.

When you were in Vietnam were there

32:30 **other moments where you’d bent the rules?**

Well, another night coming home, and there was hardly any radio chatter anywhere, and again it was probably three or four o'clock in the morning, and we decided to fly this aeroplane as high was it would go, because we're limited to forty-eight thousand feet in those days, you can't fly above that, because if you have an explosive decompression you've got problems because we didn't have partial pressure waistcoats and that sort of thing. But I don't know, I just decided we had a long

33:00 way to go so why don't we just keep climbing and see how high we'd go. We got up to about fifty-two thousand, and it was still climbing, but that was quite eerie and I thought, "We're not supposed to be up here, we'll tippy-toe back down again." But just little things like that, that's no big deal, but it was just another little thing that I've done in an aeroplane, I can look back and say, "Yeah, I've been to fifty-two thousand feet in an old Canberra," you know?

Were you able to boast about it when you got back to the base?

No, oh no, no, no.

33:30 Oh, I'd boast about things – I remember one night we had six thousand pound of bombs, and we headed up somewhere, and the target was cancelled, so here I am, I was just flying out there in the middle of the night with six thousands pounds and I was going to take them home again, and I thought, "I don't want to take any bombs home," you know? So you just get on the radio and call up, "Excuse me, I've got six thousand pound of bombs, have you got a target I could use them on," and you just keep waiting till they find one and they say, "Yes, we've got a target there," and off you go and get rid of the bombs. So that was a little bit – I don't know, lateral

34:00 thinking and let's get something done tonight, instead of wasting the whole mission.

Well how disappointing was it to come back without having completed an operation like that?

Well I guess you feel like it's a wasted mission, you're out there to do a job and you've got the hardware to – I mean you're fighting a war and somebody out there must need some assistance somewhere, and we're

34:30 there, and you know, we could go anywhere, it's like 'Have gun, will travel', we've got the gear, we've got the goods, you want it, we can put it wherever you want it, so for God's sake use it, you know? Must be somebody out there that needs some help, we can go and do it. But as far as – I mean disappointment, you know, slash your wrists or anything, you come back and say bugger, could have dropped some bombs, had to bring them home, end of the story, that's about it, so no big disappointments. If you got the opportunity to get rid of them while you're there, well that's what we'll try and do.

35:00 **I've noticed in some of your photos you'd actually – messages were written on bombs.**

Oh yes, there weren't any when I was there because there were no milestones actually in my time there was – like this might be the ten thousandth bomb or the squadron's going home and it's you know, goodbye Charlie or whatever else, but most of – no, in my things there – I don't think they – even though we flew the first mission

35:30 I think everybody was – we'd just arrived so probably a bit early to start giving people messages. But no, I didn't get to do any of that sort of stuff.

What kind of messages would be put on the bomb though?

Look I can't remember, there be a few photos in that book I showed you about the highest traditions, which is the history of 2 Squadron. I can't remember actually, but probably some snide little remark, and invariably it was put on there by the

36:00 armament guys, the ground crew guys, they'd come up with some witty little things from time to time, a few dags amongst them, and you know, once it goes in the bomb bay, nobody's going to see the sign again anyway, so … But it's nice for a piccie [picture], a little bit of fun before it happens, and doesn't do anybody any harm.

Did you inspect the bombs before you took off?

Oh yes, yes. We always checked the fuses and the attachments and all that sort of

36:30 stuff. Full pre-flight every time you go near an aeroplane. And that's I guess the beauty of the air force system, the maintenance guys do their inspections and they pre-flight the aeroplane for you, but the pilot still comes out and does his own pre-flight. Some of it might not be quite as technical as some of the things the maintenance guys do, but – and it's not a slight on them, but it's like if two people look at it, then you know, you've got a better chance of finding – and a lot of things that are not quite right with aeroplanes

37:00 before you hop in them are not always easy to see, they're not always noticeable, you've got to look pretty closely, you know, it might only just be – it was the other day when I finished the flight I came back and there was this one little drip about the size of a fingernail on the nose wheel, which I just happened to notice, and I followed it up and the hydraulic jack that lowers the nose wheel had leaked, either the union for the hydraulic line or the actual piston itself was leaking, so

37:30 by the time the next bloke comes out to do the pre-flight that hydraulic oil may very well have dried, because it's not under a lot of pressure or a bit on the tyre you mightn't have noticed, it's just such a little thing, but that's the nature of aeroplanes and that's why certainly in the military you get the maintenance guys plus the pilots will always have a look at it. The armourers will know more about bombs than I'll ever know, and they put the thing on there and they check it all out, but we still come along and check the release pins and check the vane and

38:00 whatever attachment points.

You were making a comment about the riskiness you took in target spotting, but can I discuss the process of target spotting? How would you be briefed for that?

Well there'd be intelligence around and there'd be the pilot or the organisation or the squadron or the unit that operates the forward air control and observation aeroplanes would be given information of maybe troop

38:30 movements, or troop concentrations or particular storage points, whatever people may have very well seen, a lot of it would be maybe taken from PR photographs, and then they'll go out and get down low amongst the trees and have a look for these things. And once they find the target then they call up the appropriate squadron or type of aircraft to attack the target and they'll give them the map coordinates of it and map coordinates to a high performance aeroplane at very high speed, you know,

39:00 to pinpoint it, is a little bit more difficult than the guy in his little putt-putt observation in a forward air control aeroplane, and so they can pinpoint it much more accurately probably than the guy flying the high performance aeroplane and so they just launch a smoke rocket into the target area, and then the guys – on their way in they'll pick it up before they ever get there, and see the smoke and once they've identified it then that's what they hit. And they would confirm with their coordinates, approximately,

39:30 and talk to forward air control and confirm that yes, I've got you in sight, now you're coming in and it's in your twelve o'clock and it's three miles and – whatever they use to help them confirm the identity of the target. Because a lot of the targets would be pretty close to friendly forces, and as you know, it's inevitable that in a war somebody is going to be hurt by friendly fire or friendly bombers or whatever. But everything's done to make sure that that doesn't happen, and that's the way they go about it.

Well how

40:00 **far behind were the other aircraft to drop, once you've spotted a target?**

Well you wouldn't mark the target until they were in the area, until you've made the contact and the forward air controller would be flying around the target area, and then when they're getting at the appropriate range, the appropriate time he'd then make his run and go into mark the target, and then shoot through and then the controller – he'd talk to them and tell them where to go and see where they're pointed and give them directions,

40:30 to get to where the target was. And it might not be right on the smoke anyway, he mightn't be able to get the smoke exactly where the target is, so he'll put the smoke down so the target is, you know, four hundred metres at eight o'clock from your present position, or whatever, so they'll identify the area and say, you know, "Can you see that clearing just to the left of that big copse of trees or whatever, they're just on the perimeter of that clear area," and help them identify it, talk them through it.

41:00 through it.

Great. We've come to the end of another tape.

Tape 7

00:32 **Just staying with combat skyspot Ron, how often would the aircraft take off on these operation?**

Every night, eight crews, eight flights, eight missions, every night of the week, every night. So we would fly as an individual two nights in every three, two on, one off, two on, one off, two on, one off, just end to end.

01:00 **So how often would the planes take off?**

Well they'd be spread from – the first mission would probably be about, usually about 7.30 at night, and the last one probably about around four, five o'clock in the morning, four o'clock maybe.

And the plane that you were given, did you stay with that one plane?

No, you'd probably get a different plane every night,

01:30 we weren't allocated a – we didn't have our name painted on the side of it like the Americans do, no. We had a squadron of aeroplanes and that's what we used as they came up, basically.

And you were talking about the relationship to your ground crew, and you were talking about pre-flight, but what about post-flight, what would you do when you came back

02:00 **to base?**

The only time we'd probably integrate sort of in a relaxed mode would be –

I'm not necessarily talking about the relax stage, I'm talking about –

When you've finished the flight?

When you finished the flight, what was the procedure?

Well, basically we'd just go and fill out the aircraft maintenance form, with the hours, flight details and stuff in there, any unserviceabilities

02:30 the aeroplane might have, and the ground crew would do whatever's required in the post-flight servicing. Check that – I can't remember – all the pins and the wires for the bombs were taken out, and yes, just go round to see that everything was still OK in the aeroplane and refuel it and just get it ready for the next flight.

03:00 **And what would – so they would assess whether the plane was serviceable?**

As well as the pilot and as well as the crew, the pilot and navigator, if they had anything that was wrong with it, and then you would write it up as unserviceable and try to give the ground crew as much information about it, I mean you don't come back and say, "The radio's unserviceable." "Well what's wrong with the radio, why is it unserviceable, is it not working at all or are you getting problems selecting frequencies?" That sort of thing. So there was a lot of assistance

03:30 to and fro between – when you're using the aeroplane you work together as a team, preparing it and using and assessing anything that's wrong with it, and making sure everything's fixed up. Because we flew aeroplanes that had everything fixed, we very rarely carried even minor unserviceabilities before we went flying, and that's probably been a traditional thing with the air force, we carry very few unserviceabilities. I mean there are a lot of things that

04:00 can be wrong with an aeroplane that don't have any impact on achieving the mission, or whatever, you might have to do without some minor thing, but rarely in my time in the air force did we do very much of that, where we carried unserviceabilities. The Americans have a different philosophy, they'll carry a hell of a lot more than we used to. Not again being critical about them, but it's a black box mentality, if something's not working well you take the appropriate black

04:30 box out and put it over there somewhere and stick a new one in, we would probably look and say, "Well what's not working? It's that black box, but what is wrong in that system and so what do we need to do to the black box to fix it"? Rather than, "Let's just put a new one in and take that away, and we can look at that some other time and perhaps fix it up because it's too hard to do it here and now." So I think we just had a – we used to have a different philosophy to the Americans, and I'm pretty sure it's still the same way now.

So in

05:00 **the case – I mean you were a very small squadron with only eight planes, so what would you do if you had a mission on but the plane was unserviceable?**

I think we had nine aeroplanes there, they'd always have probably a back-up, but there'd be somebody on the spot, if you said, "Look, this is wrong, something's wrong with it," they would come out and have the capacity to fix it, or try and fix it, unless it was something that required an engine change, if you found something was wrong with the engine, that had gone wrong

05:30 and the whole engine needed to be changed, well then you go onto the spare aeroplane. But those sorts of major occurrences are fairly rare. We used to have a servicing schedule that was sort of preventative servicing, rather than corrective, so you could have a perfectly serviceable aeroplane in every respect, be taken off the lines for say a major servicing, what we used to call e-servicing, and do any servicing, pull it off the line and virtually strip the aeroplane,

06:00 even though it's perfectly serviceable, because there are time limitations on certain components, and it's a bit like motor cars, you know, you go fifteen thousand ks, and even when we know it's still working perfectly, but you change the timing chain or you change the oil filter – it's to that extent but more so in an aeroplane. It's modified, that still meant that there were really things that were done unnecessarily and could have been refined

06:30 so they – in more recent years they've probably modified that approach a little bit, but you still have servicing schedules, and things need to be replace whether they're broken or not, because they have a calculated life span, and it may be – a particular component may last twice as long as it's planned to last for, but you don't take that chance, you don't wait till it breaks, you take it out and replace it with something that's then got a full life span.

So

07:00 **during combat skyspotter, or during your tour in Vietnam, did you fly all of those nine planes?**

Well I'll look through my log book but there's a pretty fair chance that I would have, I've flown just about every Canberra in the fleet, I think, right throughout the range of the MK Ones and the MK 109s, and the trainers, we had about four different training aeroplanes, a couple of which were built by English

07:30 Electric in England and flown out here, the first two, and then pretty well the balance of them, there might have been three of them, I can't recall now, but the rest were built in Australia under licence by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation. So our Canberras were Australian-built, English design.

And did the Canberras have any sort of camouflage on the outside?

Yes they did, yep. I've got painting there I can show you, there's some photos in that scrapbook and that painting on the

08:00 wall in the other room will show you the camouflage. The camouflage that we had on the aeroplanes in Vietnam was the same, it wasn't changed when we flew from Malaya, in Vietnam it stayed the same, the same colour scheme, pretty well for the life of the aeroplane. Originally they were silver with a white top, and then – well when I first flew them they were all silver, I can't recall when we first started getting the camouflage versions, probably – they were probably

08:30 camouflaged in Malaya before they were in Australia. Look, I'd be misleading if I sort of guessed the time. But ultimately the whole fleet, except the training aeroplanes, which were dual-controlled, the whole fleet was camouflaged, both in Australia and overseas, all three squadrons.

And what did the camouflage consist of?

Your sort of not quite gunmetal grey, but a sort of medium to dark grey, plus khaki predominantly, in that

09:00 random pattern, and I think probably dark grey underneath, with the camouflage on the top, can't remember now. Might have had camouflage under the wings as well. But then instead of having white numbers on the side, they became black, still had the roundings on the side with the big red flying rat in the middle, kangaroo, but it was a very good camouflage scheme, particularly in Malaya, very good, it was

09:30 very difficult to see. I can remember one day we used to fly low level, designated low level routes throughout the Malay Peninsula, and the Brits had a grid system where you put your flight plan in, so we're going a low level route, alpha four or whatever they might have been, and then the Kiwis were doing it and the Poms were doing it, and we're all flying round Malaya, which is not a big place anyway, on these low level routes in camouflaged aeroplanes, so they came up with this system,

10:00 once the flight plan was in they looked at their grid pattern and said, "Yes, well there'll be no confliction with this flight, and this flight, on this leg," but it didn't work that way, because I can remember one day we were out in a pair, and there was a flight of four Kiwi Canberras, and their four and our two went like that, on the same route in reciprocal directions, so we just sort of threaded the needle with six aeroplanes, so you just couldn't see them, the camouflage is so good, until they're right there. I mean if they're right in front, you know,

10:30 you'll pick it when it gets close, but it's not until it gets fairly close that you see it. So it was a good system, good camouflage system for the low level operations.

It's amazing you didn't have a head-on.

Yes, it was rather. We were very lucky.

Well, in the system of flights that you had, or your flight plan that you had during Vietnam, the Canberras were not

11:00 **defensively armed, so how could you watch – what system did you have for watching your back?**

It didn't matter in Vietnam because we had air superiority there, there was no opposing air force per se, only in North Vietnam, the MIGs and the so forth up there, South Vietnam, didn't need it, and even at low level you didn't, there was going to be no other aeroplane trying to shoot at you, and we weren't into the ground attack mode with guns or anything in the aeroplane,

11:30 so we didn't need any defensive armour in that role. It would have been handy in Indonesia, if we'd ever been there, but you know, the aeroplane wasn't designed to have that. With the Kiwi Canberras, they were a later version than ours, and they had a different cockpit, they had a fighter-type cockpit and they could mount pods under the wings with rockets and guns in them, which we couldn't do in ours, and there were some Brit Canberras which had a gun mounted in a hump under the fuselage I think, from

12:00 memory. But we didn't have those luxuries.

And who would be choosing the targets?

The Americans, and probably in conjunction with all the ground forces, Vietnamese ground forces, depending on which men – the air forces were there to support the ground forces, and support for the ground forces is not only close ground attack to where they might have a perimeter, and the Viet Cong or the North

12:30 Vietnamese are moving in on a perimeter, they'll call in ground strikes on those ground troops, there are other targets, as I said before, like supply routes, tunnel systems, and ammunition dumps and so forth that would be – if they're discovered and they know roughly where they are, then they'll target those. But it's a collection of a whole lot of information and intelligence from the Vietnamese ground forces, the American ground forces, the Australian ground forces, and wherever ground support was required, be it ground attack or

13:00 bombing targets and so forth, the same when the B52s were dropping all their bombs, it was pattern bombing, but they may very decided there's a whole pattern of tunnels in a certain area, so just saturate the place with, you know, hundreds of bombs and try and destroy that. So all the requests and requirements come in from probably a multitude of different directions, and quite a range of targets, some

13:30 short noticing where people get attacked without any notice and it could be at the risk of being overrun, so you have the ability to bring in tactical air support at fairly short notice. And it might be in the form of an F4, it might be F100 Super Sabres, it might be an A1 Skyrider, which is a propeller-driven aeroplane, quite a big one, a single-engine aeroplane, which carries a massive amount of armament, bombs and rockets and stuff

14:00 like that, for a single-engine aeroplane, probably just about as much as a B17 did in the Second World War, that sort of thing. So you know, quite a lot of coordination and organising required to operate in a theatre like that anyway, doesn't matter where you go.

So I'm just interested to hear how the Australian squadron worked with the 35th Tactical Fighter

14:30 **Wing, so you were attached, and so the Americans would choose the targets or – I'm just wondering how your wing commander worked with the Americans, to …?**

Well we would get the frags or the orders for the specific targets issued to us every day or every night, and they'll say, "Here's this target at such and such a time," and you'd get the orders coming through, and when they get the orders through, they might come through on a telex or

15:00 something like that, and OK, that's our next frag, put it up on the board, this is the next crew in the order of sequence to do it, and they'll fly that mission.

And what sort of role then did your squadron leader have?

Well, you know, liaising and working in

15:30 concert with all the other squadron commanders, all the American squadron commanders, go to the weekly briefings with the commander of the base, report on their serviceability rates, on their strike rates, the number of unexploded bombs they might have, and any other problems, and targeting and problems with operation, for safe operation, stuff like that. Modifying tactics or whatever was there – it wouldn't matter what it was, they're the sorts of things that

16:00 people talk about, and there's the liaison role as well to fit in with our normal methods of operations, with what the Americans did, because we had different methods, and that's why we do all these command exercises all the time, then they pay off when you get to a system like that. But when you go to Vietnam right out of the blue, and you mightn't have done – and I certainly hadn't done, I think at that stage, probably had never done any exercises with the Americans, certainly with the Brits and the Kiwis, but never Americans, so they're

16:30 different. But it didn't impact on us greatly, we'd get the feedback through the commanding officer and our op staff on what the requirements are and what day standard operating procedures and regulations and so forth, so that we fit in with the system that they operate, and it's just an ongoing day-by-day briefing system and communication, so that we still operate virtually as an autonomous squadron, we had a job and we just went and did it, and we operated

17:00 ourselves as a squadron within that American umbrella, basically. We supply the aeroplanes, we supply the bombs, they probably supplied the fuel, and things like that.

Sorry, you said they supplied the fuel?

I think – I can't remember how they worked it now, but there was probably an arrangement – we had the commitment to provide x-number of aeroplanes to fly x-number of missions, and with the weapons, and they might very well have supplied the fuel, whether we paid for it or not

17:30 I don't remember now, but there'd be all those sorts of arrangements in a joint operation in a war theatre. Again I didn't really get heavily involved, we had – I mean our squadron was fairly top heavy when I was there, because it's very visible and very contentious as well, because as you know, Vietnam was always a contentious issue anyway. So we had in fact two wing commanders instead of one. We had

the CO of

18:00 the squadron, and an OC flying. And we had probably a half a dozen squadron leaders, we had a couple of squadron leader navigators I think, and – maybe only four, but we certainly had two squadron leader pilots as flight commanders, and really we were just a squadron of eight aeroplanes, so we probably didn't need two flight commanders, but we still had two squadron leaders, plus senior navigators as squadron leaders as well. And

18:30 I was probably the – yes, I was the most junior pilot, I was the only flying officer pilot, all the others were flight lieutenants upwards. So it's – probably a bit unkind – well I suppose you could almost call it top heavy, but the CO and the OC flying and all the squadron leaders flew the same sort of things, they flew every night, or their two nights out of three, the same as the rest of us did, because we had x-number of aeroplanes and x-number of crews to service those aeroplanes, so you

19:00 got the flexibility to run a roster and people didn't have to exceed crew duty times or fatigue hours, plus you had a back-up anyway if anybody was sick. In essence it enabled us to virtually guarantee that we would get eight aeroplanes up every night of the week, and succeed in the mission, so it was a pretty reasonable effort

19:30 from the squadron.

It's a phenomenal effort, I mean eight planes to take on the VC [Viet Cong].

Look, we filled a gap in a particular form of combat that the Americans wanted to utilise, and that was around-the-clock bombing every day of the week, and the support that this one small squadron gave was

20:00 probably fairly valuable to the Yanks in that role, I'm pretty certain it relieved two full squadrons of F100s to do what they specialise in, by us just going up there with our eight little aeroplanes and flying them every night of the week. So it was probably a fairly valuable role for the Yanks in a very, very big picture, you know, one very small squadron, but you know, I think – and the effectiveness of the squadron and the reputation the

20:30 squadron had, was worth a lot as well.

What was the reputation?

We were very highly regarded I think, there's no doubt, we got unit citations, you know valour citations and stuff like that for our operations there, and – just the impact of having Australians there. We had a lot of Australians flying American aeroplanes on forward air controlling and stuff like that, and most of those guys were decorated for their time there, and we really have a pretty good air force,

21:00 we can hold our high amongst anybody, really. From time to time we go across to the big red flag exercises in America, and the 111s are pitted against F18s and whatever else, and stuff like that, and the F111s have taken out top honours and beaten all the Yanks in that exercise, and stuff like that. So for not a huge air force we have a pretty good standard, I think. Most people are pretty

21:30 proud of it, and they've got to make sure that when they go overseas and mix it with the others, they're not going to be outdone. There is a bit of pride in Australia, after all, I think.

Well just going back to the operational flying, I'm just wondering, what sort of gear did you wear in the plane?

Just those old-fashioned green flying suits, the green cotton flying suits,

22:00 almost one size fits all, not quite that bad, but you know, they're not a tailored item, put it that way, and a Mae West [lifejacket], which was the survival jacket with survival radios in it. Can't remember what else it had in it, it had a radio, and flotation gear, whether it had any survival gear in it I can't remember now.

Well I was just wondering what you would do if you had to go

22:30 **to the bathroom, on an operational flight? Would that ever happen?**

Didn't happen to me fortunately, but – look, I know there are guys who in the past – not from Vietnam but certainly flying Canberras where the navigator's been caught short and had to get his big plotting chart out and put on the floor and use that in the middle of the flight, which wouldn't be much fun for the guy up the front. But – well they had little piddle bottles in them, which would be God's

23:00 own job to try and use, because you've got the ejection seat harness on, or the parachute harness as the ejection seat pack, plus the safety harness on top of that, and they're all you know, four point harnesses and you're strapped in like you wouldn't believe, and you can imagine sitting in an ejection seat and trying to get through all this plus get a zip undone which is in the bottom of your flying suit there, not an easy exercise, I've never tried it and I think I'd make more mess than

23:30 anything. But I must tell you, on one very long trip, and it was very cold in the aeroplane, because all the metal had rime ice all over it, it was just white, and I had a sergeant engine fitter as a passenger,

and halfway through the flight he was absolutely busting, so we had these little, like a plastic tube about that long, with a plastic bag attached to the bottom of it, a piddle tube, and I said, “Here you go, we’ve got the resources here,” and he just

24:00 had his blue overalls on and a little lapstrap, so it was OK for him and he went, “Ah, thank God for that,” and put the cap back on and sat there like this, and about a half an hour or so later he looked and said, “Hang on, it’s empty.” The damn thing had a hole in it, and he looked down and all his piddle was frozen on his boots and on the floor, it was so cold he couldn’t even feel it, he was so cold. That’s the only time I’ve seen one used in the Canberra, and it didn’t work. Probably been there for so long, and

24:30 nobody every checks them out, you know [demonstrates blowing] – no, it hasn’t got a hole in it. Well I mean you’d probably turn a tap on, I don’t think you’d want to blow in it to see if it had any holes, so there – so beyond that, it’s not very flash.

Well, would your adrenalin be pumping fairly high when you’re out on operational flights?

25:00 No, I don’t think so. It’s one of those things that – I have to say that really it was a bit of a cake walk, I’d been flying the aeroplane for a few years, and it wasn’t to me a very demanding task, we’d been trained and we trained and trained and trained, and you know the aeroplane inside out, I could just about make it talk to me, I could do anything I wanted to do with a Canberra,

25:30 and …

Did it have any vices?

The Canberra? Not really, not really, no, it was a very reliable aeroplane, probably the only vice would be if you had an engine failure and you’d lowered full flap on the approach, and for some reason you wanted to overshoot or go around. If you put full power on, while you had the flap down on one engine, it would just roll on its back like that.

26:00 That was probably its only vice, but it’s one of those things that every year everybody knew you don’t do that, you know, you don’t – you’ve got full flap down you don’t try and go round on one engine, because you can’t control it. It killed a couple of crews at Amberley, unnecessarily really, but – young guys, you know, pretty well straight off pilot’s course and onto the aeroplane, as we were, but I still can’t understand to this day why it

26:30 happened, because it shouldn’t. Even if you do get in that situation, and you’re starting to lose it, all you’ve got to do is close the throttle on the engine that’s working, and it’s a big glider, it just – it’s then symmetrical and you can fly it and land it, you know, even if you can’t reach the airfield, just land it somewhere in a clear area around the airfield, at least you’ll survive. But if you try and keep flying and try and fight it, well you’re just going to die, that’s it. So I suppose you could call it a vice, but really I can’t think of any others.

27:00 Rolls Royce engines, very reliable, performed well. Engine failures? I flew them for seven years, I’ve had a couple thousand hours on them and I had probably three engine failures, four maybe. One was where a drive shaft about the size of my finger, comes off the ancillary drive on the engine, which drives the fuel pumps, the oil pumps and all those sort of things, and that sheared,

27:30 it’s called a ‘quill shaft’, and just this thin drive shaft just sheared, so you don’t have any fuel in the engine, the engine just died, and I didn’t know why, and you can’t fix it in the air, there’s nothing you can do to by-pass anything or get auxiliary fuel or whatever, so that was the only real engine failure I’d had. Another one I had a bird through the engine, again just at the critical stage in an overshoot, just gear down on a circuit and I took a fairly sizeable

28:00 bird through the engine, made a hell of a noise and I had a compressor stall and the compressor surge or whatever, and I immediately shut the engine down and continued with an asymmetric circuit and landed, and there wasn’t a thing wrong with the engine. So that was pretty sturdy. But then there was another time I flew for a whole sortie and came back and post-flight inspection, and the engineer said, “This engine’s stuffed, we’ve got to change it,” and a sparrow – it had ingested a sparrow. No indications in the aeroplane in the engine,

28:30 no glitch, everything was working fine by me, but that had damaged that engine bit by bit throughout, and needed a new engine. There’s a big bird’s gone through the engine, no damage, a little bird’s gone through, complete engine change. So, pretty reliable.

And most of those things didn’t happen during your Vietnam time?

No, I didn’t have any engine failures or anything, no problems in Vietnam as I said.

Well I’m just also curious about what you saw of

29:00 **choppers on the Phan Rang base. Were they mainly American choppers that were there?**

There were no choppers at Phan Ran except maybe rescue helicopters. It was a transport support base as well as a strike base, so they had two runways, a big sealed runway for all the jet high performance aeroplanes, and the other one had that old PSP [pierced steel plate] plate, you know those plates with the holes in it, they had in the Second World War, they had a runway made out

29:30 those, and then things like the C123 providers, the twin-engine transport aeroplane, used to go over that side, and Hercs and whatever, but whatever transport aeroplanes and Unibergs, the DC3s, they would land and operate on that side, and we used to operate from this side, and that was about it. I think there might have been a couple of choppers there, I can't remember now, but they'd just be purely for rescue, search and rescue. The others were the – based at lots of other places around.

So you did have your

30:00 **own designated part of the strip, or runway?**

We had our own squadron tarmac area, or lines we called them, with their own revetments, and our own hangar, and we also had the headquarters and admin building right adjacent to the tarmac where we were, so we had a hangar for them to do the maintenance in, and then each of the aeroplanes had its own revetment to park in. And so we were able to operate totally

30:30 independently from the Americans really, whereas this squadron went, "There you are, you're working with the Americans and you're there, so off you go," so that's what we did. "You give us the job, we'll go and do the job."

But surely you'd have to have a combined control tower to …?

Oh yes, just a normal control tower for normal radio procedures and radars and so on, sure. Yes, it was just like operating off any airfield, with whatever traffic's operating there you

31:00 use whatever the support facilities are, be it air traffic control or fire services or rescue services, then that was all part of the base complex. But we just had whatever we needed to operate our aeroplanes in terms of maintenance repairs and weapon supply and administration for the squadron and the headquarters building for the squadron. And then our mess and living facilities were separated from that, further away over the other side of the hill, further

31:30 across the base.

And just one other last thing about operations, you've mentioned the report that you would – the servicing report that you'd give to the ground crew, but what about the debriefing report that you'd do?

Yes, we had our own squadron intelligence officer, and each mission was –

32:00 you'd write up a mission report and you'd be debriefed on anything you might have seen or heard or you know, what you thought the success of the operation was, as much as they could, and probably at some later stage try and collate that with any other feedback they had from reconnaissance and other intelligence as a result of the various strikes. Or it could be part of a complete operation that we were involved in as well, not just rocking out every night just for an individual target, there might be a whole strike plan or whatever,

32:30 and all the associated support functions for that, we could have been part of that. But yes, everything was – you'd come back, you'd sit down with your teller tiller and you'd sit down and write it up and debrief the thing and fill it all out.

And you've also mentioned while we were breaking that you didn't do many, but there were two or three daytime operations that you did.

33:00 **So how did they differ from the night time operations?**

Well the day time operations is utilising those forward air traffic controllers I was talking about, so there'd be – and I guess there's also the capacity for people on the ground to call in strikes and control it, but I think most of them would have been – we would have coordinated through a forward air controller in an aeroplane, and the target, you'd probably have again

33:30 my memory's a bit vague, whether they were predesignated targets or were out into an operation in an area and waiting to see that the forward air controller had a target. He may very well have found a target, and you've probably got enough time so he'd report back through the system through the full command system, and they'd say, "Yep, we've got some more targets in such and such an area, so we need a day strike at such and such a time," or it might be in support of an exercise that

34:00 they're about to start, not an exercise, a mission they're about to start, and you'd go out and you'd have all the appropriate – you'd be pre-briefed from all the contact frequencies and where you would go to make the contact, and which bird dog you'd be talking to, and then he'd give a description of the coordinates of the target and then he'd say probably, you know, "Running into mark now, and I'll be running from the east to the west and I'm currently in your eleven o'clock at three miles," and

34:30 you'd try and locate him and stuff like that. Because then you could watch him and then very quickly probably pick up the target as he marked it, rather than not see him and not know where he is and have to look around the whole area and wait till you saw some smoke somewhere. And it's not always that easy to see. And then once you've identified it and he clarifies it, whether or not he's got the smoke exactly on the target or whether it might be, you know, five hundred metres in the four

35:00 o'clock from whatever it is, or the south-east and the target is actually there in relation to the smoke, and then you just go in and you've got the target identified and just try and march your stick of six one thousand pound bombs through the middle of the smoke, evenly spaced each side of the smoke.

And you mentioned that your

35:30 **call sign was magpie, but I'm also wondering, was Tokyo Rose going while you were in Vietnam?**

There was some form of radio propaganda going, probably nobody paid any attention to it anyway, I mean, you know, I think it was a lot of rubbish, it was probably a joke more than anything. There's some Vietnamese chicky-bird trying to talk to you about something or other, and you think, "Oh yeah, ha ha ha." I mean I don't think for a moment anybody who

36:00 would have anything like the impact that maybe Tokyo Rose had or anything of that level of grandeur but look, I don't even remember much about that, I vaguely recall that there was something going on, that if you happened to tune into a certain frequency you might get it. But I don't think anybody even bothered to go out of their way to listen to see what she had to say, I mean, what more can you say?

So you didn't tune in?

Not that I recall,

36:30 I maybe heard it once or something, look, I don't know, it's just a vague thing there in the back of my mind somewhere, and it couldn't have been that significant because even with my shocking memory I might have remembered a little bit more if it was at all significant, but I don't think it was.

Well you were about to tell me much earlier on that you did socialise a little bit with your ground crew?

37:00 Yes, I mean there's probably an old tradition or whatever, and it's really old school that the officers and airmen ranks don't mix. We had a slightly different point of view, going back to the days in Malaya, we used to go across to a little airfield called Gongketta [?], on the western side, north-western area of Malaya, and we used to operate out of what was originally an old

37:30 World War II strip that the Japanese had built, and then the Brits had revamped it for the emergency, the '48, '50, that emergency in Malaya, and that's all that was there, was a runway, not even a tin outhouse, just a runway out in the middle of the boondocks, and we used to take tents over there and operate jet aeroplanes off their strip, with tents, so we'd have a mess tent and a maintenance tent, and then our accommodation tents, and stuff like that. And after a day's flying we would go up to probably the sergeant's mess tent, which was

38:00 bigger than ours and all the sergeants would be there, and all the airmen would be there, and all the officers and air crew would be there, and drink booze and have snacks or a chat and play darts, or whatever we used to do. But the CO put the lid on it, said, "No, you can't do that." It was a big morale issue, you get on well with your troops and everything works so much better. But you start to isolate – when I first flew Canberras we had our own maintenance outfit, each squadron had it's own maintenance

38:30 team organisation, and latterly they went to centralised maintenance, they had a maintenance squadron, they looked after all the aeroplanes and each day the squadron put their hand up and said, "I need six aeroplanes today," and they'd say, "OK, here's your six aeroplanes," and we didn't get to know any of the maintenance guys. Prior to that, I mean I was a 6 Squadron pilot and we had 6 Squadron maintenance crew, and they had a 6 Squadron badge on their shoulder, and I knew most of the guys by their first name. And if you walked out to your plane

39:00 and you had half a dozen practice bombs in the bomb bay and you were going to go bombing at Evans Head and you hopped in and something was unserviceable, you'd say, "This is broken," and they'd say, "Hang on sir, we'll be right," and they'd race off, the bombs would come off out of the bomb bay, they'd be on the spare aeroplane next door and within half an hour, you'd have another aeroplane. When it got to centralised maintenance – it was squadron spirit and there was competition between the squadrons, right from the top to the bottom, and it was great. We got

39:30 centralised maintenance, the same thing happened, you'd say, "Oh, this aeroplane's broken, have you got a spare?" "Nope, sorry," and that's it. So you'd go back, and it was different, economically yes, one lot of tools, one hangar, one maintenance crew or whatever, yes, it's cheaper, but in the long term, I don't think it's anywhere near as good. But over there –

So 2 Squadron in Vietnam …

We had our own maintenance crew and you got to know all the guys, and we didn't –

40:00 we would mix, you know, because we'd have the same picture theatre and you'd all sit and talk to one another, but we stayed in our own messes, it wasn't a policy to visit the others' mess or whatever, so that was always the status quo, but we had that contact on a day-to-day basis because they were our maintenance people, and we talked to them at the aeroplane and – just like you and I might talk because you know, it's know, hey, I'm an officer, you're only an airman sort of thing, that concept didn't

exist anyway, but

40:30 they tried to keep that status separation as a principle, I suppose, in the system.

But did they have difficulty getting spare parts for the planes?

No, no, because we've got priority, we had three squadrons of Canberras plus an operational conversion unit, but if we wanted anything, we go it, to the detriment of the others, because it wasn't important for them to have that level of support back in Australia because they were basically training squadrons plus a conversion unit,

41:00 and we were an operational squadron and it was important that – and so yes, we got the priority, and I guess that's another reason we managed to keep eight serviceable aeroplanes virtually every night of the week.

OK, well that's a good point for us to change our

Tape 8

00:32 **Last time we spoke, there was a brief mention about friendly fire, and …?**

Was there? OK, I'll believe you. Friendly fire?

Yes.

Oh, OK, dropping bombs in the wrong place or whatever, yes?

Did you ever have any instances of…?

Not that I'm aware of, no I don't think so, I don't think so. Being radar controlled then

01:00 we wouldn't know about it, if the radar controller fouled up and told them the wrong coordinates or picked the wrong place, we certainly – I don't think we'd find out about it. I don't recall any instances of our squadron dropping bombs in the wrong place.

How frequent was it with the Americans?

I've no idea, no idea.

01:30 We wouldn't have heard about a lot of it anyway, probably not like it is today, because the way wars are held today, as soon as somebody, you know, like thirty seconds after it's done it's on television worldwide, but in those days I guess if you bombed your own forces it probably wouldn't get around as much nor anywhere near as quickly anyway, so – there may have been odd occasion while I was there, but I

02:00 certainly don't remember, not that I'm aware of with our squadron, anyway.

Was it ever a concern?

Well yes, I guess so because even – I mean some of our targets we would know, but perhaps we're fairly close and your run in direction was a certain way, so that you know, if your friendly forces are there, your run in direction to the target would be there, instead of that way or that way, that sort of consideration, yes.

02:30 Don't remember much more beyond that, we probably were, as I said, made aware of the location of friendly forces, probably every time we went flying, partly because of rescue considerations, if we had to jump out, then you'd know which way to go, and how far you had to go to get to the friendly forces. So I think that was probably an element in every mission brief, I'm sure it was.

And when you were talking about the camouflage you spoke about your own close call,

03:00 **what kind of radar did you have for yourself?**

In our aeroplanes?

Yes.

Nothing, no we didn't have – no, we had no radar in our aeroplanes. That was always one of the problems. We – and I mean a lot of radars could be utilised as a weather radar as well and we didn't have anything we could use for weather, so – and in the tropics that's one of those things you have to be pretty careful of, because it's pretty exciting when you fly through a thunderstorm,

03:30 and I did one night in Malaya, and it's not the sort of thing you want to do more than once. And I was only thankful that I was in a Canberra at the time, because a lot of other aeroplanes, I think we probably would have lost a few parts of the aeroplane in that particular thunderstorm, because in the

tropics they go up fifty, sixty, seventy thousand feet, you know, and they're pretty damn violent. I've been at forty-eight thousand feet in the tropics, flying underneath the anvil where you're not supposed to fly, because it's supposed to be pretty

04:00 turbulent, but it wasn't at the time, maybe it was my ignorance, I got away with it. But fascinating things, and most of the time you're OK, you can – because they're just these isolated thunderstorms, and you can wind your way between them, even at night, because we used to do this in Vietnam, dark nights and thunderstorms everywhere, and you could see this one light up and this one light up, and you'd just watch for a while as you're heading down here and say, "It's really really black there," so if it's really really black, there's probably no thunderstorm, so you'd

04:30 just go that way, and that was really the only way you had of detecting them. And of course then you get to the stage where you get some high level cloud as well as the thunderstorms, and the thunderstorms are embedded in other clouds, and you can't see them, and that's what happened to us in the Straits of Sumatra one night which was reasonable exciting for a while.

Well with no radar and no weather radar, and night flying, how did you get

05:00 **around?**

Well you've got radar – sorry, radio navigation systems, we've got radio beacons like an NDB [non directional radio beacon], and a TACAN [tactical air navigation] which was an American system, a radio navigation aid, and that gave you information on your instrument in the cockpit of the bearing from that radio aid position and the distance. So you could always position yourself if you know that – Pelaku was one of the places we used where the

05:30 radar was, I think there was a tack hand there as well, so if you know the tack hand is located at Plakoo, and your instrument needle is pointing to, say zero three zero, and then the station out there, the needle points to the station on your dial, and so it's pointing to zero three zero, we're on the two one zero, the reciprocal – we're on the two one zero degree radial from that point, and twenty-two miles away. So you could say, "Well there's Pelaku, and we're on a two three zero

06:00 at twenty-two miles, we're right there." And you pull your map out and say, "That's where I am, you know, looking at the dial I'm right over that point there," and it's quite accurate and quite reliable. So you can navigate all over the countryside just with a tack hand, without anything else. But the navigators had a Doppler radar navigation system in the aeroplane, which was good, but not a hundred per cent reliable, particularly over water. So all that

06:30 did was just a Doppler system which would give you a ground speed read out and a track read out, I think. So if they did that, that could navigate but predominantly my nav didn't do any of the nav in Vietnam, I did the whole lot myself, just on the tack hand, so I always used to fly round using that to get me where I needed to go.

Then what was the role of your navigator, if that was the case?

Push the bomb release button. As I said to you earlier on, he was a

07:00 really nice guy and quite conscientious and competent as a navigator, but the Canberra was a bit too fast for him and he really didn't keep up with it, so yes, that's the way it went.

And that relationship with our navigator as we discussed earlier, it's really quite important, and when you're in that kind of situation, how much pressure does that place on you?

07:30 Well not a lot really, I mean I think I was quite capable of just operating the aeroplane by myself anyway, and navigating around – could have been Vietnam, if I was on a long flight say from Butterworth to Hong Kong, well I'd just have to fly a constant heading and speed and apply forecast wind to it, and hope that at the other end I wasn't very far away when I got within range of the navigation aide at the other end, because in between, you're over water and there's nothing you can navigate by, and that's where the navigator comes into his

08:00 own, because he has a plotting chart and he uses the ground position indicator and using his Doppler system to plot and navigate where you're going, so he knows exactly where you are all the time, whereas the other way you've got to revert to pilot navigation where it's heading time, and distance. You can still do it, but if you don't know what the winds are and you've got no other features, if you're flying over water for a long time and the forecast said the wind is from the

08:30 north at sixty knots, and it turns out to be from west at thirty-five, and you've plotted your heading and allowed for drift on the forecast wind, and you start heading up this way and the wind blows you and you wind up going this way, and you're over water, you don't know, and you could be a long way off track, without knowing it. So that's why you need the other aids that the navigator can use. But in Vietnam it wasn't really necessary, most of the navs did all the navigation around the place, most of the other

09:00 navs, but it wasn't – you could get by without it, put it that way, you could quite adequately get around with pilot navigation. That's what I did.

And how familiar did you become with the country?

It's not a big country, so in terms of the same level of familiarity that I had with Malaya, no, because I wasn't looking at – you know, in Malaya it was all visual map reading and

09:30 flying over the terrain and recognising features and things everywhere, whereas for the first five and a half months basically in Vietnam it was at night, and just doing it on – well you've got a map, and you know where you are in relation to the ground, but it's all bearings and distances from radio waves, you look at it and say, "Yeah, well I'm over this place," and it might be Da Nang, "Well yeah, I'm over Da Nang at the moment," but that's it, you know? You've got a map and you know that Hue's there and Da Nang's there and Phan Rang's there and the Phouc Two Province is there and Saigon's there, and that sort of thing, you

10:00 know where all these places are, but it's all based on using radio navigation aids to get to these places, whereas Malaya was a whole different thing all together, it was just, "Yep, there's Pelaku over there, it's just over that hill, or as we come up this river and where the bridge crosses there, if we turn right a little bit then Playkoo's just over the other side of the hill." No, no, didn't know that in Vietnam, which I would have done in Malaya.

And how well lit were the areas down

10:30 **below, when you were night flying?**

How…?

How well lit were they?

Well they're not, I mean Saigon you would see, yes, as a big city that was still lit up at night, but other cities you could see lights like you would, but at thirty-thousand feet I guess most of the time you didn't worry about you know, which town was which, there were some lights down there or some lights over there, and of course we knew the bigger places like Saigon, you can look from a distance and say, "Well there's Saigon over there," but

11:00 beyond that they were I suppose relatively meaningless because we weren't navigating by those towns, it was all distances and bearings from radio aids and stuff like that.

Did you ever get lost or off course?

No, no, I suppose in my time in the air force I've been lost about three times, and each was when the navigator was doing the work, so I always rubbish them about that. They're good friends of mine that I was lost with, but

11:30 yes, I was just sitting there doing what the navigator's saying, and I got lost.

Was that early in your career?

The first time was with Paddy, in Malaya, very soon after we got to Butterworth, because it was quite a different role than he'd been used to, because all your navigator training you fly constant headings and accurate speeds and it's you know, all the basics hinge on accurate flying and timing and stuff like that, and proper planning. When we got to

12:00 Malaya and we were down low level at high speed, and he had no low level navigation training the way were doing it at high speed, and we were just up and down valleys and over hills and this sort of thing, and just over undulating jungle, and to a map reader under those conditions, it is a mind-boggling job, I mean it's really difficult. And when you get there and you start doing this, and terrain following

12:30 and stuff, to sit there with a map and try and read the contours if very, very difficult, very difficult, I don't know how they ever did any of it, but he got lost, and he was most distressed, he sat down next to me on the floor and tears started to roll down his cheeks, he was lost. So I said, "We'll just go up to five thousand feet, we'll have a look around and get ourselves re-established and we'll start again." But he was a very good navigator though, Paddy was an excellent navigator,

13:00 and that was the only time he got lost, but he was very embarrassed about that. And I never let him live it down, of course because you know, he was the navigator, I'm only a pilot, but our guys, you know?

Well I asked if that was early on in the piece, to establish whether those kinds of lessons made you be more aware of the navigation role?

Well yes, it should have been part of your education process flying those aeroplanes, the pilot's got to be, you know, try to be

13:30 as aware as possible where he is anyway, rather than just blithely sitting there and assuming the navigator – I mean you could probably assume ninety-nine per cent of the time that the navigator knew exactly where he was and was right, because they were that good. But everybody's human and there are things that some form of misindication or if their instrumentation doesn't work exactly right, sometimes you can't necessarily pick it up,

14:00 depending on the system you're using and how you're working it, it mightn't be obvious for quite a

while that hey, hang on, this is not matching up any more, and sometimes it's too late, you're already lost. We happened to be coming home with another navigator, these were in the Butterworth days, we were ferrying an aeroplane back from Australia after servicing, and we used to have to go – this was during confrontation again with Indonesia, and we used to go across to

14:30 Perth, and then Perth out to Cocos, and then Cocos all the way around the top of the Great Konickabars which are north-west of Sumatra, and then back down to Butterworth, so that we couldn't fly over Indonesia. And that's a long haul, and there's nothing in between, and if you get past the halfway point, you don't have too much flexibility in some of these things, if you miss – coming the other way if you miss Cocos Island well you're history, sort of thing. So the navigator's got to be pretty good. But we were heading back

15:00 this time, and there was a lot of cloud around and again we were about forth-eight thousand feet, and I just happened to look out the side through a gap in the cloud, and I could see islands down below, and I said, "Hang on, there's not supposed to be any islands here," and I said to my nav, this was Julius the old fellow I used to travel around the States with when we were on 1/11th, I said, "What are these islands just out here to the right? We're x-number of hours from Cocos, we should be …?" "What islands, no islands there?" I said, "Well yes there

15:30 are, have a look down here." And he handed me up this huge plotting chart which was pretty useless, it was all he had, "Which ones are they, which ones are they?" I said, "You've got to be kidding me," you know? I'm looking a hole in the cloud at these islands, and I got this map and looked at my watch and figured out roughly where we should be, and I eventually identified them, and I handed back to him, and they were islands right on the coast of Sumatra, which meant we were inside their air defence zone, and I handed it back and I said, "Juley, it's these islands here.. "Oh rubbish, it

16:00 can't be, can't be," and he unstrapped and raced up the front, and looked over the side and he said, "Shit, turn left, turn left," because we were in Indonesia's air space, you see, about three quarters of the way down the top of Sumatra. But turn left? I wasn't going to turn left, it's too late now, we're there. Because it's right across from the Dam: which is their big fighter base, with all their radar and stuff like this. And I said, "Juley, we're going for Butterworth, I'm turning right," so we went and headed straight for Butterworth, right across the

16:30 top of Sumatra. Because we were virtually on the coastline, and we spent the whole time as we were flying – I'd drop the wing every now and then and try and look back as far behind me to make sure there was no fighter behind us, and I think we knocked forty-five minutes off the record for the fastest time from Cocos to Butterworth. Didn't tell anybody how, but at that stage we were still only pilot officers anyway, and you know, you do these silly things. But I mean it was too late, we were in the mire,

17:00 so let's just keep going now, and get across there. So that was number two.

I want to ask now what's number three?

Number three was with Jules again, we were on an exercise up near Northern Queensland somewhere and yes, he was a bit whacked, he didn't know exactly where we were because it was low level visual stuff again. So we had to sort that one out. He was a very good nav, a highly intelligent guy, and after he retired from the air force he went back to

17:30 university and got himself a law degree and a few little goodies like that, you know, he's no slouch this guy, so you could imagine me, with my thick brain, I'd make the most out of saying, "Dummy navigators, the only time I've ever been lost has been with you guys."

Well trust is a really important element of your relationship.

Absolutely, yes.

So how does –

Look, these guys, I mean I had the utmost faith in them anyway, I mean that's just a minor glitch really, it's just one of the those things, and nobody's perfect, but I mean

18:00 these guys were – all the navs officers were good, I've got a lot of time for navigators, they're a few steps smarter than most of us pilots I think, yes, they're a good bunch of guys, and they put a lot of faith in the pilot, I mean they're in a worse situation than we are, you're the bloke that determines whether they live or die, so you've got to admire them for the courage they display to take the chance of going up with a whole bunch of cowboys flogging around the airways,

18:30 so yes, it's an ideal – to me a pilot and navigator crew and a twin-engine jet aeroplane of that nature is an ideal way you can do a multitude of different things in the aeroplane, and it's interesting to fly and you can be very independent and travel anywhere around the world, and I think, in the Canberra you could go anywhere in the world, it had the legs to get you wherever you needed to go, it required next to no support, you could just rock in anywhere and you didn't even

19:00 need an external power source or battery cart to start the thing up, you just hop in our aeroplane and push the starter cartridge and off you go. They're very reliable, and a good aeroplane.

A very fond relationship there.

Oh yes, we used to call it the ‘Queen of the Skies’, but yes, a great old machine.

Why the Queen of the Skies?

I don’t know, just looks nice, a lovely old aeroplane, performed well, graceful looking thing for a high speed aeroplane, yes, a

19:30 pretty nice looking machine, the Queen of the Skies. Notice we said Queen of the Skies and not King of the Skies? You should feel proud about that, we’re prepared to acknowledge the feminine nature of things.

Well I mean, were aircraft referred to as a ’she’ or a ‘her’, as in like the Navy, when a ship is …?

Probably not so much as boats, I mean I used to probably call the

20:00 Canberra ‘she’ as much as anything, yes. I don’t think we did with any other aeroplanes, but it was just a special machine. I think it’s one of the best aeroplanes – I mean our planes are so much better now than that was, but I still think it’s – there are aeroplanes around and I think that’s one of the best aeroplanes that’s ever been built, it’s a bit like the Mustang, which if I had my druthers, you could give me an F18 or a F111 or anything you like, and

20:30 put a Mustang next to it and say, “Which aeroplane would you like to fly or own?” And I’d go for the Mustang every time, because to me that’s the ultimate aeroplane. And there are other things like the Golden Guinea Bird, the DC3, that’s got to be one of the best aeroplanes ever built, an amazing aeroplane for its era, and stuff like that. So there are a handful of them around like that, which if you’re lucky enough to fly them I suppose you develop that feel about it.

21:00 **Well you did mention that there was nowhere to go in Phan Rang, but you were able to take leave. In that six months there, what leave did you have?**

We had – I think I had a couple of days or so in Bangkok, I think we had a choice, you could go to Hong Kong, Manila or Bangkok and that was it, for I think it was probably two days in wherever place you went, that’s maybe four

21:30 days away, transit each way and a couple of days R&R. We had a break, I think we probably scrounged a ride with one of our Australian Caribous and about – I don’t know how many of us, there was probably four or six of us went up to Da Nang, no sorry, Da Lat which was in the highlands where all the rich Vietnamese used to go for holidays, and where they had all the market gardens, quite a gorgeous place, went up there for a couple of days, and

22:00 apart from being able to take an aeroplane back to Australia for servicing, that was it for the six months.

So that leave in country that you took, in Da Lat, whereabouts was that located?

Da Lat is further north from Phan Rang up in the northern areas and in the sort of highland country, and we stayed in an old French colonial hotel, one of these beautiful old buildings with doors that were about

22:30 twelve feet high in the rooms and stuff like that. Part of it had been – was still black and burnt out where the Viet Cong had actually attacked it, but surprisingly – it was amazing, it was sort of Viet Cong territory up there but it was amazingly peaceful, no noise, and this beautiful old French colonial hotel, Lord knows how long it had been there, and views, the back of it overlooked a huge lake, and it had various levels of, well, not patio, but terraced

23:00 areas, and then some more steps down, and nice little concrete balustrades with pots and things on them, and then another terrace and more steps, and it eventually went down to the lake. But the whole thing overlooked the lake, and all the trees and forests and whatever around it. And we were there in the middle of the war, having a couple of days break and we had deer wandering round the place and early morning the tropical mist just lifting off the lake, it was just amazing. And sat there one day and probably – I’m

23:30 not a great drinker and I was never a great fan of wine or certainly not red wine, a little bit different now, but I didn’t like red wine in those days, but I can remember absolutely thoroughly enjoying this red wine we had, and we had a steak, I don’t know where it came from, but we managed to get a steak, and we had this red wine and we sat out on this patio area, overlooking this view, in the middle of the war, eating steak and drinking the red wine, but the secret was that it had come from the bowels of the hotel

24:00 somewhere, it was just a really dark green bottle, no label on it, cork sticking out the top, and covered in dust. And that fascinated me, and I thought, I wonder how long that’s been there. And as I said, we sat there and drank this red wine, it could have been the worst wine on the face of the earth, but it seemed right to me at the time. So yes, that was a nice little break.

Didn’t it all feel surreal, that you were having this experience in a war zone?

Yes a little bit, a little bit, because as I said, it was so quiet and we were

24:30 sitting in a hotel which you know, probably a quarter of it was bombed out or burnt out or something, and yes, just sitting totally unprotected and no weapons, no nothing and there we were in this hotel, and in uniform, that's all we had to wear, and having this nice little break for a couple of days.

So you were in uniform and unarmed?

Yes. So we were probably too dumb to think we needed to be anything

25:00 different.

Why would you choose to take leave in country?

I think it was probably, look you guys are due for an R&R and everybody's going to get two days R&R and it's going to be at Da Lat or something like that, and so that's what we did, we didn't say, "Can we take leave and we want to go to Da Lat," it was, "Hey, we've got an aeroplane that's going up there and you can go, two guys at a time," or four or six or whatever it was, "And go and have your in country R&R," and that's

25:30 it, you get one two-day stint in country, I suppose. I don't remember, there may have been an option to go to Saigon for a couple of days, don't remember. But I've been to Saigon, we'd been down there for some reason to go to Mackery [?] headquarters for something or other, briefing or whatever, and Saigon was just another city that was full of military personnel and sandbagged hotels, and

26:00 guards everywhere and people getting shot by guys riding around on motor scooters and riding up behind somebody and shooting them dead with a pistol and stuff, so I guess it wasn't a hugely attractive proposition to go down there, because what are you going to do, you know? Go round and get a bit of Vietnamese food and beyond that, that was it, so it was just another big crowded city and a bit untidy at that at that stage. So Da Lat was obviously far more appealing, if that happened to be the option at the time, it

26:30 probably was, and if people decided it was safe to go, well we said, "OK, fair enough, away we go."

So I'm still taken aback by the being in uniform but unarmed and in an area that the VC had actually gone through. I mean was it a safe zone, was it a safe area?

I guess it probably was at the time, otherwise they – flying into Da Lat, probably Da Lat

27:00 airfield was clear and at that stage considered to be a safe zone, and I don't even remember that, it might have been an area that the Viet Cong probably at that stage had no interest in, there was no strategic or tactical advantage to be ensconced in that area, I don't know, I just remember going there and just remembering the red wine and the nice view.

And how

27:30 **did the locals strike you?**

Look I was never very impressed. We went to a nightclub somewhere, where was that, might have been on one of those trips away, might have been in Saigon, I can't remember now, but we went in and sat with

28:00 – the Vietnamese locals were there, and we drank the beer and I can remember them buying a round of drinks, I think it was a, I don't know, a Scotch and three beers and a coke, and it was $US15, which in 1967 was a lot of money for anything like that. So we had our drinks and I guess we weren't there very long, and walked out, and as I walked out I just happened to look to one side and on the wall was a price list for everything there, they had two price lists, one for locals and one for armed services

28:30 personnel, and ours was double the price than the locals, which really annoyed me, because I thought, well hey guys, we're here supposedly giving you a hand, and we don't want any hand-outs, but why charge us twice as much as everybody else, who were sitting there doing the exactly the same that we are, and drinking the same booze. So that didn't impress me greatly, but it was probably a minor issue anyway. But the rest of them that we associated with, I probably wouldn't feed, they were too lazy, they'd rob

29:00 you blind and you know, they had pretty menial tasks, or simple menial tasks, I mean all they had to do was do a bit of sweeping or you know, clean up a bit of rubbish or whatever, do a bit of laundry, and they wouldn't come to work and you'd say to them, "Look guys, you're getting paid to come for these number of hours, if you don't come, you're not going to get paid," and they were getting paid in a month more than the average person would get paid in a year, and they didn't care, they'd

29:30 rather sit on their butt and do nothing and not get the money, than come to work and do simple little jobs. So I thought they were a pretty lazy bunch of people and I couldn't generate much interest in them. But that sounds extremely racist I know, but I don't have much time for the ones that come out here and get into their little crime sprees and little cells here there and everywhere, in the Cabramattas and all that. But I greatly admire the

30:00 ones that get to this country, escaped Vietnam because they really needed to, and they come here and

they can't speak English, and inside four years they've got an excellent command of the language, they've got a university degree, they've got a job, they've got a car, they've got a house, and I think, good luck to them, I think that's quite amazing. I try and imagine myself doing the same thing, going to Vietnam, not speaking the language and doing that, and I don't think I'd achieve it in a million years. But beyond that I have I suppose you could say mixed feelings

30:30 about them. And I wouldn't trust them.

Did you attempt the language at all, whilst you were there?

No, no. Uc dai loi, that's Australian, and that's about it.

Sorry, what was that?

Uc dai loi.

Which means?

Australian.

So that's it.

Yes, that's it. Uc dai loi number ten. I remember that.

Just based on those observations that you made, that you said then,

31:00 **do you think that they wanted the western presence there, as in the US and Australia?**

I think that'd be pretty hard to assess, I think there were probably a very high percentage that probably did, and a lot that were a bit ambivalent about it, and others who had serious doubts about I guess what was going to happen to them in the long run. I don't know, to me it's such a hugely complex issue,

31:30 and probably a differing attitude towards Australians in the country than maybe Americans in the country, I think that's always going to be different. And the influence that Australians had in the Australian area of responsibility was probably far greater than any Americans would have achieved, and I mean that's the nature of the way Australians operate anyway, and then the Brits are a little bit different again, we always have different ways of handling things, and I think by and large Australians handled it pretty well.

32:00 Certainly the Australian military wherever it goes I think probably has a pretty reasonable reputation and works fairly appropriately with wherever they are, and are fairly readily acceptable. I don't think you'll ever see anywhere, you know, 'Aussies go home', be it Timor or Afghanistan or – what's that other place – Iraq? Malaya, Vietnam, I don't think there would have been too much of that.

32:30 And of course the Vietnamese, a lot of them want to come to Australia, more so than America, I guess a lot of Vietnamese went to America, but probably the ones that were being jacked up by American finance while they were over there. That's a very cynical look at things, I suppose.

Well I mean one of the problems of that relationship with the locals is not knowing who the enemy really was. How did you find that, whenever you did venture out of the

33:00 **base?**

Well venturing out of the base was so minimal anyway that it really didn't have an impact. I guess the short visits, I can't even remember how many times I went to Saigon, maybe once or twice, wandering around Saigon briefly, I felt a little bit uncomfortable, but they didn't strike me as being a you know, particularly affable sort of

33:30 a race, but that would be understandable under the circumstances, because whenever we were wandering round Saigon – I was in a flying suit on one of the visits down there and – it must have been only one visit – and that was a little disconcerting, and I guess everybody, because they didn't know who was their friend and who was the Viet Cong, and I suppose they're just as vulnerable as maybe we were, if they showed any affinity towards the

34:00 service personnel. But that could be to their detriment. I don't know, maybe they're just naturally that way. I think about the sort of people in other countries that you go to foreign countries, and the way people know you're a foreigner, but still happy to talk to you, whether they can speak English or not, they'll smile or talk, and a hell of a lot of people do it, but Vietnam didn't strike me being that way. Maybe they're just naturally reserved, I don't know, but it would be awful circumstances for them

34:30 anyway, and I don't think you could expect any of them to go out of their way to be friendly and welcoming and you know, the happy people, because that wasn't a very happy situation for them. But as far as mixing with them, that was virtually the limit, really. A short stint at the nightclub where – well the nightclub people are certainly not the ones to gauge or make any judgements about because that's a fairly mercenary approach to whatever activity is going on anyway, and not much

35:00 exposed to the people in Da Lat, we were very minimal staff and we were virtually there isolated by ourselves, and that was it, so not much mixing with them anyway, or virtually none.

And did you carry arms when you went off base?

No, no, in terms of going off base, in country, there would have been Da Lat and Saigon, that's it.

35:30 **And you wouldn't have carried arms in Saigon?**

No. And one, maybe two visits to the beach, where we didn't carry arms either, so that was it. There would have been armed American personnel around the place, but no, we were just having a break for – seeing as we were flying at night, we had the days to – the spare time to do something, if you could go and do something, it was fine, but we just

36:00 didn't – we didn't go off base, that was it. I think Phan Rang is just an airfield base out in the middle of nowhere, there's no city associated with it, or town or anything like that, it's just an air force base and nowhere to go.

You made a mention about flights back – a flight back to Australia during your time in Vietnam. What was that for?

That was to take an aircraft back for a major servicing and then bring another one

36:30 back, turnover of the aeroplanes, so that was a matter of flying down through Darwin to Amberley and having it serviced it there.

Did you take any leave in Australia?

I think I managed to have – I might have had a quick trip down to Adelaide, which would probably have just been an overnight, just to say hello to my folks, and that was about it. I had to go to Edinburgh, I think I managed that. I can really only recall – because the situation

37:00 was fairly tight time-wise and you couldn't afford to be without that aeroplane for very long when you did that. Go back, get the new one, test it and whatever, after its servicing, and get it back there. And that's what I started to allude to before, the taking it back was a pretty interesting exercise.

What happened there?

Well we started quite early in the morning, the aircraft had to be test

37:30 flown, the one we were taking out of servicing, so we got airborne on that, and the test was OK except something else went wrong with it, and that had to be fixed. So we waited until that was fixed, and I said, "Look, it needs another test flight, but what we'll do is, we'll get airborne, we'll check out whatever needs to be checked out, and if it's serviceable we'll just keep going to Darwin, we won't come back refuel and then go, we'll just keep going." So we did that, we got airborne, everything was fine, so we just kept going to,

38:00 Darwin, and it took I think nearly an hour longer than usual, it was quite a long flight because of winds and whatever, we landed at Darwin, we had a sandwich while we sat under the wing of the aeroplane while they refuelled it, and then we headed off to Phan Rang, which is about a five hour flight, how long it was from Darwin direct to Vietnam. And of course we're then getting into night, and as we got closer to Phan Rang the weather was getting worse and worse. I'd just been bragging from my time in Australia, how great the weather was at Phan

38:30 Rang, we've never missed out on a mission through weather, it could be thunderstorms all over, but Phan Rang just seemed to be in this nice little niche and we could – never had a problem. And of course, what's happened? Phan Rang's closed, it's completely surrounded by thunderstorms, which is just what I needed at that stage, and of course my poor old nav had lost the plot, he didn't know where we were, and we really didn't know how our endurance was going, and I had a passenger as well, and we couldn't go, so we had to divert. And we had in those days we didn't have magic radios

39:00 which you could just tune up any frequency you like, they had preset frequencies, and they were preset for what we needed to use in Australia, plus what we needed to use in transit, plus a couple to get us into Phan Rang at the other end, so they were ferry frequencies. And we actually got caught short with the weather, and I diverted to Cam Ranh Bay, which is just north of Phan Rang, and the weather was lousy there as well, and the only Cam Ranh Bay frequency we had was for the ground controlled radar approach, which you

39:30 need to use when the weather's really lousy, because the cloud base was down about two or three hundred feet, we broke out in point right at the minima and there was the runway in front of us, which I just landed on. And we tried to taxi in and the Americans said, "Call the tower now on line such-and-such," and I said, "Negative, I don't have tower frequency, I only have ferry frequencies." "Call the tower now on da da da da da," and I said, "Negative, negative, I do not have Cam Ranh Bay tower frequency,

40:00 I only have GCA, and three frequencies." He didn't understand that, and he told me to call the tower again, so I just stopped, right in the middle of the runway. And that got some action because very quickly a vehicle with flashing yellow lights, "Follow me," came out, so we managed to get back in and we waited and waited and waited, refuelled the aeroplane there, and waited until all the thunderstorms

cleared from Phan Rang and got airborne and flew to Phan Rang, and that was about midnight when we got there, so from seven

40:30 seven thirty in the morning Australian time till midnight Vietnamese time, that was a long day, which is pretty crazy really, because that's well beyond the limits of what you should fly. So I think I flew about – I think it was about ten hours flying that day, and we're normally limited to about five. But it's the old story, you know, got to get home, they need the aeroplane, blah, blah, blah, young and stupid and away we went. So that was an interesting exercise, they tried to find out where the hell I was because the radio compass, the only radio aid I had at that stage was –

41:00 and all the thunderstorms, they lock onto the thunderstorms, the electronics do, and of course that was going on and taking it to Cam Ranh Bay was OK, but anyway, we got there and look back on that and say, "How stupid was that"?

We've come to the end of another tape, so we'll do a swap. Do you want to stand up, you look a bit uncomfortable?

Tape 9

00:30 **OK, well we're just winding up your time in Vietnam now. I'm just wondering how you felt about leaving that tour behind you?**

Very simplistically I suppose it was time to go home because it was becoming a little bit boring, because like I said before, there was nowhere to go, nothing to do, flying every night and

01:00 the role wasn't particularly challenging, I mean it was doing a job and you know, happy to do that, and I was satisfied with what I was doing there, but I mean there comes a point where I think it's time to go. Being in Vietnam didn't worry me per se or anything like that, I wasn't busting to get out of there because I missed this or missed that or missed something else, it was, OK, this is getting a bit boring. But that's about the – that would probably be the major sentiment I had. I mean

01:30 naturally everyone looks forward to getting home, but I could have gone on for another six months, OK, it wouldn't have been a huge issue for me, but you know, that's probably the overriding sentiment, sorry.

No, that's fine. There's just one other cultural sort of question that I've got. There've been many, many iconic sort of images associated with Vietnam sort of since the Vietnam days,

02:00 **and you're quite into music, were there any songs that were played over and over on the base?**

Up, Up And Away, yes, Fifth Dimension, every time I hear that I immediately revert to Vietnam, and that was flogged to death by Armed Forces Radio over there, the Fifth Dimensions were the in thing. So that's the most obvious one that comes to mind, probably the only one actually, yes.

And what were the sentiments of that song?

02:30 I don't know, I just liked it, it was a nice song. I don't know whether there were any flying connotations associated with it, maybe subconsciously it's the up up and away, I don't know, but that was – they were very popular at the time, and at the crest of the wave, and they played it a lot, so it just rings a bell. It's like "Oh Deana," when I was doing national service, every time I hear Paul Anka singing "Oh Deana" I'm back at

03:00 Woodside, so it's a similar thing.

And just a final question on Vietnam, did you see any evidence of any drugs or anything of that nature?

No I didn't, no. I think there was probably a bit going on there but no, I saw nothing of that nature really. We'd always been isolated I suppose from all those

03:30 sorts of things anyway, we had our good little complex, and that's where we lived, and that's where we worked and that was about it.

Well post-Vietnam you went on to the F111 training in America, so what sort of technological changes were there in that conversion for you?

It was a quantum leap really, as I said earlier we were flying Canberras

04:00 and Sabres and they were both World War II technology, certainly the Canberra, and we went to a state of the art, and I think even more than state of the art, it was pretty well ahead of its time, it had so many new things in it, you know, composite construction, swing wing, and after burner turbo fan and five stages of after burner and a unique flight control system and modular escape hatch and stuff like that. And it was amazing, you know, a

04:30 whole different concept of instrumentation and cross linking between the left and the right hand seat with an inertial navigation system where everything was closely linked with – probably I would suggest one of the most demanding from a crew coordination point of view, the closeness and the link and the cooperation and well, the linking with the pilot and the navigator was quite critical, it was – and the navigator

05:00 was virtually in the same position as the pilot was, he's sitting right there, you know, and he even had a control column. The only difference was he had an attack radar in front of him and had his pilot's instruments. So there were – and the capability of the aeroplane was quite mind boggling, what you could do with it in terms of the type of weapons you can deliver, the system that was delivering it, the type of the modes of delivery, it's environmental defence in terms of radar warning systems it had in it,

05:30 its electronic counter measure systems, its defensive mechanisms of the flares and chaff, infrared sensors down the back end, it was quite amazing. Vulcan gattling gun, it had a nuclear capability, it was just amazing that plane, absolutely amazing. But the thing was, it was I think planned to be a six month course, and we flew for six

06:00 weeks out of the six months, the rest of it was ground school, and simulators. So the course we did to start with was quite comprehensive, probably the best training I had in the whole of my air force career, the first part, that was – all the pilots did the navigator course as well so we knew everything in the right hand seat, the same level as the navigators. And we were instructed by USAF navigators, who, primarily, had not seen the aeroplane. And trained us

06:30 out of manuals and with training aids – which I find is the hardest possible way to do things, and they were brilliant, they were brilliant. And they put up with a lot of rubbish from a lot of our smart Alecs, but they were good, they were really really good. And the flying side, when we got to Nellis [Nellis Air Force Base] was probably the worst training I've had in my time. But that preparatory part with all the theory and learning systems, I worked my butt off,

07:00 and I knew the systems very well, and we also with the wisdom of hindsight had the advantage of flying the simulator before we ever saw the aeroplane, without any instruction from pilots, because we had to operate the simulator while the navigation course was done, and the only instructors there were navigators, and they'd not seen the aeroplane. So we had to sit in the simulator, exactly like the aeroplane, it was the first any of us had ever seen in simulators of that nature, I mean you could do anything in the

07:30 simulator that you could in the aeroplane, and we had to in that and teach ourselves to fly the aeroplane. You know, in retrospect that as pretty damned handy because we did, I don't know, sixteen or so, two and a half hour simulator rides, and when we went to Nellis in Nevada, Las Vegas, we had I think two sim rides with an instructor, and then a brief exam and a few things, and then a week of ground refresher or whatever and then into the aeroplane. And when I got in that

08:00 aeroplane I felt like I'd been there half my life. I was totally familiar with it, and when it got airborne I found it quite easy to fly, no wing roll, no nothing, and that was all that long ground stuff. So in terms of flying the aeroplane it wasn't a huge problem as you would expect with something of that nature of advancement from what we'd flown, because we did all that pretty extensive ground work before we got anywhere near it, and if you know exactly how the aeroplane

08:30 works and all the systems and you can go to the buttons and something happens and you can do that, you can do that, you know what happens, and actually getting in and physically polling it around is not a huge problem. It just performed beautifully, it was just a great machine.

And how did you adapt to the change in the speed of the craft?

That's not a problem either, I mean I've flown Canberras at four hundred and

09:00 fifty knots at low speed, flown the Sabre, they're high speed aeroplanes, the 111 we were limited to subsonic flight while we were there, because they had a couple of problems with the aeroplane, and most of the time we, you know, our approach speeds are not that much faster than they were in the Canberra or the Sabre. And so in terms of if you're flying one relatively high speed and high performance aeroplane, jet aircraft and you move into another one that's a little bit faster, it's not

09:30 really noticeable, it's pretty relative, I mean the faster you go the further ahead you look, that's all. No, I don't really think I found it very hard, but again it would have to be all the work that was done beforehand, but to actually step in the aeroplane was relatively straightforward, I thought anyway.

From your descriptions it does sound like

10:00 **it was a – just an amazingly lethal kind of craft.**

Oh, it was amazing, amazing capabilities, amazing. Terrain following radar was another thing we'd never seen before, air-to-air refuelling none of us had never done before, all different styles of weapon delivery, weapon release and weapon systems, radar systems, yeah, it was just amazing, an amazing piece of kit.

10:30 **And at this point in time, were you either expecting or hoping to return to Vietnam or…?**

No, no, the idea was with that training we were to bring two squadrons of aeroplanes, twenty-four aeroplanes back to Australia at the end of our training,

11:00 and that didn't happen because the aeroplanes weren't ready, so we hung around for another month, a month and a half waiting, and it wasn't going to happen, so they said, "We'll send you all home, not much point just sitting around here for nights on end, we'll send you back to Australia and at least you'll be home for Christmas whatever," and then in the new year, whenever they're ready, we'll go back and pick them up. And that didn't happen for a long time, it was on again, off again, on again, off again. So we're back into the simulator and back in the classroom and then, it's delayed again, and

11:30 after about eighteen months they said, "Look, what do you want to do, do you want to hang around and wait longer, or do you want to go and do something else in the meantime?" So I couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel at that stage, so I said, "I'll go and do something else," I had a couple of choices, I got the second choice, which was an instructor's course, and went on the instructor's course and I think I was either on the course or just started instructing at Point Cook when they made the decision to have an interim fit with the F4 Phantoms, for two years until the one levels were ready. So all the

12:00 guys that stayed behind went back to America again, converted to Phantoms, brought them back, flew them for two years, took them back, and then went back and picked up the F111s. They were there for years, and meanwhile I'm down there instructing in my little Winjeel, and stuff like that, so – and I never ever got back to the squadron after that, I spent the rest of my career as a flying instructor, specialist and rubber stamp between the eyes, and flying school and exchange tours, an instructor and then central flying school training instructor, and then chief flying instructor there and staff

12:30 course, and a ground job for a year and then back as CO, and I couldn't get out of the place. Not that – I mean it was great, it meant that I probably flew longer anyway, I wound up with – out of my twenty years I flew for eighteen of them, I was only on the ground one year on staff course and one year as an aide to the air vice marshal and the rest of my time I was flying. Had I not done that then I wouldn't have got to lead the Roulettes, which was another highlight of my career, I suppose, yes.

13:00 yes.

So you had no regrets about not returning to a squadron?

It would have been nice, that was my mindset, because the average was to do your instructor's course, spend two years in flying school, and then go back to your squadron, QF5, and that didn't happen to me. I still continued to fly a variety of aeroplanes in a testing role for CFS and I used to go back and do the instructor renewals on the 111, because I'd flown it, I could go back and do that, and go back and do the

13:30 instructor renewals on Canberras and stuff like that, as well as going through the schools. So I got to fly the F111 periodically over the rest of my career, with I think a grand total of about seventy hours I suppose, I had thirty when I left America and probably more back in Australia, just checking instructors. So I guess that was the – I don't know, the only icing on the cake with my job, the Roulette bit and going

14:00 back to examine on the F111s. I was happy with my career; I had no complaints. If I'd had my druthers yes, it would have been nice to have gone back to the squadron

Well tell us a little bit about the leader of the famous Roulettes.

A little bit about that. Bit like my joining the air force, I sort of got it by default. I didn't really want to leave the Roulettes actually, but

14:30 traditionally the chief flying instructor takes on the role as the leader of the Roulettes, and I'd done a fair bit of formation flying in my days, in my strike role and stuff, but the incumbent CO and CFI [Chief Flying Instructor] had their eyes on an ex-fighter pilot who was in the B-flight at CFS [Central Flying School] and they said, "Look, if you don't really want to lead the Roulettes, then we've got this ex-fighter pilot who can probably step in and do the job." So I

15:00 got belligerent and I said, "Oh no, no, no, it's fine, I'd love to lead the Roulettes," and I didn't want to, but I said, "Bugger you," so – and I wasn't very popular after that I might add, but anyway, that's how I came to lead the Roulettes, and yes, so that was a bit of a sharp learning curve, and it all happened fairly quickly. And in my time they started a CO then that took over who was quite interested in broadening their exposure,

15:30 and we started doing a few more commercial civilian-type activities, you know, anniversaries and celebrations and stuff like that, and going to things like the Bird Man Rally and whatever, because previously it had been predominantly the anniversary air shows each year at the – I mean one year they do four operational bases, and the next year they'd do four support command or training bases, and precious little else. And I think the second year we did something like thirty-odd displays, which was quite a lot. Now they do a hell of a lot more, of

16:00 course again, but we were pretty limited, it was a part time job, we were fully occupied in our role as trained flying instructors and examining and stuff like that. So the Roulette thing was much of a lunch time and after work and spare time thing, and we had a very low allocation of flying hours to train up new members, practice for shows, transit and do the shows, it was something like two hundred and fifty hours a year. Well that's not very much, so we'd probably scab a bit off and use our own

16:30 staff continuation training hours that were allocated and put that together, and add that into the training and –

And what was the role of the Roulettes?

Well it's – from an air force pilot's point of view it's a fairly substantial extension of his flying skills, it's quite a demanding thing to do, it's not easy and not a lot of people can do it, not a lot of people want to do that either, I mean low level formation aerobatic display flying is –

17:00 it's pretty precise and it's got to be well disciplined and if you don't you have accidents, as you – well you've seen around the world on a pretty regular basis. So you've got to watch what you're doing. But it's a good PR [public relations] thing for – I think for the air force, you see I don't know, probably in your experience the navy are very, very prominent in you know, the boats come into harbour and people go onto the boats, so they use the publicity

17:30 machine quite well in the media. The army is much the same, they have their little groups around in all the shopping centres and they have exercises – so they get a lot of exposure from that point of view. The air force to my mind really didn't do a lot, didn't get a lot of exposure, any exposure we'd have would be once a year, you'd go out to one of the major centres and see an air show, and that would be it. So the Roulettes became I think a very, very valuable PR and advertising tool for the air force and in the years that the Roulettes –

18:00 certainly prior to that aerobatic team, didn't have the face and the exposure that the Roulettes have had or brought to the air force. Now, nearly everybody knows who the Roulettes are, they appear all over the place, and it's probably been responsible for a lot of people wanting to join the air force, because they see a little bit, they don't know anything about the air force, but as you see the Roulettes and it probably looks exciting and it looks professional and they're obviously very

18:30 skilled guys doing it, people say, yeah, you know, so I think it's good value for money, people look at it as a bunch of guys up there having a damned good time, they probably are; but it's sheer hard work to do it as well, and that word 'dangerous' comes into it, but you know, there is an element of risk in that sort of thing, which is not evident in other sorts of military flying, but perhaps you do, in peacetime anyway. So from my point of view, quite a challenge,

19:00 I probably made more difficult decisions and quick decisions in the two years than I made in the rest of my air force career, because it's one of those things that – yes, it was a bit challenging and you've got to be as precise as you can all the time, because – when I say all the time, you've got, apart from keeping these other guys alive while you're practising for a ten minute span, you're in front of a whole lot of people, and it's got to be

19:30 right. And one mistake, and one bloke out of position or one delayed turn or poor positioning, stands out so much, and people remember it, and say, "That's a bit grubby, a bit untidy." So as I said in my video the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] did many years ago, the ABC A Big Country, that we certainly aimed for – used to aim for perfection knowing full well we'd never get it, but at least you keep trying to get it, and when you

20:00 get close it feels pretty good. So yeah, that was a nice part of my career.

Well a couple of other things I'd like to touch on, just events that happened to you. Just tell us about your meeting the Queen.

Close to disaster. I just happened to –

20:30 see the CO walking the crew, and he said, "Oh Biddell, you did the last Royal Guard of Honour didn't you?" I said, "No, not me sir, no, no, no." "OK, well you can do this one." So I was going to lose whichever way it went, I think. And the OC [officer commanding] of the base was in full support, he said, "Righto Biddell, I'll give you a hundred and twenty men, I want a hundred man guard of honour, and if it doesn't work, I'll have your guts for garters, that's all." "Oh, thank you, sir." I was flying aeroplanes, the next minute I'm out with a sword and you know, the drill and stuff. So anyway, we worked our way through that and

21:00 on the day we went to – we had a full dress rehearsal and every time I forgot to march on the Queen's colours, a certain part of the ceremony process you say, "March on the Queen's colours," and I forgot it every time in practice, I don't know why, but I just – there was this mental block there somewhere, and on the full dress rehearsal I did it again and we were part way through so I probably put them to the order had to get them back up to the slope and get it on and then

21:30 do that again. And on the day we travelled in there and we the full dress rehearsal which was on the dockside at Newman, Newport, Newmans Wharf or whatever in Brisbane, on the Brisbane River. So I went for the full dress rehearsal and got through all that. On the day we travelled back – we travelled in one uniform and it was a stinking hot day, it was January or February or something, so we carted our other dress uniform on hangers and we pulled up in a big cargo shed on

22:00 dockside, and it all started – because it was all open to the river, and we were all in our undies and the

Britannia slots up at the deck so I think that would have been the Queen's first impression of the guard of honour wouldn't have been red hot, with all in their undies, so that was a fairly inauspicious start to the day, and we got all organised and marched around the corner, and came around the corner, we'd already done the full dress rehearsal, which was all open, now was a space about this wide with – they'd erected all these

22:30 stands. So we had to walk through the scout and of course you've got the hundred man guard of honour here and I'd walk along the side, but there wasn't enough room, so they all went through and I was right at the end of the two flights of a hundred men, and the RAAF central band was up the front. They all got through, and I heard this voice up the front say, fairly quietly, "Band, halt!" So of course the band halted, didn't it, and so did half the guard of honour, it went click click click, all these people, and I'm thinking, "Oh

23:00 God, there's thousands of people in the stands and it's all televised, and oh God," so we got all that under control and – mind you, just prior to walking out one of the blokes goes, "Don't make any mistakes, sir, will you?" I was really feeling well supported at this stage. Anyway we got it all sorted out and lined them all up, and then the Queen came and I just marched right across the dais and the thingo, "Your guard of honour is ready for

23:30 inspection, ma'am," or something like that, your majesty, your guard of honour is ready for inspection, and wait for her to step down and then you escort her and she starts chatting and you go and walk up and down and inspect the guard, and then at the end of it you step back and salute again and the guy, this OC who'd said to me "I'll have your guts for garters," was a bit too quick to come round her left hand side, he then escorted her back to the dais, and as I was coming up here with the sword finishing the slit, he zipped around

24:00 right next to her, and I could have gone kachew, I sort of bent my elbow and – or taken all his buttons off or something, it would have been great. But anyway so that was the end of that and I think it's a once in a lifetime thing, I wouldn't want to do another one, it was that far from total disaster. But anyway, it televised quite well and everybody was happy, and she was gorgeous and yeah, very, very pleasant and easy to talk to. Mind you I was terrified I wasn't going to hear what she said, because I was walking along,

24:30 she's about this big, because the last thing I wanted to say is, "I beg your pardon ma'am?" I wanted to get it all first shot, and she spoke so softly, but anyway. So that was another interesting experience.

As you say, a once in a lifetime.

Yes, well once in a lifetime by luck I suppose, and once in a lifetime by choice as well.

25:00 **Well we've covered many sections of your career, you've had a very long flying career. When you stop and reflect on that career, how do you think your time in Vietnam impacted on you?**

25:30 Look, I don't think it had a great impact at all, it was – OK it was a very contentious war, I've never varied my view about whether we should or shouldn't have been there, as far as I'm concerned, we should have been, and there are a lot of reasons apart from the normal reasons that are put up for taking on that war.

26:00 So as far as an impact on me, I really don't think it had much at all. I don't have any reservations about anything and people say, "Oh but you were out there killing people." I've never looked at it that way either, you've got a target, and I'm trained to put bombs on the target, so that's all it is, it's a target and I dropped the bombs, I mean I'm not interested in whether you know, you've killed fifty people, a hundred people and say, "Yahoo, we've wiped out a whole…" And then, I did my job professionally and I think I flew that extremely

26:30 well and we had a very successful result, in other words the bombs fell where they were supposed to fall, really accurately. I've done my job, and we're part of a machine that is trying to win this war, and if we're a very small cog in the wheel and we do that thing properly, then that's what I'm there for. Maybe I should think more about the politics of it, I don't know, but you know, I'm in the air

27:00 force, I'm a volunteer, I'm a career officer, and our government says, "That's what we're going to do," that's what I'm going to do. I'm not going to be a conscientious objector or bitch and moan or say, 'Why are we here, we shouldn't be here', and bleat and bleat and bleat," and then still go out and drop the bombs or whatever. No, it really didn't have an impact like that on me, it was pretty straightforward as far as I was concerned.

And when you stop now and

27:30 **reflect back on your career, what do you think stands out as your proudest time?**

Whew, oh, the proudest time –

Or memory?

Memories? Gee that's hard, well I suppose the Roulettes was fairly significant in all that. The high of my career is

28:00 something that I look back on as being – I'm fortunate that I happened to be in the air force when I was, timing-wise was everything, and if I'd been in another course, a different course at a different time, my whole career would have probably been totally different, so the way it turned out, I think I – I mean I guess I've never really thought about highlights, I look at – you know, I was lucky that that span was as good a time as I can ever imagine being in the air force, the way things developed,

28:30 the opportunities I had, the aeroplanes I flew, the interest I had in it and the people I – that I became friends with and worked with and stuff like that. You know, I mean the RAAF was something magical to me, that RAAF was something special which I don't think it is for a lot of people any more, it's a bit like, you know, the CSIRO [Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation] or the Commonwealth Bank or the RAAF, it's run like a big corporation, and I don't think that emotional part of

29:00 it is there the way it used to be. And maybe that's because I'm a you know, a war time child and the – for want of a better word, the glamour of the military and the aviation, and I'm not a hero worshipper but you know, I was interested in aeroplanes and flying and I did something that as I said before, almost by accident, that I can't think of anything that I could have done that would come close to it. And when I got out of the air force I was like I was when I was

29:30 eighteen, thinking, what do I want to do with my life, and my father's saying to me one day, "You're only eighteen bloody years old, and if you don't bloody well know now what you want to do now, you'll never bloody well know," you know, sort of thing, and I guess he could have said the same thing to me when I was in my forties and got out of the air force, you know? What am I going to do now? Because it wasn't a job, it was a whole lifestyle, it was my life, you know, everything, the social aspects became better and the common interests and the bonds and

30:00 the ethos and the spirit and all that sort of stuff, were something that – there's just nothing that would compare with it anywhere else, it's just not possible, not come even close. So it's a whole package I suppose, as far as I'm concerned. I mean each step along the way, I used to – flying the F111, yeah, that's a highlight, leading the Roulettes is a highlight, flying the Canberra of course was a highlight, a couple of years in Malaya, they're all special moments that in

30:30 any career it's pretty hard to beat, as far as – I don't know, satisfaction, sense of professional achievement, yeah, it's good. And it got me somewhere in my life that I probably never would have got by myself. The air force or the military, that's what it does to you, it extends you and I know you don't get a whip out, but right from the start you join and you've

31:00 got peer pressure and you've got competition amongst your peers, and you want to succeed and it's interesting, it's challenging, it's just so different to anything else. So I didn't think I'd get selected for the pilot's course to start with, and then I did, then I didn't think I'd graduate, and I did, I thought, "I'll never make flight lieutenant," and I did, and when I got there, I nearly fell off my chair when they told me I was promoted to squadron leader, I said, "What happened?" You know? And then I got to wing

31:30 commander, and each step along the way was something I in my wildest dreams would never have thought I would have achieved. But you know, and I'm not the sharpest tool in the box, but I've done all those things, and I guess – getting to CFS is probably as far as you can go as an instructor and leading the Roulettes, they're all sort of highlights, but I was put in the position, and you've got to do it, and so you go and do it. If I'd been left to my own resources in my life, without that maybe that

32:00 that challenge or that pressure say, I can't fail, these other guys who are going to look at me as though I'm a dickhead, you know, and away we go. For good or bad I think that extends you and I owe a lot to the air force for what I've done in my life, and I can't imagine being anywhere near that had I not joined. So I was blessed to have made

32:30 those steps, and those shoot-from-the-hip decisions to start with, it sort of worked out, you know? I'm a little bit sorry that I didn't stay longer, I would have liked to have seen out a full career, all my peers stayed in for thirty, thirty-five years, and air vice marshals, one of them's chief of the air force, several of them, not that I'm suggesting I would have got there, I might have never got past wing commander, but at least it was a whole lifestyle which

33:00 was great.

And did the RAAF for you mean a sense of family? Is that what you're talking about?

Yes, it's a whole – it's a whole lifestyle, it's a pretty huge family, but it is in essence a family lifestyle, because I could go anywhere in Australia, and there are people I know, that I can walk up and sit down and have a meal with and talk to,

33:30 and you cross paths, you know, on a regular basis in whole lots of different places, and it's still going on now, you know, I've been out of the air force for twenty-three years, and I'll run across people who know somebody else here, and this somebody comes up I haven't seen for four years, and it's like it was yesterday, "G'day, how are you going?" The strong friendships I probably formed were – well the early ones in the air force and latterly they became

34:00 associates more than close friends, and I don't know why that is, but the old friends are the good friends and funnily enough most of them are navigators. Yeah, it's a lifestyle, with a spirit, esprit de corps, a passion for something that is very special, and if you want to make it nothing more than RAAF,

that

34:30 to me is – that's something special, and always will be.

And – well I'm just wondering, do you march at all on Anzac Day these days?

I've only done it a couple of times. I should make the effort to do it, but you know,

35:00 I don't know why I don't really push for it, I don't have an answer for that. I guess up until I left the air force I'd never marched on Anzac Day, because I was always up there in a flight path somewhere, so you know, I have never ever done it, but yeah, I'll do it again, I'll do it again. I'm a bit remiss for not having done it more than I have.

Well,

35:30 **the record that we have made today of your story, your career and your time in Vietnam is going down for future generations to look back on. What sort of words, advice or message would you like to put down on record for those future generations?**

I think probably in a simplistic

36:00 way I think the younger – our future generations should think more about everything else and anybody else we've become a very self-centred – we're all the centre of the universe nowadays I think, and I think if we like to consider what is good for everybody and the country as a whole, if we started thinking a little differently in some more lateral terms about what our whole country is about and what

36:30 we're all about and what our neighbours are about, then – and not bleat about what we haven't got and how badly off we are, I think – if I had my way, I think eighty per cent of the population I'd put in a boat and send them out to some other countries and say, "Just go and have a look at that, and then stop bitching about what you've got," because let's not wreck this place because of our self-vested interests and you know, always wanting more and not expecting

37:00 to work for it, and maybe accept our station in life a little bit more readily than we do, and expect that everybody's going to look after us and we're not responsible for anything we do, some other silly bugger's always responsible for it, or we can always blame somebody else. So at the end of the day we can really only blame ourselves for what we do, even when it comes to voting. I wish I had the wisdom of my years, but that's about all I can offer.

Well we are coming to the end of

37:30 **our interview today, so I'm just wondering if there's any words that you'd like to say in closing?**

Well, I have to thank you for making the effort and daring to sit down and talk to me about these things, because I suppose when it's been and gone and all you've got left is talking about it, and more often than not people don't want to sit and listen to you talk about it, and you try not to bore people and bring it up, but

38:00 it's something that's – I guess you get a lot of pleasure out of talking about those things when it's probably meant so much to you, and so many of your friends have been affected the same way, well the old school ones anyway. And I've got two sons in the air force which – I would have loved all three, but you know, that's their choice not mine, I tried to make my youngest son join, but no Dad, I don't want to do that. I don't have a problem with that anyway,

38:30 but – and I have I guess an ongoing vested interest in their attitudes towards the system are much like mine, and hopefully I have inculcated some sense of pride in what they do, and they are, they maintain their own standards against all odds, and I'm proud of them for that. So yeah, that's – and even the one who's not in the air force has his standards, which he maintains, and I'm proud of him for that too, but that extra link with the

39:00 air force and to see them sort of having the approach that maybe I had is good in a world where it's becoming very much corporate and money oriented and individual career interests, the vested interests, rather than what's good for the whole system.

Well on that note, that's a fantastic note to end on. Thank you very much for speaking with us today, it's been real pleasure.

Likewise, thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS