

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Ronald Richards - Transcript of interview

**Date of interview: 22nd May 2000**

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/2365>

### Tape 1

**NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2007.**

14:03 **I'll talk, okay we'll pick up?**

So I went back into action again, up at Seven Mile Run at Port Moresby. Well the Japs were raiding that place that heavy and we were short of aeroplanes. Every night we'd fly the plane across to Huon Island to get out of the road of the bombs. And whilst there we had a radio message on the 21st March, Saturday, to report back to Port Moresby the next morning, which we did. We went back

14:30 to Port Moresby and they bombed her up with four, two hundred and fifty HE, high explosive bombs and we were told to bomb Lae, but not to open the doors until we got in the air, which we did.

**Before we get into that, just want to take you back to enlisting, if that's alright. You enlisted up in Sydney, but you were from this district?**

Yeah I was from Thirroul.

**You left family behind?**

No I was married in

15:00 1938 at Stanmore, and as I say I went away in 1941.

**But you left family behind?**

I left a wife behind and no children at the time, but she was living with my mother and father and I used to write to her every second day. I'd been married three years when I joined up. And she stayed with

15:30 Mum and Dad and then she got out and went to a place with her sister or something. But we kept in touch all the while.

**Did you hear from her often?**

Yes she used to write to me and the mail would get through, but we were very careful what we had to send back in the mail. It was always censored and we kept in touch right through, so much so that when I was wounded, first thing she done she caught the train straight up to Townsville. When I'd got there,

16:00 she knew I was there, and come up to Townsville with me. And she helped; she got very friendly with the Yanks [Americans]. That's where I told you out there I got out of the place because the Yanks got me out of Townsville. We didn't have the facilities to bring me down, back to Sydney.

**And you were a wireless air gunner?**

A wireless operator and air gunner on the first Empire Air Training Scheme through Australia.

**And you were wounded and had to be discharged?**

Yeah I was wounded and

16:30 I was discharged, and the funny part about that was that when I saw the head of the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] in Sydney he said to me he didn't want me to take a discharge because I was so highly trained that I should stay in the air and teach people what I'd learnt. And first hand of knowledge of action with the Japanese, especially the Japanese fighter planes. But I said to him he couldn't expect me to do this.

17:00 I said, "I've been through so much, do you think I'd enjoy sitting there training a person to go through what I went through?" I said, "I'll take my discharge," and I was discharged in April 1943. And that's still in a plaster on the arm and a calliper on the left leg and on crutches, and that's how I started work

at the Repatriation Department in 1943 on crutches and with a plaster on the arm. Certainly because they told me I'd meet all me mates coming back from the war, that they

17:30 would be coming through the Repatriation Department.

**Tell us about that work at the repat [repatriation] system?**

I started off in the, what they call the pension section, where the post office used to pay all the pensions. And they'd sign a slip to take their money and all those slips come back to headquarters in Sydney and you had to make sure that everything was right with their pensions. Well from pensions I then was promoted to a medical section and from the medical section to the

18:00 accounts section, and the accounts section to, the last one I was in at the Repat was back to the medical section but on a higher grade. And that's when they decided to open the Repat Office in Wollongong and they picked me to open it because I had been a South Coast boy.

**And how do you think it's looked after people?**

Oh it was absolutely fantastic; they couldn't do enough for them.

18:30 You know for instance, even a person with a cancer has been accepted as a war disability, which is very hard. But that happened while I was in the office at Wollongong that we used to get all the ex-serviceman in and then we'd give them a ten pound, I think it was ten pound or five or ten pound tools of trade allowance to go on with their work. Plus those that had the knowledge started businesses

19:00 and we give 'em a five hundred pound business loan. And that was taken up in a big way in Wollongong, Lavis Electrics, H.G. Palmers, Kellaway I think it was had the big Ford. And those people, all got their five hundred pound business loan and all kicked on. And we had a very, very good rate down in Wollongong. Plus I'd help them with their applications for medical treatment and pensions.

19:30 And it was very, very, you know, it was really down to earth treatment.

**For yourself coming back home when you were wounded, was it hard to adjust?**

Oh it sure was. They give us a suit of clothes that looked like a bag on you, and I started work at the Repat with an air force shirt and a blue tie, and this suit and a hat.

20:00 The Deputy Commissioner of Repat, he was hat mad. He wanted you to wear a hat. I don't think I'd ever worn a hat in me life, but I got a bit used to it.

**And what about joining up with the RSL [Returned and Services League] Club, when did you do that?**

I joined the Waverley RSL in 1943, very, very early and a very low RSL badge number. And I was working at the Repat and I got a

20:30 work mate at the Repat had a cottage at Waverley and he asked me would I come and share it with him, bring the wife up and the baby daughter. I'd had a baby daughter in 1943. And I went to live at Waverley and that's when I joined the Waverley RSL. My first stint with the RSLs and I had that much knowledge after being right through the Repat that everybody you see, once they knew you was at the Repat,

21:00 they wanted you to help them try and get medical treatment and a pension, which I did a hell of a lot.

**But the other thing with the RSL, was it the mateship too?**

Yes it was the mateship because the subjects was generally about the war, when you'd call in after work or anything like that. The conversations was what they'd been through and what they're doing now and what they intend to do. And it was real interesting, there's no two ways about that. And

21:30 I became, I was called up in 1958 by the Deputy Commissioner at the Repat and I was discharged without an application. I was discharged as a totally and permanently incapacitated ex-serviceman, returned ex-serviceman. And I rebelled. I was, I'd risen to executive status and I was the purchasing

22:00 officer for all the Repat Hospitals with big staff, and a very, very complicated job because I, buying x-ray equipment or new drugs, always used to have the advice from the specialists, and the top specialists at the time. And I was really rapt in it and I was handling it well and all of a sudden I was called up and just pushed out on the scrap heap, with all that training and

22:30 I just had to take it. But as I said, I took up golf and won a Winner of Winner's Golf Championship at Wallacia with a big golf club in Sydney. Won it outright, Winner of Winner's Championship. And I took the cup back down to the Board of Health and they laughed at me, they said, "You can't back the Commonwealth Government, you can't back it."

**With the RSL here what does that mean to you, the club here in Thirroul?**

23:00 Well the Thirroul Club closed. Yeah it shut down and the president at the time it shut down was Keith Woodward, who's out there now. But she wasn't run well that RSL. But there was a lot of camaraderie

there between the ex-servicemen at Thirroul. You were known as a Thirroul, a Butcher. Thirroul are the Butchers, their rugby league team. Everything that comes out Thirroul's the Butchers. And still is.

**Is there something about the club you can't,**

23:30 **deal with other people who haven't gone to war?**

No as a matter of fact you're at the stage now where they really want the children of ex-servicemen to join these RSLs, as preference to the civilian family who never had anything to do with the RSL, that's my opinion. But of course other people have different ideas, but you get that opinion that they want children of ex-servicemen to keep the

24:00 RSL going in Australia, which is a sensible idea.

**But what about with Anzac Day, what does that mean to you?**

Well Anzac Day, that's something that sticks in my gizzard. I was wounded on the 22nd March 1943 and from 32 Squadron that had just been formed at Port Moresby out of 6th Squadron, and nobody bar my skipper who I was wounded with,

24:30 came down to Townsville Hospital to see how I was going. He left me and had one flight and the whole crew disappeared and they don't know from that day to this what happened to that Hudson [bomber plane]. And his wife came up to see me in Townsville and I tried to explain he was such a decent good living great bloke, that he'd be found. But he was never found nor any of the crew, nor the plane, from that day to this. And I only learnt just about,

25:00 well I went up to Belmont and I was playing a game of golf in the Belmont when a [UNCLEAR], who was the editor of the Guinea Gold [Australian Army newspaper printed in New Guinea during World War II], an air force man in New Guinea, turned round and looked at me and said, "It can't be." and I said, "What do you mean, what can't be?" He said, "You were Sergeant Ron Richards." I said, "Flight sergeant, mate." like that. He said, "But you can't. I saw him killed in Port Moresby." I said, "What do you mean I was

25:30 killed? I went up to Rona Falls Hospital." He said, "Yeah," he said, "but nobody thought you'd even reached the ...". The boys in the squadron, none of them even thought I'd get up the mountain to, so they all thought I was dead. No wonder they, and I was under a misapprehension all those years because nobody from 32 Squadron had tried to find out what happened to me.

**Tell us what your injuries were?**

Well for instance I had that elbow, cannon shells through there blew that

26:00 elbow right off. I had a burst right up the left side. One shell went in down the leg there, one went in and hit that knee and it's all blown off, still blown off there. Another went high in the femur and you can still put your finger in the hole in the bone. And I tell you if I'd have been wearing a parachute I'd have been an original DSO, that's 'dick shot off'. It was,

26:30 it was that wound in the femur that stopped me from walking for so long. It was shattered and I was in a frame with weights on a pulley, stretching it, lying there day after day while they tried to make the bones join. And it was very, very difficult. I'll tell you I died twice. I know I died twice but I come back, and I can remember to this day and there should be no fear of dying because

27:00 it's absolutely an amazing experience and the colours, the angels flying around and the music was just absolutely fantastic, and I didn't want to come back, but I did. Once a person wants to die like that they want to keep going, but I come back twice like that, and that's vivid in my memory, even to this day.

**And your wife was the nurse?**

And she went up there and she was by my bed

27:30 all the time and I was rotten. I had plasters on the arm, and I turned round and I, oh shocking to talk about it any rate That's the first time I've spoken about it for years and years and years.

**Back to Anzac Day, what do you think of it today with all the young people involved?**

Well the young people are really involved today because the RSL has pushed out a campaign that

28:00 makes them take notice. They're even going to the schools on certain days and telling 'em what it was like to be an Anzac and how the ex-servicemen saved the country and all this business and so they should look up to them. And they've come good, in my opinion they've become really, really interested in what's going on around the ex-service and the RSL.

**And what does it mean to you, do you think of mates?**

I think of mates

28:30 but it, I don't want to think of mates. The one reason why I don't think of mates is we were sitting in the crew room at Port Moresby and the Japanese Fleet had steamed into Rabaul Harbour. And of course the

skipper, the commanding officer called for volunteers to have a plane, which instead of carrying bombs was to put petrol tanks in the bomb racks to get distance so they could fly

29:00 from Port Moresby to Rabaul to photograph that Jap Fleet in the harbour. So I volunteered but I'd been out on a trip that day and a mate of mine, a very good mate of mine sitting alongside me, Frankie Mariner said, "Don't you go, I'll go. I haven't been out today." So they accepted him and to fly with the first DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] winner up the north,

29:30 Flight Lieutenant Frank Padrina was the first DFC winner up the north. Course they go over to Rabaul, they fly these planes over and they photograph this Jap fleet in the harbour. And just as well there was clouds, clouds around and they turned around and they flew into these clouds as the Japanese Zeros [fighter planes] come up off the aircraft carriers in the harbour. So they were stuck in there and couldn't get out and they run short of petrol.

30:00 Well they landed back at Rabaul back at Port Moresby with very, very little petrol left and they carried this bloke out the kite onto the ground still alive, and he looked at me, he said, "The b's couldn't kill me in the air" and he died, right in.., just that was it, gone. And I thought to meself, 'Well if he hadn't've said to me I'll go instead of you, it'd've been me lying there,' see. And what happened

30:30 that time was his commission came through as an officer the next day and his wife gave birth to their first child, and that's always stuck in my memory, always. One bloke I didn't want to see die it was that guy. Because nearly, oh there was.... 32 Squadron got blown out the air, not many 32 Squadron's left alive, flying men, not many.

**So that's the hard thing about Anzac Day?**

Oh it's a hard thing at Anzac

31:00 Day, is back to the rotten things that happened. Particularly it comes on Anzac Day because everybody's talking about ex-servicemen, what they did and what they didn't do.

**Would you re-enlist again?**

Yes I sure would. If there was any threat to our country, I'd enlist again tomorrow.

**And you'd go through what you went through?**

I'd go through what I went through just to make sure that Australia was right.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**