

Australians at War Film Archive

Ronald Brennan (Ron) - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/378>

Tape 1

- 00:31 **Ron, I guess just for starters we'll start from the beginning. If you could just tell us a little bit about your childhood years, family life, working through the depression, and also a little bit about what you knew about World War 1,**
- 01:00 **what sort of experience your family had had of World War 1?**
- Yes, well I was born, can't go back any further than that. I was born in Thornbury in Melbourne on 3 April 1925. I was born to William and Violet Brennan, they were my parents. I had
- 01:30 2 older brothers and we lived in Northcote right up until the time I joined the navy. My father died in 1928 when I was 3. He served in the 6th Battalion AIF [Australian Imperial Force] in Gallipoli and France and among other wounds, he was gassed and that affected his lungs.
- 02:00 So that when he got pneumonia, when he contracted pneumonia in 1928, his lungs just failed and he died. At that time I was the youngest in the family, I was only 3. My eldest brother was 8 and my second brother was, well he's 2 years older than me, so that would have made him 5 and
- 02:30 my sister wasn't born until July that year, my father died in May and she was born in July. So that left my mother with 4 children on a war widow's pension, that was her only income. She struggled all her life to bring us up. She did a wonderful job because she reared us all through.
- 03:00 I went to primary school at a school called Westgarth out in Northcote, then went to Northcote Boys High School. By that time I was 16 and starting to think I was going to be passed by by the war. Now in between the wars I
- 03:30 was closely related to the First World War from my father, his old battalion mates. Used to go every Anzac Day and they'd sort of take me over, and also other relatives. My mother's brother was killed in France during the war at the age of 18, and so we had this background of
- 04:00 war service. So that the 3 of us all wanted to get into the services. My eldest brother joined firstly the army and then transferred over to the air force. My second brother, he joined the army and was taken prisoner in Singapore and spent the rest of the war, of course, in the prisoner of war of the Japanese.
- 04:30 So I originally wanted to, I had views of joining AIF because my father's background was in the military. So I went down to the drill hall and tried to join up, telling them that I was 21 and all that sort of thing, and the old recruiting
- 05:00 officer there said "Go home son, go back to school". So that diddle me there. That was early in 1942 when I was still 16. Then I thought well I'll try the air force but they were a bit stricter and of course they demanded to see a birth certificate, which was very difficult for me to produce. So
- 05:30 somebody told me that the navy were taking people at 17 ½. Well I still was 17 ½, so I had to wait until October that year before I could qualify. So I went into the Olderfleet building in the city, the recruiting place for the navy and joined up there. Now at this time I left school because I didn't want to get tied down with any
- 06:00 further studies, my main aim was to get into the war, to win the war for them. I got a job and I was working at a place called Sutton Tool and Gauge, it used to be in High Street, Northcote. I was working a lathe, working shift work and all that. So I went and joined the navy and they said, "How soon can you come into join the navy?" I said,
- 06:30 "Well I'm unemployed at the moment, I can come in tomorrow if you want me." And they said, "Not that quick but we will call you in the next couple of weeks." So I got my call up and I went. I told the boss down at this engineering works that I'd joined the navy and I was going and he said "You can't go" and I said "You just watch me". So when I was down at Flinders [Naval Depot] doing my

- 07:00 training, this was in November 1942, I came home on my first leave after a fortnight, they gave you home leave after a fortnight, weekend leave, I came home and my mother says "There's a letter there for you. It was from the Manpower, you've got to report to them." So I went down and saw the Manpower and they said, "Why haven't you been at work for the last
- 07:30 Fortnight?" I said, "Well I'm in the navy." And they said, "Well you can't do that, that's a reserved occupation." I said, "Well, I don't want to go back there, I want to stay in the navy." They said, "You'll have to go see your employer and get him to agree to your being in the navy." So I went down and I saw the foreman and I said, "What would it take for you to give me the sack?" He said, "Oh if you became violent and hit me,
- 08:00 you'd get the sack." So I said, "Do you want me to hit you?" And he said, "Oh no, we'll give you the sack, we'll say you became violent." So that's how I got out of that, so I was then in the navy.
- Can I just go back a little bit? The reasons for wanting to join, you said you wanted to go there and win the war, you had that sort of youthful vigour I guess and you also had that background of having a father and uncles and families had been through the First World War.**
- 08:30 **What was the main reason for you wanting to go out there and do your bit? Was it a sense of patriotic duty or...?**
- Well that's hard to say, I don't know that I was ever a real patriot, how of this huge machine of the Germans sweeping all over the world and all that sort of thing and
- 09:00 now the Japanese were coming into it and they're going to come down the other way. So I just thought, well all my forebears did their duty as I saw it, so I said "Well, I want to do the same thing, I don't want to be left out of it." I saw during the 2 World Wars at school those whose parents had served in the forces were treated with more respect
- 09:30 than those who didn't go to the war, everyone seemed to say "Your father didn't do his duty to these other people. I didn't want my children to be in that situation too", so that was another reason that I wanted to join up and do, as they used to say in those days, "Your duty". I saw it as my duty and so that's why I was keen to get in. I wanted to go in the army at a
- 10:00 youthful age because I had dreams of getting into my father's battalion, he was in the 6th Battalion and there was a 2/6th Battalion and I had dreams, in my naivety because I realised, in the forces, whenever you requested something you got just the opposite. But that was my thoughts at that stage and that's why I went to the army first,
- 10:30 the AIF.
- You must have been very proud of your father?**
- I was proud of all, my father, my grandfather and my uncle, and my other uncle, he was in the navy. And, of course, he was still alive at the time and he was the one that pushed me towards the navy. He said "It's a better life than the army, you don't get in trenches and all this sort of thing."
- Were you hearing a lot of stories about...?**
- Yeah,
- 11:00 well all my father's mates used to come to our place, well not all of them but a lot of them used to visit our place and you'd hear all the stories of the last war you know. They were all the good stories, you never heard, my father never told us about the bad parts of it. He served through the bad parts because he was in Gallipoli and then in France in the trenches and he would never
- 11:30 tell us about the bad parts, only the good parts you know, the mateship and all that sort of thing. It's virtually what goes on now - you never hear too much about the bad parts, you only hear about the good parts.
- You said your grandfather, was he involved?**
- Yeah, he put his age down, he was 48 I think or something and he put his age down and got in the army. He went to Gallipoli
- 12:00 and France before they found out his real age.
- What, did he put his age down to in order to get in?**
- I'm not too sure but I think the maximum age for enlistment was 40 and he was about 48. So they caught up with him. He was in France at this time, and they discharged him because he had falsified his,
- 12:30 and they discharged him and he came and as soon as he came home he joined up again and went back. So apparently they let him stay this time. His son who was only 16, he was walking down one of the streets in the city and a woman gave him a white feather, which in those days was the symbol of cowardice

- 13:00 because he looked older than his age and he said "That was it for him", so he put his age up and joined up. But he had to have his parents' signature of his papers and my grandmother wouldn't sign his papers, so my mother, who was his sister, she signed his papers for
- 13:30 him. He went overseas, and this was later on in the war. He was in France and he was killed in France, he'd only just turned 18 when he was killed. My grandmother never forgave my mother for signing his papers and my mother never forgave herself for signing his papers because she reckons she signed his death warrant, which was rubbish of course because he would have
- 14:00 gone no matter what they did, he would have found a way around it. So when it came for us to join up my mother would never sign any of our papers because she had this from the First [World] War. My second brother, my eldest brother didn't need her signature, so my second brother he asked for her signature and she said "No". He said "If you don't give it to me, I'll go to
- 14:30 Sydney and join up and you won't know where I am". So reluctantly she signed his papers. And then of course, when he was taken prisoner of war in Malaya she said it's history repeating itself, you know. So when I asked her to sign mine there was great hysterics and everything but I was determined to get in and she said
- 15:00 "I should be allowed to keep one of my boys at home", you know. But I talked her into it anyway.

How did you manage that?

My charm I s'pose, I don't know how really. I virtually used the same threats as my brother but I wasn't really fair dinkum in them I think. She was very worried when I joined the navy because

- 15:30 she thought it would be the end of me. My father, he served in the navy before the First World War and he deserted the navy because the navy wasn't getting any action and he deserted the navy and joined the army and he went away under a false name and wasn't until he was in France
- 16:00 that he admitted to his officers that he had joined up under an assumed name, so they changed all his papers and he... So when I've been researching his history he appears in the battalion records as Russell and, you know, it makes it difficult to research it. But anyway, he straightened it out and
- 16:30 he joined the AIF anyway and went away with them, and he got all the action he was looking for apparently.

So you said he served, he was at Gallipoli?

Yeah, he was at Gallipoli, the 6th Battalion. They were in the landings at Gallipoli and then after Gallipoli they went up to France and they served up there for the rest of the war.

- 17:00 So he finished up a sergeant, he started off as private of course and finished up as a sergeant, that was that. I don't know that there's much more I can tell you about that part. I was fortunate that Legacy, Legacy as good as they are, they took over the parental,
- 17:30 the male parenting role of our family, my mother was a war widow, and they allotted what they called your Legatee, he was our Legatee, and he was Pat Hanna, the film star from the early 20s, he was in films like The Sentimental Bloke and all those
- 18:00 sort of Australian films that they did in those days. He was a great bloke, he looked after us whenever there was a need. My mother only had to ring him up and he'd be out like a shot. He was a very good bloke. But he used to come periodically to us and if we needed any fatherly advice he'd give us fatherly advice and that sort of thing.

Can you remember any specific examples?

Well, I can remember my brother

- 18:30 was hit by a teacher at the technical school when he was going to the technical school and my mother got very upset about that so she trooped down to the technical school and was going to take this bloke apart, this teacher apart. She wasn't getting very far and she called on Pat Hanna and he went down there and nobody could do enough for us then, well for my brother, I didn't go there. And
- 19:00 another time, the chap over the road my eldest brother, as boys will, hit his son. So this bloke hit my brother. So my mother stormed over there and this bloke was a big engine driver, about 6 foot 3, I think, so my mother tackled him and she said, "You hit my son again and I'll hit you."
- 19:30 She was very possessive my mother, naturally, 'cause she was left to bring us up. And I can always remember at the time 'cause we kids were all watching and the chap who lived a couple of doors up, he was in the light horse in the First [World] War and he was only a pip squeak of a bloke and he came up and said, "Don't you touch him, Mrs Brennan, you leave him to me. We old diggers have got to stick together and I was an old digger with your husband."
- 20:00 And he was dancing around. That was another reason where I learnt that the old diggers stick together

you know. An other illustration of my mother's sense of fair play and everything, we were coming home, we used to go to the Legacy Club of a Friday night, and we were coming home this night, I was only about 10,

20:30 and we were coming home and there was these 3 drunks had a policeman lined up against the wall and they were bashing into him and a crowd's standing around watching. Well my mother said "That's not fair", so she pushed her way through the crowd and went up to these 3 blokes and pushed them away from the policeman. She got a letter from the Commissioner of Police for helping, her public spirit.

21:00 But that's the sort of woman she was and that's how I think she could bring us up because she dedicated her life to us.

Sounds like you learnt some great values. Was there also like a religious ...?

Well, she was a member of the Salvation Army. She was brought up in the Salvation Army as a girl but then she married my father who was a Catholic, so she virtually

21:30 followed him. But after he died, she reckons it was an act of God, a few days after he died, there was a knock on the front door and there's these 2 young Salvation Army girl officers, lady officers, and they were looking for accommodation. Well we had this modest house in Northcote, only had 2 bedrooms and a sleep-out and she

22:00 said to them straight away "If you're prepared to live in our lounge room, you can have the room" and they said "Oh that would be wonderful". So for 5 years we had these 2 Salvation Army officers living in our lounge room. We didn't have enough bedrooms for the 5 of us, my mother and 4 kids as it was, but she didn't hesitate,

22:30 and she gave them this room, and of course that got her back to the Salvation Army and she reared us all in the Salvation Army after that. I played in the Salvation Army band until I joined the navy.

What did you play?

Oh, every instrument, went through the lot. That's the way they used to do it, they'd teach you as a child to play every instrument and wherever the demand was, they'd shift you around.

23:00 My brother is still, he's only just retired as a bands man at 82 but he's still in the Salvation Army. My sister was in the Salvation Army until she died but my other brother and myself, once we came back from the war, we didn't go back to the Salvation Army, we got away from that you know. Not for any particular

23:30 reason but just that we drifted away from (UNCLEAR). But I've always had a great respect for the Salvation Army. I know their teachings and I always had a respect for them.

What is it, do you think, you learned from the Salvation Army? What sort of values or..?

I think it gave me my, what I feel is my greatest assets

24:00 and that's love of my fellow man. Like that's whenever anyone asks me what religion, I am no religion but I love my fellow man. This was reinforced when I joined the navy because being on a small ship you had to love your fellow man, you just couldn't afford not to. That was the main thing they taught me.

24:30 And that's part of their creed of course, their love of their fellow man. The Salvation Army was founded by a chap in the London slums who saw the need for a religion for the down trodden and that's how it started. Even today you'll see that with their Red Shield and this sort of thing, that that's their main aim. They teach

25:00 love of God through love of your fellow man.

Your father died when you were 3 but it seems you do have some memories of him?

Oh yes, very faint memories. I know he was a tall, dark headed bloke that his mates used to call Darky Brennan and he was a bit of a larrikin

25:30 but he loved his kids. He used to take us on picnics and that and just before he died he got enough money and he bought an old Dodge car and he used to take us everywhere in this car and we used to think we were kings, kings of Northcote we thought we were, because we had a car. We didn't have it for long unfortunately because it went to pay all the bills when he died.

26:00 It was only about 6 months old when he died. I can remember that car clear as crystal. I can remember sitting up in the back seat, it was a Tourer, sitting up in the back seat as those we were kings, lord over all the other kids in the street because there weren't many cars in the streets in Northcote in those days. That and remember his mates coming and taking me too, he used to take me

26:30 into the Anzac Day march. I wasn't allowed to march, kids weren't allowed to march in those days on Anzac Day but he'd take me around and show me off to all his mates and that sort of thing and then I'd have to stand with my mother on the sidelines and watch the march. That sort of thing lives in my memory but not much else.

I'm curious to know just bringing up the Anzac Day marches, whether you think that has changed over the years, has it grown in any way or do you think it still means

27:00 **exactly what it used to mean?**

It's grown in one way and not necessarily in another you know. The time I'm talking about, which is the mid 20s, late 20s probably, there were many First War ex servicemen and they used to treat it as a religion virtually. They had to march on Anzac Day, so there were very big crowds

27:30 of marchers. What I notice now is there is more interest with the young ones and the kids. As I said before, we go up to Lismore of an Anzac Day and it's a march for the whole town, all the schools have their marchers and you know, the kids up there, they love it and

28:00 the country towns seem to be more involved than the city actually. What should I say, for instance the schools have their Anzac Day ceremonies just before Anzac Day and I was called on to go up there and address them once, at the Lismore High School, and

28:30 they were that wrapped in Anzac itself, not that I was Anzac but Anzac itself, the thought of Anzac, the kids were that wrapped and they corresponded with me after that you know, from Lismore, asking me things they hadn't thought of to ask me while I was there and all that sort of thing. It really did something for me going there. I didn't want to go there in the first place but, ah,

29:00 they made my day actually.

So it was a different thing back in the 20s and 30s, it was more the diggers remembering?

Yeah, plus this is another thing I was talking about before with the schools being what we called a Junior Legatee, they used to call us, we used to get to go into the Shrine for the big ceremony in the Shrine, represent the school,

29:30 and they, other kids were a bit crook on that because we got out of a day's school going in the, representing the school on that. But that was another thing built in to me, how important it was to have a father who was an ex serviceman, played his part in the First [World] War.

I guess your, I assume your mother would speak about him a lot?

30:00 Oh yeah. She kept his uniform hanging up in the wardrobe, it was a Shrine. I don't know when she got rid of it but it became moth eaten and it was still hanging up there, you know, with all his medals and what have you. She never let us forget our father even though we didn't know him very well, my brother can remember much more about him than me

30:30 because he was 8 and I was 3. But he was such a figure that I can remember, I can't remember much more of my early days at school for instance, but I can remember him.

You obviously had the support of the Salvation Army and Legacy and that but how was your mum making ends meet?

Well she had a war widow's pension, which was

31:00 a measly sort of pension but she used to go get odd jobs. Like for instance one that I can remember vividly she got a job as an office cleaner but she was determined to be at home when we came home from school, when we went to school and when we came home from school. That was her determination that she'd see us off for school and be there to welcome us home.

31:30 So she used to have to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, catch the cable tram from Northcote into the city, do her job of office cleaning, come home and be home in time, by about 8 o'clock, in time to get us off to school. Then she had to go back in at about 8 o'clock at night and when we were home, had been fed and ready for

32:00 bed and all that sort of thing. Then she'd leave us in the care of my brother while she did the same trip again on the cable tram. I don't know how much he got paid for that but it wasn't much of course. We never had material things as kids, we were always on the bread line virtually but we had a good life. She sacrificed herself

32:30 at every turn for us no matter what it was. But that's how we got through. So really when we got up to the depression of course we didn't really notice the depression as much because she had her fixed income from the war widow's pension and she had this job until such time as we were old enough to sell papers and that sort of thing, to augment the family

33:00 income. So the 3 of us, the 3 boys, all sold papers and you know we got by. For instance, I tell my grand kids now, they've all got pushbikes by the time they're 6 or 7 or something. I got my first bike when I was 13 and that was

33:30 an old second hand bike, which my mother bought for 2 pound at that time, and she did that on lay-by, got it on lay-by. She still had the dockets for it, I saw them when she died, I found these dockets, the lay-by documents for this bike of mine and she had it painted, and I thought it was Hubert Opperman's

bike.

- 34:00 I reckoned I could've beaten the world on it when I got it. But that was the only toy that I can really remember having. Our Christmas presents used to be a pillowslip full of fruit and lollies, maybe a book or something we needed for school but that was it,
- 34:30 we didn't know what presents were. But the other kids had presents and we played with their presents. So that's the way it went anyway, that was my childhood. Well I wouldn't really call it a hard life actually, it was a life where we had none of the material things of life but we had plenty of love and family
- 35:00 strength. And as I say, we went through the depression seeing other people suffer from the depression but not really suffering from it ourselves because they only came back to our standard. They had all the material things before the depression and the depression brought them back to our standard, so we...
- 35:30 **So there was nothing there for you to lose?**
- We didn't have anything to lose. Just going back to my mother. I never tire of talking about my mother, but she was left with this house. It was a war service homes house but she still had to keep up the payments on it, I wouldn't know how much they were but whatever they were, it was a real struggle for her to keep up the payments of the house but
- 36:00 she was determined to do it and that was another load on her back besides the 4 kids.
- Were you and your brothers inclined to help out as you got a bit older and you were doing odd jobs and so on?**
- When we got our odd jobs yeah, but when we grew up, she refused to take anything from us because she said "We had our lives to lead then" and none of us were real
- 36:30 flush with dough. So she always refused to take anything from us except the normal gifts and that sort of thing that people give.
- How close were you and your 2 older brothers and sister?**
- Fairly close family,
- 37:00 again we had our lives and my 2 brothers lived up in Preston, Heidelberg area and we were down here in Chelsea and my sister lived with my mother all her life, even after she was married, she sort of took over and she lived in the family home right up until she died. Yeah, we were fairly close except for my second brother, the one who was a prisoner of war, he
- 37:30 married a girl who didn't see eye to eye with my mother and he drifted away a bit. He's only just recently died. She, oh I shouldn't say about it but she was a real queer and she refused to have anything to do with our family, and we've since learnt they had a son,
- 38:00 who we'd never met and we only met him recently, a matter of 2 months ago. He didn't know his father had died, she didn't tell him. She's never spoken to her own family for 30 years I think, she was queer. He was, what we called our black sheep, not that he did anything wrong, he led a good life
- 38:30 but he just didn't mix with the family. Although, he used to go down and visit my mother unbeknownst to her, unbeknownst to his wife, he'd always go down and visit my mother but we didn't see anything of him. Then unfortunately he died last Boxing Day, first we saw about it was when I looked, my son actually found it in the TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Pension] magazine,
- 39:00 that's the Totally Permanently Incapacitated, found it in that magazine that he'd died. So we tracked it down, we went through Vets [Veterans'] Affairs and everywhere and tracked it down and found that he had died. She hadn't told anyone, we still don't know the circumstances of his death. She hadn't told anyone and she had him buried, no she didn't have him buried, she had him cremated without telling anyone and
- 39:30 when his son tried to find where his ashes were, he found that she'd told them "Just to throw them out". So the son's very upset about that of course. It's a tragedy really, just for the sake of.... And my mother could never find out why, what she'd done to cause it because the daughter,
- 40:00 her daughter in law, my sister in law, she blamed my mother for it and my mother even went to the length of writing to her and saying "Tell me what I've done and I'll apologise". She said "In fact, I'll apologise not knowing what I've done wrong". But my brother's wife said "If you don't know what you've done wrong, no good me telling you", sort of thing. So
- 40:30 it hurt my mother very badly of course, because her brood was splitting up from around her. She didn't like to see them breaking up because she was so protective of her brood, as I illustrated earlier that, you know, it was a terrible thing for her anyway. The tragedy of her life I think, apart from my father dying,
- 41:00 it was the tragedy of her life as she called it, to lose her son. But he still used to come down and see her,

sneak out. We don't know just what happened. We don't know whether it was because he was a prisoner of war of the Japanese and had been beaten into submission sort of thing, and because he had a pretty tough trot as a prisoner of war. In fact, he would never even listen to anything about the war. I tried to

- 41:30 get him to tell his story one time. I rang him up and said "Why don't you tell your, write like all these other blokes of their experiences?", and he said "No way", he said "I can't even think about it". So that's the tough trot that they had, we reckon this must have had some affect on him and enabled her to dominate him.

Tape 2

- 00:31 **So Ron, just before you were telling me about your reasons for joining up, you were telling us a story about when you were working in Northcote. Can you just tell us that again?**

Yeah, well as I said earlier, I got this job in early 1942 with Sutton Tool and Gauge which manufactured machine parts for the services

- 01:00 and I used to work night shifts. I used to work on lathe and work night shift and we used to have our meal break, there was no such thing as meal rooms in those days, you either sat at your machine and ate your meal or when the weather was suitable, we used to go out and sit on the median strip out the front.
- 01:30 And I was impressed by the number of young servicemen at that time of the morning, which was about 1 o'clock, used to be walking back into the city. Obviously, they'd taken their girlfriends home and missed the last tram and had to walk back into the city. And they used to go past in droves, these young ex servicemen, and I used to look up to them and say to myself "Gee, I'd like to be one of
- 02:00 them". In fact they used to stop and talk to us and I used to ask them "How do I get into the services?" Some of them used to tell me "When you grow up come back and see us you know". But they were very good to me and instilled in me that desire to be one of them, you know.
- 02:30 Not to be the one walking back from taking my girlfriend home but being in the services. So that all lead up and sort of got me to the stage where I had to go into the services, one service or the other. And as I've said before, I tried the army first and got knocked back by them because of my age. Tried the air force
- 03:00 and got knocked by them because of my age and while my first wish would've been to join the army, I remembered that my father, before the First World War was in the navy so, and I had an uncle in the navy, and he told me to join the navy, and I spoke to a few of the sailors walking past and they told me where I could get into the navy at 17 ½,
- 03:30 and I was approaching 17 ½, so I went in and saw them in the navy. It went from there.

Had you even, during your school years wanted to be in the armed forces in some way, one of the services?

Once the war started, during the war, oh yeah. That was my one aim in life to join up and do my

- 04:00 bit. Not from any great feeling of patriotism, I don't think but mainly because I'd had the experience of having a father who'd served in the First World War and uncles and grandfather and this was what I thought I should do. And apart from the fact that they didn't look like they were winning the war and I thought I could win it for them.
- 04:30 That led me to join the navy. We had to go into Olderfleet building in Collins Street in Melbourne and then when I received my call up, which was only a couple of weeks later, I had to report in there and they marched us, there was 20 odd of
- 05:00 us that day, they marched us down to Spencer Street Station where we caught a train down to Flinders Naval Depot and we started our training. Of course, by this time it was the end of November and it was getting pretty warm, so we virtually did our training over the summer and it was very hot. I was always susceptible to sunburn
- 05:30 and the navy issued us with these square necked shirts but it left a fair bit of your shoulders out open to the sun. We were out doing all our parade drill and what have you, and the rifle drill got very hard on the shoulder, on the sunburnt shoulder, because
- 06:00 it used to rub there you know, when you sloped arms and that sort of thing, with the rifle and it was pretty difficult. Apart from the fact it being very hot at the time. Others that had been to Flinders will tell you how cold it is down there but we didn't strike it cold, we struck it when it was hot.

What were you feeling, after you'd signed up and you got the call up and you had to go down to Flinders, I'm

- 06:30 **imaging that there was a sense before that when you were meeting the servicemen on High Street there, that there was a sense of the adventure. When you were actually called up how were you reacting then?**
- Very excited of course. Well I didn't know what to expect. I was a young bloke as I said, brought up in a maternal environment where I
- 07:00 didn't get to do much really, in the way of travel or anything like that. I played the normal sports that kids played like cricket, football, hockey but didn't get to travel very much. In fact, I think the only time I'd been out of Melbourne was when I went to a Legacy Club camp down in Flinders, down at Blairgowrie, so
- 07:30 I was sort of going into an area that I knew but was still full of excitement not knowing what to expect; having the usual taunts thrown at us when we went from the train where they marched us down into the depot and all the old sailors are saying "You'll be sorry" and all that sort of thing, and not knowing what they really meant. But we learnt when we got into the training 'cause it was pretty rigorous training.
- 08:00 And what with all the injections and vaccinations, and even though they left you with your arm, you could hardly move, they didn't excuse you from rifle drill and all that sort of thing 'cause they said "That was the best thing to get rid of it, to use your arm". So all these things, one thing and another, it was pretty hard but I enjoyed it, I learnt to enjoy it.
- 08:30 It turned me from a young bloke that wasn't very fit into something that was fit. Harking back to my mother again, they were allowed to come down and visit us one weekend. Now to do this, they had to get into Flinders Street, get on a train, go all they way down to Flinders on a Sunday and
- 09:00 then they could visit us down there. She'd bought herself a new hat for the occasion, was proud of her son, bought herself a new hat and rigged herself out and her and my sister arrive down there this Sunday morning and down at Flinders, being right on the coast of course, it's inundated with seagulls of course.
- 09:30 She started to berate a few of the young sailors because they were chasing the seagulls and then one of the seagulls dive bombed her, she got it all over her hat and then she learnt why the blokes were fed up with seagulls down there. She was quite impressed, what the navy had done for her son in a few short weeks. She went from
- 10:00 thinking she'd signed my death warrant virtually into thinking she might have done the right thing to get me into the navy with its discipline and what have you.
- Can you tell us more about that, the discipline, the training and what a typical day would have been at training?**
- Oh yeah. The discipline then was very, very strong. You'd be woken up at 5.30 every
- 10:30 morning by a petty officer coming around because we had to sleep in hammocks, you can imagine what that meant to a young bloke, never slept in a hammock in my life, and we had to sleep in these hammocks and his method of waking you up in the morning was to go along, he had a baton, and he'd belt the bottom of the hammock, get it right in the back. He'd call out the usual naval cry of "Wakey, wakey, lash up and stow," 'cause that was the first
- 11:00 thing you had to get out of bed, lash up your hammock and put it in the hammock, bin up the end. You lived in the same room that you ate, did everything else, was sort of your home while you were down there. So first thing you had to do was that, then you had to put on your shorts and shirt and go out and do PT [physical training] for an hour and
- 11:30 race round like athletes for an hour. Then you'd go back and have breakfast and then get an hour for breakfast and then you'd go and do your training, which could be anything from PT to rifle drill, going on route marches all that sort of thing for your training, to get you fit and
- 12:00 it was very strong. You couldn't even look disappointed if they told you to do something because the favourite punishment down at Flinders, there's a huge parade ground, must be nearly I'd say, the perimeter of the parade ground would be at least half a mile, probably more, towards
- 12:30 a mile long, and the favourite punishment was if you didn't do something properly, if you were doing push ups or something like that and you didn't do it to the instructor's liking, he'd send you off on a run around the parade ground and you'd come back and then you'd have to do your push ups, or if it was rifle drill and you were a bit slow in doing what they wanted, you'd have to run around this perimeter holding your rifle above your head sort of thing.
- 13:00 Later on when you got into the gunnery school they had a shell, a 4 inch shell, I don't know what they'd weigh, probably at least a hundred weight, I know that's not the modern term, best part of a 100 kilograms I suppose, and you'd have to put that on your shoulder and run around the parade ground. So that was the sort of thing

13:30 you know. It was very high discipline and it was getting you ready for having to accept discipline when you got to sea because you had to be part of a team when you got to sea and there was no chance to think whether what you were doing was the right thing or not, you did what you were ordered to do. It was a rude

14:00 awakening for me anyway. I'd never had that sort of discipline.

And what was your take on the instructors and officers you came into contact with?

What was my what?

What was your attitude towards, at first it must have been a bit of a shock to the system?

Ah yeah. Well it wasn't that, they were pretty good blokes. Some people tell me they struck real nasty blokes but the ones I struck were pretty good. While you didn't like the orders

14:30 they were giving you, it didn't mean you didn't like the bloke. I found them all pretty good. In fact all through my career in the navy there was only about 1 bloke I think that I didn't really like.

Can you tell us about it, who was that?

Ah that

15:00 was when I was on the ship, we had a first lieutenant who was a pig of a bloke and nobody liked him. He had his job to do but others that we had after him, after we'd got rid of him, they did the same job but in a much better way than he did. But we found out after that he was,

15:30 he finished up having a nervous breakdown, so that was probably because of it.

So at training were you making friends?

Yeah, well you had your class, about 20 blokes, and we were all friends. There was training in that too, for when we joined the ship too because when you got on the ship you were all friends,

16:00 all mates, you had to be, it had to be a close integrated body of men but they didn't instil this into you but it just naturally went that way. There was some you liked more than others of course, because we had a wide variety in our class down there, people from the slums to

16:30 really highly educated blokes. We had one bloke who was a bank manager for instance, joined the navy as an ordinary seaman. By and large they were good blokes.

Was there anyone from, be it school or where you were working, people that you knew, growing up with you, who joined the same time?

No. I met one chap, Bluey Lang, who came from,

17:00 he worked at Myers, lived out at Preston actually. He worked at Myers and he and I linked up together when we first went into the Olderfleet Building and we decided to stick together. We were in the same class down there and he was drafted to the [HMAS] Lismore the same time I was drafted to it, so we stuck together for a while till he got drafted off

17:30 the Lismore.

And you were talking about the training being the PT and the drills. When did you start doing specific training for being on the ship?

Well you did your gunnery course and you did your seamanship course which down there, all part of this, it was only a couple of months training, and all this was crammed in,

18:00 all these parts of the training were crammed in, the gunnery course, the seamanship course. We learnt to tie knots and all that sort of thing and then they used to take you out on a tug they had down there, as part of your seamanship course. You used to have to steer this tug and go out into Western Port Bay and sail around Western Port Bay and

18:30 all the stuff, because you're only being trained as a recruit, you weren't a specialist in anything. 'Course those that joined up as stokers, they did their engine room training down there. And all the others, the other specialists, then after the training you could elect to go and do whatever specialist course you wanted to do.

19:00 But me, with my great yearning to be in amongst it, my first question was how long would that take, and they'd say a couple of months and I'd say "No, the war will be over by then. I just want to go as an ordinary seaman." And that's what I did. I went to the Lismore; I was the youngest ordinary seaman and that meant I was a dogs body, I did whatever I was told to do. You know, scrub decks,

19:30 do anything. My action station was down in the magazine because that was the job nobody else wanted, and I was the youngest seaman and I didn't have any specialist training and I was put down there. It was a pretty frightening experience, my first action station, but I came through it all right.

20:00 **How were your sea legs when you first went out in that tug?**

I always suffered from seasickness. Every time we went to sea, all the time, if I went in a rowing boat I used to get seasick, if I...

But you knew this before you signed up for the navy?

Yeah, oh yes, I'd be down on the old [PS] Weeroona, the pleasure ship that used to sail from Port Melbourne down to

20:30 Queenscliff and I used to get seasick on that. If ever I went out fishing with my brothers I used to get seasick. But still, that didn't deter me, I said "Ah, I'll get over that". But I used to, unless, one chap that I said we never liked, he used to tell me "The best cure for seasickness was work", so whenever I was sick, he made the blokes

21:00 that suffered from seasickness, he gave them extra jobs to cure their seasickness, but it didn't work. After you've been at sea for a while, for instance, on the Lismore I was always sick when we first went to sea after we'd been in harbour for a few days or something like that but after a couple of days you got used to it and later on,

21:30 in my navy career, when I was on another type of ship, I was never seasick on that. It's just the movement of the ship, it affects different people in different ways. But we had a lot of people were seasick. Probably the best illustration was one of our ASDIC [Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee], that's the anti submarine operators who operated the machine for the ASDIC machine, to try and find submarines, well they used to

22:00 have to sit in a little cabin about 3 foot by 3 foot to work this machine, listening for pips you know, sends out a signal and comes back, and he used to take a bucket up on watch with him; you weren't excused of duties just because you were seasick, and he used to take a bucket up into this little cabin with him and he'd have it between his legs. So any number of people were seasick, fact they used to tell us in the navy

22:30 that Nelson, you know that bloke that we all looked up to, he used to be seasick. It's just one of the facts of life that you have to put up with.

And you found there was no cure for it, there was nothing you could do? Obviously work didn't help?

Tried every cure known to man, I couldn't find one. They didn't have tablets like they have now, of course, they have those travel sickness tablets, but they didn't have those in those days.

23:00 Well they didn't tell us about 'em anyway, they didn't give them to us.

Sounds like when you were training, you were in a rush to get out there and be in the thick of it and do your bit?

Oh yes.

What were you hearing at that time before you actually got on the Lismore, what was the status of the war at that point?

We were very, very nervous. In fact one weekend when we were down at Flinders they got the rumour that

23:30 Flinders was going to be attacked by the Japanese, so we had to, down at Flinders there's this big swamp right around and we had to go and lie in this swamp all one Saturday night, waiting for the Japanese to come. We were going to protect Australia against the Japanese. How anyone ever thought the Japanese would land down at Flinders, I don't know, but I still think it was just

24:00 a rort to get us to the hard facts of life that we may have to lie in a swamp for (UNCLEAR) and we were getting used to it with mosquitos biting us and all that sort of thing. It was still very nervy at that time.

Were you armed in the marshes?

Yeah, had a rifle that we still hadn't been taught how to use. Our biggest danger was that somebody would fire their rifle and shoot someone else.

24:30 But that's just the sorts of things that went on. That, and my recollection of one chap was killed in a car accident down there, not from our class. But we were detailed off to be his pall bearers and we had to tow a gun carriage from the depot up to the cemetery at Flinders down, which is all up hill.

25:00 We had to tow this gun carriage because the navy were great on the ceremonial and he was being buried in the cemetery down there, and we had to do the slow march towing this gun carriage for something like 3 or 4 kilometres I suppose, up hill, very hot, as I told you before, and

25:30 we had to tow it up there for him to be buried. All ceremonial, his family had been brought down there and all that sort of thing. We didn't know the actual chap that was killed, all we did was curse him all the way up this hill. We didn't show much compassion for him. But that's

26:00 one of the things I remember about, from down there.

The training sounds pretty intense. Were there any other mishaps or accidents or did you learn things the hard way?

Well I don't know if it taught us anything but we used to have to do what they called the "Commando Course", was part of it. They had this area set aside where you had to do all the commando tricks like climbing ropes and all that sort of thing,

26:30 crawling through water. And they used to have a tower on one side of where you had to charge up this, it was like a parade ground I suppose, and firing at targets you know, you've seen it on TV, figures would pop out of the bushes and you'd have to try and shoot them. Well the only people that got hurt there, there used to be an officer

27:00 and another chap up in this tower setting off the bombs, you know, the explosions on the way to make it realistic, and the both of them got shot. Somebody, well they'd have to do it deliberately, I'll get back at them, they're blowing all this dirt at us and he apparently shot up at the tower and it went through the steel that they had around the sides of the tower, through

27:30 the sailor's chest and went right through him and into the officer. So he got 2 blokes wounded with the one bullet. I reckon he should have got a medal for that but... There was a big investigation of course, but they couldn't pin it on anyone.

Did you guys know who it was?

No, no, nobody would admit to it. But it was, that was just one of the incidents that happened that sticks in your mind.

28:00 But that was part of the training Like I told you, the other parts of the training, I don't know why they were training us as commandos. But they excused it by saying "You never know when your ship might have to supply a party to go ashore and do something". It was all just part of the toughening up process. That's another thing that sticks in my mind from down there that wouldn't have happened to too many blokes down there, I wouldn't think.

28:30 So you finished your training and then what?

Then I was told at the end of your training they put up on the noticeboard where you were being sent to. Bluey Lang and I went down and we see this HMAS Lismore. I said to Bluey, "What's HMAS Lismore, I've never heard of it?" He said, "I wouldn't know." So we made enquiries around there as to what it was, nobody knew what it was.

29:00 So then they said "Well, first of all you're going up to Williamstown, to the depot in Williamstown to await transport to go and pick up your ship". Of course we're still trying to find out what the Lismore was, they finished up telling us "It was a corvette". Nobody seemed to know what a corvette was. We were down there for a few weeks' waiting for a ship

29:30 to take us overseas because we finished up finding out that the Lismore was overseas somewhere but nobody knew where. So in the meantime they used to put us on a tug that used to tow targets for ships to fire at, you know, for gunnery practise. So we used to go and do that 3 or 4 days a week. So then finally

30:00 came when they told us "We had to report down at Princess Pier, down at Port Melbourne because there was a ship in there called the SS Tanda which was going to take us overseas." So they took us down in a truck to Princess Pier and we got on this Tanda which was a merchant ship, passenger liner actually, and we still didn't know

30:30 where we were going but they finished up dropping us off in Colombo.

How many of you from Flinders ended up there?

There was about 100 of us but not all going to the Lismore. There was the destroyer reinforcements, there was 4 or 5 destroyers over in the Middle East and these were the reinforcements going over to relieve blokes off those ships.

31:00 They were called the N Class Destroyers and the title of the group was the N Class Reinforcement. So anyway, we got on this ship and went up to Colombo, travelling in luxury, we had our cabin. But anyway, we got off it in Colombo and put into the depot there in Colombo and we were there for a few weeks, which was good

31:30 for us because we were 2 young blokes never been out of Australia before, so we were able to explore Colombo. In the meantime, when we got to Colombo we found another 3 blokes that were going to the Lismore, but they were older people than us.

They were on the SS Tanda as well?

Yeah, and so we

- 32:00 gathered together and humorous thing, this is all our experiences as young blokes, we got to Colombo and we had to get up and do PT, physical training, same as we did down at Flinders, every morning. So one of the chaps from this N Class Reinforcements was cook and he was detailed off to go into the galley
- 32:30 to cook the breakfast. So we were coming back from physical training when he was coming back from the galley to get changed for breakfast, see. So we said to him, "What's for breakfast?" He said, "Its scrambled eggs but don't have 'em, whatever you do don't have 'em." I said, "Why, scrambled eggs sounds all right to me?" "Yeah but it was supposed to be fried eggs,
- 33:00 and the chief cook, the first 9 of the first dozen were bad, rotten, so the chief cook said 'we'll have scrambled eggs then they won't notice the difference.'" So we didn't have the scrambled eggs, we had toast and that was just a little interlude.

So you were staying on the ship?

No, we were in the depot. It was an old girls' school actually,

- 33:30 barracks, so we were there for a few weeks and then we were called down to say that the [SS] Mauritania, the troop ship, the big troop ship, it was going up to the Mediterranean and we had to get down and get on that. So, we got on that and got up to Port Tewfik, that's the top end of the Red Sea,
- 34:00 and they told us that we were disembarking there. All the rest of the troop ship was Englishmen, servicemen going home on leave. So it sailed up Port Tewfik and we got off the ship, 5 of us, and when we turned round, the ship only stopped at the wharf, unloaded us and it turned
- 34:30 around and went back down the Red Sea and we thought that made us feel pretty important because for a big ship like that, just to go up the full length of the Red Sea and they couldn't go through the Mediterranean, it was too dangerous for transport like that, so they'd gone back down and they went round South Africa and up to England. So we reckoned we were pretty important to have that sort of (UNCLEAR). I still can't understand why they did it but still...

35:00 What else could they have done, put you on a...?

Well something smaller surely or put us on a navy ship or something like that. So anyway, we then had to travel by train from Port Tewfik to Alexandria where we were put in the depot again. All these depots we went to. Still nobody knew where the Lismore was and we spent about a week in this depot

- 35:30 until one morning they said "The Lismore's come into harbour, get your gear and get down there". So that's when we joined the Lismore. She'd been up in the Mediterranean for a few months by then and so we were their first relief for a long time, and we were met with open arms by the blokes that had been over there for 2 ½ years and they couldn't go home until we arrived there to relieve them.
- 36:00 That's when we joined the Lismore.

Well, we're definitely going to talk a lot more about the Lismore. Just thinking also it would be good to get a sense, obviously the furthest you'd been from Melbourne was Flinders I take it, at that age when you were 17 ½ and for you suddenly to be seeing the world and crossing the seas, that must have been quite an experience?

Oh yeah, it was something I'd never dreamed of, was happening and to see these

- 36:30 countries. I used to write poetry in those days, I call it poetry, probably not poetry, and I sat down and these poems, the impressions of these places on us, you know, the squalor and you had such variation. The rich, you see the rich blokes riding round in big, flashly dressed and then the poor, nothing, just
- 37:00 living in rags and virtually living on the street. This happened in Colombo, we noticed this, and then we got up to Egypt and it was the same thing up there. In fact, we were told by the Royal Navy, the Royal Navy didn't like the Australian Navy I might add, and we were told by them that "The
- 37:30 truck drivers were instructed that if ever they ran over anyone they had to back up and make sure they ran over them again and make sure they were dead because if they killed anyone with the Royal Navy trucks they didn't have to pay compensation, but if they just injured them they might cripple them and have to pay compensation them for life." Well that's what they told us anyway and I, well we believed it because we saw how the
- 38:00 British treated the natives.

This is in Ceylon?

No Egypt. One of the amusing stories too, at this time, but it really annoyed us at the time, in this navy depot in Alexandria, the admiral of the fleet was coming to visit, so we all had to get out on the parade ground and parade on the parade ground, and

- 38:30 this commander of the depot, he said in a loud voice, "Get rid of that khaki." We wore khaki summer wear, you know shorts and shirts, whereas the English wore all white. And, "Get rid of those khaki off my parade ground, they make it look untidy."

- 39:00 The petty officer came puffing up to us and said, "Righto, colonials fall out." We all stood there. He said, "Colonials, fall out." "We're not colonials, we're Australians." And he said, "Well, Australians, fall out." And they got rid of us off the parade ground, so that when the admiral of the fleet stood up there, he'd see a sea of white instead of this patch of khaki
- 39:30 in the middle, and we thought that was a great joke. We didn't mind because we didn't want to be out there in the hot sun and parade waiting for the admiral of the fleet. So they sent us over to the cricket ground over the road under this English petty officer and we had to prepare the cricket ground for the match which was to take place that afternoon, and
- 40:00 there was this little Egyptian and he was making a nuisance of himself around us, like we're rolling the pitch and putting in the stumps and all that sort of thing. This English petty officer picked up one of the stumps and whacked this little, he must have only been about 8 or 9, and whacked him over the head with a stump. He must have had a hard head, I thought it'd kill him.
- 40:30 The petty officer got very worried because the Australians took to him, we were going to do the same to him. First of all he started to bluster with us, give us orders and all that sort of thing. So anyway, we got out of that, but that's the sort of treatment that instilled in us that they treated them just like dirt and we
- 41:00 weren't surprised in any of the English colonies how they all, after the war, tossed the English out. But the same thing happened, I wasn't on the ship at the time, but when the Lismore was going up there it stopped at Port Tewfik and the senior naval officer there wouldn't let any of the ship's company have leave, it wasn't only the Lismore, there were 2 other corvettes with it,
- 41:30 because they didn't have white summer gear, they only had khaki. He sent a signal to the ship forbidding shore leave because we didn't have white gear. There was a lot of hoo ha over that. The captains of the ships reported it back to the admiralty here in Australia but they changed their opinion later.

Tape 3

- 00:31 Well, the Lismore was one of 56 corvettes which the Australian Government decided it needed early in the war. It was the first, they decided to build 56 corvettes, well actually 60, 4 of which went to the Indian Navy. They were building various shipyards around the country
- 01:00 and the Lismore was the first one laid down, its keel was laid down first, but it was the second one completed and commissioned, the [HMAS] Bathurst being the first. The shipyard that built the Bathurst was quicker in building it than the one that built the Lismore. The Lismore was built in Morts Dock in Sydney, by the way because the Bathurst was the first one commissioned,
- 01:30 the type of ship got the name of the "Bathurst Class Corvettes". They were built as a mine sweeper actually but most of them were never used as a mine sweeper, they were the navy's jack of all trades and they used to do anything the navy wanted them to do, such as transport troops, mine sweeping, bombarding the coasts and that sort of thing. But whatever the navy wanted
- 02:00 them to do, they did. The Lismore for instance acted as a tug, a minesweeper, anti submarine patrols and all that sort of thing. And the Lismore was commissioned in January 1941 in Sydney. Within 2 weeks it went down to Jervis Bay to do its working up trials and while it was there it suffered
- 02:30 its only casualties for the war, for the rest of its service. They had a cricket game down there wherever we stopped in a port for any length of time there was always a cricket game organised. So they went ashore down at Jervis Bay to have a cricket game against the locals and then when the motorboat was coming back, the ship was anchored out in Jervis Bay, it got very
- 03:00 rough and the ship's motorboat sank on its way back and 3 of the ratings were drowned. We built a monument down there to them, down at the Naval College at Jervis Bay there is a monument to those 3 of our mates that drowned. I wasn't on the ship at the time. It must have been a terrific blow to all these
- 03:30 young blokes with a new ship only just been built and they go down there and within a fortnight they lose 3 of their mates. It must have been a terrific blow. The navy wouldn't let them stop to ponder on it, so they then went back to Sydney and from Sydney they joined up with the Bathurst and the 2 of them sailed first to Singapore,
- 04:00 but Singapore was starting to get bombed. And, actually the Lismore and the Bathurst and quite a few others were built for the Royal Navy, the British Admiralty but they were manned by Australians, that's the deal the two governments made, they wanted the Lismore and the Bathurst up around the Gulf,
- 04:30 Persian Gulf where all the trouble is now of course. That's where they wanted 'em, so they sent them on from Singapore up to the Persian Gulf. And it spent its time for the next two years escorting convoys around the Persian Gulf and all round the coast of India, up to Burma and

05:00 then all around the Indian Ocean virtually. Then in early '43 they were sent up to the Mediterranean. So it got up there early in 1943. So really, when I was first drafted to the Lismore,

05:30 it was actually based in Colombo but because nobody seemed to know where it was, secrecy being what it was in those days, even the navy didn't know where it was, we wasted our time sitting down here, whereas we could've left a month earlier and joined up with it in Colombo, but by the time we got over to Colombo it was up in the Mediterranean.

So you've got to tell me, why didn't even the navy know where it was? What

06:00 **was going on there?**

You tell me and then we'll both know. No, I don't know the answer to that, probably because it was attached to the Royal Navy and the Lismore was answerable to the Royal Navy, not the Royal Australian Navy and once they'd got rid of it overseas probably the Royal Australian Navy forgot about it. But that's how we came to meet up, the Lismore came and then we

06:30 came and met up with it in Alexandria, up in the Mediterranean. Right.

So you were under the command of British naval officers, naval command, how did that work on the Lismore?

No, we had an Australian, some of the corvettes had English naval officers as captains; but we had a chap whom we all loved by the way,

07:00 the one captain we had that had the unanimous love of his crew, mainly because he looked after his crew. He was a strict disciplinarian but he looked after his crew, he'd support you in any way. An illustration of this is, we were down in Mombassa and

07:30 we sent out, they had all the English navy patrols were ashore you know, to pick up anyone that got into trouble but our captain insisted on us sending a patrol ashore on our own, so that we'd deal with any Australians that were in trouble and not leave it to the Royal Navy to deal with them because he reckoned the Royal Navy would

08:00 take advantage of the situation and really be hard on the Australians. So he insisted that we provide our own patrols and anyone that was picked up by the military police or anything like that, they had to get our patrol to go get them and bring them back. That's the sort of man he was, he was an ex-merchant navy man, was an officer in the merchant navy.

08:30 And he was a reservist when the war came he was called up by the navy, and he was a down to earth sort of bloke, but he was a real, everybody loved him. In fact the only bloke I ever heard that said anything against him was a mate of mine, bloke called Lofty Giles, he's dead now, so I can talk about him, he was a big bloke, the biggest bloke on the ship, and

09:00 the captain insisted on having boxing tournaments on the foc'sle you know, as a means of sport, and he was a champion boxer, the captain, so he'd always say, "Righto Giles, you and me." He always picked the biggest bloke you know, so nobody could say anything against him. Lofty Giles used to say to me, "One of these days I'm gonna land one on that bugger," he said, "And he'll never forget

09:30 me." But he never landed a blow, the captain was too good. As I say, he was that sort of bloke and everyone loved him for it. He never sort of beat up Lofty Giles or anything like that, he just made him, showed him that he didn't know anything about boxing.

So the captain of the Lismore, when you joined, he was already there, so he'd been...?

No, he wasn't the commissioning captain,

10:00 the commissioning captain was a Pom but he was in the Australian Navy, bloke named Crawford, Lieutenant Commander Crawford, and he was captain up until just before it went up into the Mediterranean, and Lance Lever, the man I'm talking about, he was the first lieutenant under this Crawford. So Crawford got a transfer away

10:30 somewhere and Lance Lever took over as captain and that's how...

So when you joined up with HMAS Lismore in Alexandria you said that it had already been travelling around the Persian Gulf and so forth, can you talk about the experience of meeting up with the seamen that were already there, what

11:00 **impression they gave you, your expectation about now getting stuck into the war?**

Yeah, well of course the old salts always like telling the young blokes stories of course, making themselves out a hero to make the young bloke think he had to look up to them. They were pretty good, in fact when I joined the ship

11:30 you know, I'm used to, when you went on draft as it was called, when you were transferred from one place to another, you had to carry all your own gear. We had a kit bag which stood about 3 foot high, a

metre high, about 18 inches, whatever that is in metric, round, it was a heavy canvas bag. You had that, you had what we used to call a "dilly bag", which was a little blue bag which we used to take our stuff ashore

12:00 with you, when you went ashore, instead of having a handbag, you had the dilly bag. And then you had your hammock, which was rolled up into a sausage about 7 foot long and about 18 inches diameter, and you had to carry all that yourself. The Lismore was anchored out in the harbour and we pulled alongside, in this motorboat,

12:30 and I look up and we're way below the deck you know, and I think geez, how am I going to get my stuff up on deck. And a bloke came up, one of the sailors on the ship, jumped into the... "Are you Brennan?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Righto, where's your hammock?" And he got my hammock and threw it on board. "Where's your kit bag?" Threw that up. I thought, geez, this is all right, how long does this go on for? And he said, "You're my replacement."

13:00 He said, "I've been waiting for you to come," and he said.... We always laugh about that now when we meet at reunions, how he was keen to get off the ship and how he couldn't get off the ship until I got on it. He had all his gear packed on board and they were going to take the boat that we came out in, they were going to take that boat and go ashore. That's the way they treated us anyway.

Can I ask you what was in your kit bag?

13:30 **Do you remember?**

All your gear.

What did you take?

You don't take anything. We had 2 uniforms, your working uniform and your going ashore uniform, 3 pairs of shoes, 1 pair of boots and then your socks and your underwear and all that sort of stuff, your shaving gear,

14:00 anything you wanted to carry actually.

Did you take anything from home?

No, they took everything off you when you went in the navy. You went in in your own clothes with your own suitcase and that sort of thing but they took that off you and then they sent that home for you. A navy truck pulled up outside my mother's place and said "Here's your son's stuff."

Can you tell me about

14:30 **that, did you tell your mum you were going? Did she know you were going off?**

What going overseas?

Yeah.

Nah, we couldn't tell her. No, you weren't allowed to disclose your movements, but she guessed.

Can you tell me about that story?

First she knew that I'd gone overseas was when I wrote her from Colombo, weren't allowed to say where we were of course. They used to have a censor and if you mentioned a place it'd be cut

15:00 out of your letter. She said "The first letter I got was full of holes", being the young bloke I tried to tell her where I was, but she knew I was overseas somewhere because the envelope was postmarked Royal Australian Navy Overseas. She knew I was overseas but didn't know where I was. But we gradually, as I got older and shrewder, I was able to throw her out hints

15:30 about where I was. For instance, when I was in Alexandria, my poor old dear mother, I've said how she was a strict Christian, very religious, and I told her, I don't know how I actually told her that I was in Egypt in Alexandria. So when I got a letter back she said, "I told grandfather that you're in Alexandria

16:00 and he said how many times have you been down to Sister Street?" Well of course Sister Street's where all the brothels are at, in Alexandria. Mum wrote, "I don't know what the censor bloke thought when he read it, here's a bloke's mother asking if he had been down to Sister Street." And me old grandfather, he thought that was a great joke with his daughter because he wasn't religious at all and he thought it was a great joke, he'd put one over on his religious daughter. But that's...

16:30 You found out ways to let them know that would get past the censor anyway. But when I first got over there, as I say, it was full of holes where I tried to tell her where I was and the censor was too smart.

How did it feel leaving Australia and going into the unknown? Leaving your family?

Well, in that poem I showed you before, that was the way I felt, didn't know what

17:00 was in front. But whatever it was, I was determined to not shame myself, to try and do whatever I was

asked to do, nothing heroic but nothing... Everyone, when you get into action everyone's scared but you can't show that being scared, you've got to hide it.

Were you worried about your mum?

17:30 Oh yeah, I was worried because she had 3 boys. 1 we didn't know too much about where he was, Brian as I said was a prisoner of war. The other brother was still in Australia in the air force, and to think that she'd lost virtually her family, that she'd struggled so long to keep together and now she'd lost all of them, all the boys anyway and was only left with the girl.

18:00 It must have been a terrible worry for her and we worried about her being worried. I think the women were the ones who suffered more from the war, you know, everyone makes the men the heroes of a war but it's the women, they battle on without knowing what's going, whereas the blokes are away, they know what's going on whether they're in

18:30 real danger or having a good time, they know what they're doing. Whereas the women can only worry about what they might be doing. I think the women had more to put up with than the men, and I've always said that but, they're the ones who put in the true war effort, the women depend on us.

Do you think it was any easier or any different for your mum

19:00 **given your father had been to war and your grandfather and her brother, so she had this family or relationship with people that had been to war?**

I don't think it was any easier, it might have been even harder, because I don't know what they had told her about the war. She had the evidence of my father of course, with his wounds, he had 3 or 4 wounds

19:30 and then the gassing, that eventually killed him. And her brother who was killed in France, she knew those. I don't know, I don't know whether it was harder for her or easier for her. But I think she was resigned to having us go.

Do you want to read your poem about leaving?

Don't know, where is it?

20:00 You're asking me what were my feelings when I left Australia as a real young lad and a naïve young lad really. First time

20:30 I'd really been out of Victoria, in fact out of Melbourne. When I was on the ship transporting us overseas and was thinking about it on this ship, we were going down Port Phillip Bay with the lights on the shore you know,

21:00 and they're disappearing out of sight and I thought what have I let myself in for, you know. So once we got out of the [Port Phillip] Bay and out into the sea I went down into my cabin and I thought I'll set my thoughts down on paper because I'll never remember them. So I wrote this poem called, "Goodbye Melbourne".

\n[Verse follows]\n "Along those heavy old planks of Station Pier\n

21:30 We trudge along towards the liner there.\n

Our drafts says that we're to go overseas\n But where we are bound is not really a care.\n Our transport sails off down the Bay,\n Goodbye to Melbourne,\n Says the teenage lad.\n I'm sure that I will return to you someday\n But leaving for the first time makes me sad.\n What lies there before me\n Tempers my

22:00 Sadness,\n

Is it glory, hardship, pleasure or pain?\n Having joined up I now go to face the test\n Of fight our enemies, 'ere I return once more.\n As the city's buildings disappear far astern\n I gaze ahead, throb of engines beats steady,\n Soon through the rippled sea I'll learn\n If all that training has me a sailor made ready.\n

22:30 Still looking ahead to the adventures before me,\n

Strange countries to see, great sights to behold\n But today is the day that I depart from my hometown of my childhood,\n Puberty to teenage so bold.\n There'll come a day, back to Melbourne I'll come,\n Much older in experience from adventures untold,\n Then once more my home town will welcome her ailing sailor son,\n

23:00 Welcome,

Return to the fold." \n

But that's the way I felt. That gave me the idea that wherever I went I'd try to put down on paper, in the form of a poem, my impression of the place where I was. And so in that way I built up a few poems.

It paints just such a beautiful picture of

23:30 **setting off into the future and the sentiments about leaving home.**

Yeah, well I can understand young blokes these days, they all go overseas these days and they must feel similar pangs the first time they leave home but then you had the uncertainty of what was going to happen. I'd been to the repatriation

24:00 hospitals and visited all the old soldiers that had come back with all sorts of wounds and you know, when you're going you don't know what to expect. It's not until you really leave to go overseas that you start to think about these things. Up till then, you'd been doing your training and all that sort of thing and you don't worry about what's ahead of you but then you start to have second thoughts and

24:30 think hmm, are we going to, you know, come back like some of those old blokes?

Did you share your poetry with your mates?

No, they never ever knew I was writing it. I purposely, I usually used to do it you know, when your all

25:00 on the mess deck some of them would be playing cards and some doing other sorts of things, you know, games, playing different things, and I'd get up in the corner somewhere and write my poetry. Oh no, they would've reckoned I was a nit.

They didn't ask you what you were writing?

No, they probably thought I was writing a letter home or something like that. I'd never agree to being that sort of bloke.

25:30 **Did you send your poems home, was that possible?**

Nup, oh sorry, I used to send the occasional one. I couldn't because they're all written about countries, it'd give away where I was, so it wouldn't get past the censor. No, I couldn't send them home.

So let's return to...?

Well, we're on the ship.

We're on the ship.

Well, up until

26:00 then I didn't know what a corvette was. Now I had visions of going to one of the glamour ships like a cruiser or one of the big ships or a destroyer or something like that. Because, I said before, corvettes were built as a jack-of-all-trades, they did any job the navy wanted them to do. We always reckoned we got the dirty jobs but they probably all said that. But

26:30 my first impression was, as I said, my first impression was when we got alongside in the motorboat and I was looking up how was I going to get all my gear up on to deck? Then I was shown where my mess was, had to go to the mess.

27:00 And I walked onto the mess deck and to see it, to think that there is 90 men living in this, I couldn't work out where 90 men would fit on this mess deck, it was so cramped. But it's the sort of thing you had to get used to. I don't know how we all didn't

27:30 finish up with lung cancer because the mess deck, when you were at sea of course, the ship had to be blacked out so there was no air, they had sort of vents that blew air onto the mess deck but you could cut the air with a knife, and that's where you spent your life, except when you had to be up on deck, naturally.

So you were confined to the mess deck unless you were working?

28:00 Well, no not really confined, you could up and walk around the upper deck if you wanted to as long as you didn't get in the way of those that were walking but most of your life was spent there anyway, especially at night, because you'd get in your hammock and the hammocks used to be slung so that they were touching each all across the deck, that was the only way they could fit them on. It wasn't until I became more experienced

28:30 that I thought this is silly, I'll lay my hammock down on the upper deck and sleep up there, so I did that. You weren't supposed to but a lot of us did because it was the only way to get some decent air. So that was the corvette, she was...

What was the job of an ordinary seaman on a ship like a corvette?

Doing anything you were told to do.

29:00 From painting the ship to scrubbing the decks, to doing anything, if anything needed repairing you know, if any of the ropes needed repairing. You were actually an apprentice and you were usually put to work with more experienced blokes and do what they told you to do. That's how you learnt. The...

29:30 ah yeah, it was a good life.

With the technical functions of the ship, you talked before, about it being a mine sweeper and those other things, did you learn about those functions?

Yeah.

Can you talk about that, I mean mine sweeping for example?

Yeah, well we were trained to mine sweep but not everyone on the ship was involved in the mine sweeping

30:00 aspect of it. There'd be the mine sweeping crew which had to lay out the lines which cuts the mooring for the mines and the ship would sail along, and of course you could pick up any mines that were there, hopefully. But we only ever did mine sweeping once and that was at

30:30 Sicily where it was our job, we had to sail in close along shore and clear a path, sweep a path in for the landing ships that were coming in. That was the only time we really did any mine sweeping, most of our, the Lismore activities were anti submarine patrols, protecting convoys mainly or patrolling outside a harbour to stop any submarines getting into the harbour.

31:00 And that was our main function for the whole time.

So with the anti submarine patrolling, how did the ship protect?

Well we had ASDIC the anti submarine detection, I forget what the IC stands for, and this sent out a signal from the ship

31:30 and then if it struck anything metal it would return a metallic signal back to the ship. We had our ASDIC operators that used to do that. That was one of the specialist things that I didn't want to get into before. I could've been one of those but I didn't want to get into anything that would stop me getting overseas quickly. Then that's what had happened. Then of course

32:00 we had the means of fighting it with our depth charges. The operator could tell the captain where the return signal was coming from, the range and bearing sort of thing and he'd then, the captain would steer over it. They reckoned the signal would get shorter of course. When they first picked up a submarine it would come back and it'd go like

32:30 ping, they used to call it a ping, it would come back with this ping, and as you got closer to it from them sending out the signal to it coming back, it would get much shorter until it got to the stage where they were instantaneous and you'd know then he was over the top of the submarine. Then they dropped depth charges down and, depending on the accuracy of the information, just how successful they were with the

33:00 actual depth charges.

So would the whole ship be informed?

Oh yes.

You'd know?

Ah yeah, we were all called to action stations, guns, everything. So everyone knew. But see, not having that specialist training, being just an ordinary seaman, my main role on the ship was as a, steering the ship, as a lookout,

33:30 and that sort of thing. We had the 4 hours' watch, my first hour of the watch would be as a lookout where I'd be up on the bridge. We had 3 lookout points, we had either side of the bridge and one down on the stern. Then we had a bosun's mate who had to carry any messages the captain wanted, take them down to any of the officers and that,

34:00 so he was sitting there waiting for the captain to tell him to go down and also to call the men, call the next watch and that sort of thing. That was his job, and then steering the ship. So your 4 hours were divided up amongst one of those duties, and usually an hour on them then you'd switch round. The bosun's mate would go to one of the lookouts and relieve him so then he'd go to another lookout and relieve him, he'd go to the other lookout and relieve him,

34:30 and he'd go up to the wheel to steer the ship. The one who'd been steering the ship would go bosun's mate. And they were all just seamen and that was our job. I've lost my train of thought.

So if the submarine detector had detected there was a submarine and you're say, on lookout, what would you do? What would

35:00 **your role be then?**

Well to look for it, to see if it was on the surface to start off. Well you should have seen it anyway if you were on lookout and it was on the surface. But if you hadn't seen it, submarines of course often came up to periscope depth, so that they could fire a torpedo and you were supposed to be able to pick up that

periscope which was only about, well a couple,

35:30 well about 50 mm, or might have been... no the part that came out of the water wouldn't be any more than 50 mm in diameter and it wouldn't stick above the water very much, and you're supposed to be able to pick that up. The whole ship had a job to do anyway, when that happened, because immediately there was action stations. My role, no matter where I was on the ship, whether I was

36:00 on the ship, if I was even up as a lookout, as soon as someone had an action station as a lookout they'd come and relieve me and I'd dash down to the magazine, which was my action station, which was right down the depths of the ship. So everyone had their action stations positions anyway. All the gunnery ratings of course, they had their guns to man and that sort of thing.

So you'd go down to the magazine?

Yeah.

36:30 **Can you tell me about that? What the magazine is and what you'd do?**

Well, it's really a room which has all the cordite chargers for the guns, where they're stored. Supposed to be the safest place on a ship because nobody wanted the magazine blowing up. But to the people who manned the magazine during the action stations, it wasn't very safe because they used to batten you down, as soon as the crew

37:00 of the magazine were in place they'd batten down the hatch and that was never opened until the action stations had finished. But if something, if you had a fire in the magazine, well they'd flood the magazine to protect the ship, to protect the rest of the ship. So it wasn't a very comforting position to be.

So you'd drown? Anyone who was down there would drown?

Oh yeah. They'd sacrifice, well there was 4 of us on the Lismore in the

37:30 magazine and well, sacrifice of 4 men as against 90 men on the rest of the ship, because if that fire got out of hand, the ship would blow up and they'd all be killed. So it was the captain's responsibility then to dictate when they flooded the magazine. Fortunately, it never happened to us but it engendered all sorts of thoughts in a young sailor's mind you know, to be battened down

38:00 under there. And I remember saying to the leading seaman who was in charge of the magazine, I said to him, "How do we know when to get out of here?" He said, "Well, it's like this, we don't insist on you wearing your lifebelt while you're down here because there's nowhere to go but," he said, "When the 4 inch gun goes off, I suggest you get your lifejacket and hang it around your neck." And he said,

38:30 "When the", we had a smaller sized anti aircraft gun down the stern of the ship and it was called a pom pom, and he said, "When you hear that fire," he said, "You tie your belt on." And he said, "When the Oerlikons," they're a smaller anti aircraft gun, "When they go off," he said, "You blow your lifejacket up." He said, "When you hear the machine guns

39:00 go," he says, "Well then you start to panic because," he said, "The plane must be that close to us." And the first time I was down there and I heard the 4 inch gun go off, I thought we'd been hit. It shook the whole ship, the 4 inch gun shook the whole ship, and they used to have insulation, crumbed asbestos insulation on the deck heads of the ship and every time the 4 inch gun fired, that

39:30 came down like a snow storm. Many an anxious moment was spent there anyway.

So there'd be 4 blokes down in the magazine?

Yeah.

What were you doing in there?

We were passing up the ammunition to the guns. On a large ship, it's all done hydraulically, it all goes up through a lifts and that sort of thing but it was all done by

40:00 hand on a corvette. You had to pass it out through this little hole about that big in the hatch and pass it up, and there was someone there to take it to the next ladder and he'd pass it. So that was our job anyway. And I never managed to get myself out of that job. While I still stayed on the Lismore, that was my action station for the Lismore all through my time. When I got a bit more experience and tried to get out of it

40:30 they said "Oh no, you're doing too good a job there". I said to the leading seamen, "How can I do a bad job, so I can get out of this place?" But never, ever managed.

Tape 4

00:31 Being in the magazine was that you didn't know much what was going on, you could only imagine about

what was going on up on deck. Whereas those that were fortunate enough to be up on deck saw everything that was going. They knew as it was happening, whereas we were tucked right down there, nobody told us what was going on. All we had to do was our job and pass up... But it had its

01:00 advantages. The aircraft tended to strafe the ships you know, and the strafing wouldn't hurt us, whereas the blokes on deck were in danger of being strafed. You can't have it all ways.

What about a torpedo?

Well if a torpedo hit a corvette, it wouldn't matter where you were on the ship you were because you see, a corvette's only a small ship and any torpedo

01:30 would have demolished the ship virtually. So it wouldn't matter where on ship you were, unless you were up on deck you might have been thrown out into the sea. So we just didn't think about that, you couldn't. If you started thinking about those sorts of things, of what might happen, you'd go ga ga.

How long would there be a call to action?

02:00 **I mean, what sort of period of time would that be?**

Well you were expected to do it in the shortest time possible but usually the whole ship was closed up for action stations in about 2 or 3 minutes. If it went any further than that the skipper would be going crook and he'd have you doing practise runs ad nauseum.

And how

02:30 **long would you be in action stations?**

Well it depended on the action of course. For instance, when we were in Sicily we were at action stations for 24 hours virtually. And we might be closed up at action stations all the time. At any other time it depended on the action, if it was a submarine you just had to, until the captain was satisfied that he'd missed the submarine,

03:00 you had to stay at action stations.

It would be good perhaps to get onto your first activity once the Lismore left Alexandria.

Well, it was just outside Alexandria, when we were on our way

03:30 back from further up the Mediterranean that we lost the only ship in the convoy that we lost in all the time that the Lismore was escorting convoys. There was a troop ship in our convoy that was torpedoed and sank, it sank in 7 minutes, and out of 1,500 odd, my figures might be a bit out,

04:00 1,500 odd there was only 400 rescued off that troop ship. Well everyone searched for the submarine, nobody could find the submarine. There's 8 ships in the escort and nobody could find the submarine.

So let's start that story again?

Yeah, well this ship was torpedoed, as I said, the only one

04:30 that we ever lost, and it was full of free French and British sailors sailing from the ports along north coast of Egypt, back to Alexandria, most of them to go home. The Free French were there as reinforcements for the French Navy ships that were in Alexandria,

05:00 and we were having breakfast actually, at the time, and we heard this thwump of course, with the torpedo going off, and by the time we ran from the mess deck out onto the upper deck the ship had gone. All that was there was all these survivors clinging to all different sorts of things. So the Lismore and the [HMAS] Gawler, that's a sister ship to the Lismore, another corvette,

05:30 we were detailed off to go and pick up survivors, along with 2 Royal Airforce rescue ships, which had come out from one of the ports, Derna port in North Africa. So we picked 396 I think it was, the Gawler picked up a similar number. All told there was 800 odd rescued by

06:00 the Gawler, ourselves and these 2 airforce rescue boats. We had them all over the ship. We had a crew of 90 as I said before, on the Lismore and we had close to 400 survivors on the decks. They were everywhere, you couldn't walk anywhere. One of our mates told us a story of how he came

06:30 out off the mess deck and there was a bloke lying down on the deck just outside the mess deck and he kicked him, you know, accidentally kicked him as he stepped over him, and he apologised and turned around and found the bloke was dead. He said "It was a waste of an apology". So we then had to transport them into this coastal town of Derna and unload

07:00 them and then we had to catch up with the convoy. But that was my first impression of war you know. To see this big ship go down so quickly. I thought at the time when I was on the Mauritania, which was a big troop transport, and to see it go down so quickly and thus the devastating affect. We didn't even know if it was a submarine

07:30 that had sunk it, there was conjecture of whether it had hit a mine you know, or something like that. But later on we heard from the German news agency claiming that this submarine had sunk this ship, so then they knew it was a torpedo. The fact that they couldn't find any trace of it, you know, the ocean's a big place and submarines, as you say, how do you find them and that, well,

08:00 you only find the odd one of the many hundreds that are under there. The fact that they never ever picked up his signal, that's what made them think it was a mine. Then we found out it was a submarine, so for any submarines that were picked up on ASDIC there must have been hundreds of them that were never picked up of course.

But why would that be?

Well a submarine's only a small

08:30 thing in a big ocean and unless you get close enough to it to start off with...

But they've got to be close enough to...?

They've got to come within range of the ASDIC but they can be, yeah, they've got to be within range of the ASDIC to fire their torpedo effectively but, you know, that's the sort of thing that happens. So eventually

09:00 the navy wore down the submarines and eventually they won the war in the end but it was a dicey business for a long time.

So you set out from Alexandria as part of a convoy?

Mm.

Was it a big convoy?

Used to have about 50 ships in them and there'd be about 8 escorts around them you know, searching for submarines and that, or aircraft.

And that's,

09:30 **what the Lismore's role was, as an escort?**

Mm. Well most of the corvettes were the same, that was their role during the war. As I say, they were built as mine sweepers but very few of them did much mine sweeping, it was more any of the other tasks that the navy gave them. Then, of course, then we had the invasion of Sicily, the Lismore and some of the

10:00 the sister ships were in the escort of convoys up to the invasion of Sicily and their role there was to take the convoy up to Sicily and then patrol off the beach of Sicily mine sweeping, to make sure there were no mines and then try and fight off the German aircraft coming out to get rid of us. And that was the second

10:30 phase of my war experience in that while we were patrolling up and down mine sweeping, the battle group, the battleships and all that, were further out to sea and they were bombarding the shore over us and they had 15 inch shells, diameter that is, and when they went over the top of you they sounded like an express train

11:00 going over the top of you. I remember being up on lookout one night, this night they fired over the top of us and I thought to myself those poor Germans over in on the land there, I'm glad I'm out here and not in there. But they were monstrous things those battleships. The ones that we had with us,

11:30 they had 9 guns, 15 inch guns, so they're firing 9 guns together at broadside you know, and you can imagine, you could virtually feel them go over the top of you, these shells, as they went over the top of you. We said "We hope they've got their range right and don't drop them on us". So that was my second taste of war, and then of course

12:00 the German aircraft came out and they were bombing us to get rid of us because we were the escorts for the ship. We were supposed to, actually we were supposed to go into the port once they'd secured the port, there was a tanker in there that was refuelling the ships, and we were supposed to go in and tie up alongside her to refuel because our fuel was running short. We learnt next morning

12:30 that that ship had been sunk by the Germans at the time we would have been tied up alongside her. We always reckon the Lismore was a lucky ship and that was one of the instance where we were lucky that we weren't where we were supposed to be. Because when that tanker went up, it would've taken us with her.

So the invasion was happening

13:00 **and German aircraft were trying to bomb you out of the water? So your role at that point, while this land battle was going on was what? Just to stay in those waters?**

Oh no, we only stayed there until the ships had unloaded and then they came out and we had to escort

them back then, then pick up another convoy and bring it up. That was our role, bringing

- 13:30 reinforcements up to reinforce the troops that were on the ground. And protect those ships virtually, that was our role.

How long would an unloading take?

Virtually overnight. You know, you'd get there and then you'd see them off and we'd cruise up and down while they were in the harbour unloading and then as soon as they came out you know.

- 14:00 We'd probably be there about 12 hours I s'pose and take them back and bring up another lot. We had, at one time, we had to take some to Malta, which was the other way. When they came out they went back to Malta. Because obviously they must have come up with another convoy from the western Mediterranean, whereas we came from the eastern Mediterranean and, you know.

- 14:30 **So you were with the eastern Mediterranean fleet?**

Eastern Mediterranean fleet, yeah.

And it was controlled by the British?

Mmm.

So it was Royal Navy with...

There was only a few, there was only 8 corvettes - that was all. There was a couple of destroyers, Royal Australian Navy destroyers attached to that fleet but mainly it was all British ships and they had

- 15:00 hundreds of ships but we were the only Australians. In fact we were the only Australians in the invasion of Sicily, the corvette crews, there were 8 corvettes up there. Then our next problem was when,

- 15:30 once the Sicily invasion had taken hold and they'd virtually got that, we had to do a convoy of ships the full length of the Mediterranean, in fact they told us we were taking them to England which made us all excited. We were on our way, and just before Gibraltar there's a little island called Alboran and that's when the Germans attacked our convoy

- 16:00 from the south coast of France, they were apparently based at the time. They attacked us and they reckoned they sunk all the escort which they didn't strike, they didn't sink any of them actually. But we shot down quite a few aircraft and they didn't get any of the

- 16:30 merchant ships they were after either, they hit a couple but didn't sink them. So we luckily came through that too. That was a pretty hectic couple of hours when we were attacked by 50 odd aircraft.

What sort of anti aircraft weapons did the corvette have?

Well the corvettes didn't have much at all really. We,

- 17:00 early on when we went into the Mediterranean, before I was on it of course. But we had our 4 inch gun on the front which wasn't an anti aircraft gun, it was only a low level gun, and then we had this pom pom on the back and that was all we had, oh and 2 machine guns. The admiral of the fleet at that time said "I'm not going to use them because their too vulnerable

- 17:30 to aircraft attack". So our skipper, we went to Tripoli and there was a big dump there of all abandoned guns and that so he took a party ashore, he purloined a truck and took a party ashore and we got 2 Breda, anti tank guns they were actually, but you could lift them up and fire at aircraft and

- 18:00 since the admiral had said that "They'd fitted us with 4 Oerlikon guns", which are anti aircraft guns, and so from becoming a very lightly anti aircraft, we had more armour on the Lismore than any other corvette, either English or Australian, because the skipper had taken things into his own hands and had his engineers attach these guns

- 18:30 to the deck you know, we bristled with guns after that.

We've heard a few stories about this fantastic improvisation that had to happen when there was shortages...?

Fact that we got these Bredas, they would fire the same shell as the Oerlikons, so we were equipped with Oerlikon ammunition, so we were able improvise with these Bredas and use those too.

Was this

- 19:00 **Captain Lance Lever?**

Mm, well Lieutenant he was, he was only a Lieutenant. But he was the captain of the ship and as the captain of the ship he's God almighty on the ship of course. He took things into his own hands. He said "We're not going to send off signals requesting this and requesting that", he said "We'll go get 'em ourselves". Took a few blokes off ship and went and picked up these guns.

- 19:30 Apparently at the dumps they were only too anxious to get rid of these guns that they'd collected there, so we got them. So after that of course, I said, we thought we were going to England but we got as far as Gibraltar and we took our convoy from there out into the Atlantic Ocean, turned north to head from England and then over the horizon another convoy comes with the Royal Navy escort
- 20:00 coming down from England. And so we were instructed to give them our convoy and take over their convoy. So the Royal Navy again put it over us again and they got to go back to England and have a good time, whereas we had to go back through the Mediterranean. Never seen anything like it, we were only a day from England and all the blokes had got out their uniforms and they're pressing all their uniforms, their winter uniforms, because we'd only worn,
- 20:30 and we reckoned the Poms had put it over us again. "Kippers" we used to call em, Kippers, you know kipper fish. They used to have kippers for breakfast and we'd call them "Kippers", one eyed, no guts, very derogatory. You get any bloke that served with the Royal Navy on an Australian ship and none of them are totally endeared with the English.
- 21:00 I think that's where a lot of the republicanism comes from. Even though we were staunchly in favour of the King, the King was our monarch but I don't know, we never speak politics when we talk at our reunions but I think a lot of them would be republicans. But...
- 21:30 **That's interesting. You know, it's interesting that the British, like you say, everyone was allies in that war but the British had such control.**
- They looked down on the Australians. They looked down on, as they called it, the "Colonials", you know. Anyone in the Commonwealth was a colonial and we always took offence at that because we weren't colonials, we were Australians.
- 22:00 **It makes you really want to put something over them, doesn't it?**
- Yeah. What else can I tell you about that?
- So you turned away from England...?**
- Yeah, went back into the Mediterranean. By this time we'd been at sea for, going from Alexandria going right though up to the Atlantic and back, we'd been at sea
- 22:30 for best part of a month, so we were running short of supplies. We arrived outside Alexandria and the ASDIC man said "He had a signal on his ASDIC" and he said to the captain you know, "I've got a signal. I don't think it's a submarine but there's something there." So the captain said, "I know what it is, it's a school
- 23:00 of fish." So he said, "Righto, log in the log that we've got a contact with a submarine." So he immediately went over this school of fish and dropped a depth charge and fish, you've never seen so much fish. I've never seen so much in my life. All over the surface of the sea were fish that had been stunned by the depth charge. He ordered the boats to be lowered
- 23:30 and we went down and collected this fish, and I make mention of it in my book actually, they got fish cleaning parties on the quarter deck and we had fish for a week. Before we'd finished collecting the fish off the surface, all these boats had come out from Alexandria, the local fisherman, they had a great time picking
- 24:00 up this fish. We got as much as we needed and they all got the fish too. But he did it because he thought there was, officially he thought there was a submarine there. So it cost the navy one depth charge to feed us for a few days.
- What was the food like on board? What were you being fed, and in that situation where you are at sea for months, supplies**
- 24:30 **must get very low?**
- Yeah. We were fortunate, we had good cooks and they used to make eatable food out of pretty rough sort of food. You know it was the usual bully beef and tinned this and tinned that, all the vegetables were canned vegies. When we were in different places they used to supply
- 25:00 us with camel, we've eaten camel; they used to supply us with yak, yak's like a big buffalo, it tasted all right but it was tough. The camel, when they were cooking the camel you couldn't stay on the mess deck because it used to smell to high heaven when they were cooking it, but it didn't taste too bad.
- 25:30 They ate, our supply assistance, our supply people, they used to go ashore and get whatever they could get and our cooks used to make the best of what they could get. As I say, we had some good cooks on board. We probably ate better than say a soldier would eat in the field, when he was in the field. But it was pretty hard all the same, it was pretty rough sort of food.
- 26:00 **You must have also gone a bit crazy coupled up on a ship for that long?**
- Yeah, well they used to call that "Channel Fever" of course, when you get within sight of the harbour

everyone used to go mad and they called that channel fever, once you struck the channel into the harbour everyone sort of goes mad. That's right, it was a pretty, like when you talk about action and all

26:30 that sort of thing, that was a rarity really, mostly it was boring you know, just playing mother hen to a flock of merchant ships, buzzing around keeping them all in line and all this sort of thing, so that they wouldn't get attacked. It was a boring sort of existence really. Like, I was only a seaman, as I say, but for the poor old skipper it must have driven him up the wall.

27:00 On all the corvettes, it must have driven them up the wall being a skipper responsible for all these merchant ships, which didn't seem to like doing things. For instance, when you're in a convoy your speed was controlled by the slowest ship in the convoy, and some of them couldn't do any more than about 6 knots,

27:30 which is about 10 miles an hour. The skipper used to think up all sorts of ruses to try and get them to speed up. He'd start off signalling, "Can you increase speed?" So this, Lance Lever, he had a particular ship that reckoned it couldn't go any faster and all that sort of thing, so he used to have a signal that you hoisted when you were attacking a submarine, a big black flag, and the skipper said, "Hoist

28:00 the signal, I am attacking. Convoy scatter and look after yourself." Well he reckoned he could see the ship speed up immediately after he'd been trying to get him to speed up. And that's the sort of thing that skippers, must have driven them around the wall, and they thought up all these ruses to try and get them to speed up. And of course, Lance Lever,

28:30 being the sort of bloke he was, he knew the merchant navy and he knew what each merchant navy ship was capable of doing, so he knew when they could do better. He used to think up all sorts of ruses to try and get them to speed up.

So how did you communicate with those ships?

By Aldis lamp, the signal lamp, mainly. With flags for set signals, but he could signal them

29:00 and then we could go close and he could call them on a loud hailer. But a lot of them couldn't understand English of course, on the loud hailer.

But no radio communication?

Oh no, you had to preserve radio silence because the submarines could pick up radio signals too and track you down. You weren't allowed to use the radio at sea unless in an emergency of course.

29:30 So, you know, that's the way we spent our time in the Mediterranean. Anyway, then it became about September 1942 when we were transferred out of the Mediterranean and back into the Indian Ocean. That's when I said we got this very good signal from the admiral of the fleet thanking the Australian

30:00 ships for their contribution which, he said "They wouldn't have been as successful as they had been", which was a nice pat on the back of course. But he had a different attitude to us than when we first went into the Mediterranean. When we first went into the Mediterranean, they reckoned we were going to be a liability.

Why was that? Did they not think you were trained well enough?

Ah no, it's just the Poms again.

30:30 They reckoned unless you were an English ship you weren't any good. You know, the Poms always reckoned the Americans were no good and their colonials weren't much better.

So what was it that made you a good ship and a good crew?

Well, it was the crew obviously. Mainly,

31:00 that we were mostly compatible, we learnt to be compatible anyway. You had your occasional bloke who didn't fit in but mostly you developed into a good unit where everyone stood up for the bloke next to him you know, or had faith in the bloke next to him. For instance, they had faith that I'd pass up

31:30 that cordite and I had faith that they'd take it off me because you know, we knew each other. The same thing went on ashore you know, if a mate got into a fight everyone was supposed to get in and help him. This is what, they knew they could rely on you to stick up for them as they'd stick up for you, sort of thing. And

32:00 yeah.

Was there much trouble when you went to shore after being cooped up, going channel crazy, and you arrive?

Yeah, go to the wet canteen and without doubt, that's where they took their ire out on a lot of the Poms.

Do you recall incidents?

Oh many, many, many. Like we had a bloke Joe Dodd, who was a very good boxer and fighter and

32:30 he wasn't a particular mate of mine but he joined the ship the same time as me, he went over on the Tanda. And he always liked to fight, just have a fight, and we were in the wet canteen and this big bloke came and stood next to me and said something about, "What ship are you on Aussie?" We said, "The Lismore." He said, "Oi," he said, "That little thing out there, what a shocking ship that is." And I said to him, "Yeah, that's what we reckon about it too."

33:00 And Joe Dodd's there and he said, "Ah, you insulted my mate and you said those nasty things about our ship." And the bloke said, "Yeah, but you say them too." And he said, "Yeah but it's our ship, we can say what we like about our ship but you can't say it," and he went bang. In a few minutes, there's a big brawl in the wet canteen.

Was that

33:30 **a brawl between the Brits and the Aussies?**

In the finish it was Brits versus Brits and Australians versus Australians, anyone that wanted to throw a punch. But that's how they took their tensions, got rid of their tensions. Especially Joe Dodd, he reckons if he went ashore and didn't have a fight, he reckoned he'd go back still feeling as bad as he was when he came ashore. He loved to fight, Joe.

34:00 Poor old Joe, he's dead now of course. We always stuck to each other, whether you knew what the trouble was or didn't, fact that your mate was in there you had to get in there and protect your mate. That's what built up the camaraderie on the ship. Like, don't get the impression that every time we came ashore we had a brawl, far be it from that. But that's what happened.

34:30 For instance, talking about that sort of thing, when we were doing, in South Africa, where we haven't got to yet, there was a pub there that everyone used to go to and on this particular night I was on duty and my duty job was to be a member of the patrol. I was telling you how the captain used to insist on sending our patrol

35:00 ashore. So we got this message on the ship that there a big brawl in this pub. So there was 6 of us in this patrol and we had to double down the wharf and it was just at the end of the wharf, the pub. So we go down there and all you could hear was breaking furniture noise and the petty officer in charge of us says "We'll go for a run around the block". So we doubled around the block and come back and it had settled down a bit, so we went in.

35:30 He said, "I wasn't going to go in while they were all throwing chairs around, we might get hit." So we went in and we eventually made the enquiries and found out that it was, the 2 instigators of it was one bloke from our ship and this Pom off another ship, navy ship that was there. So we arrested the 2 of them and took them back to the ship.

36:00 All the way back this Pom, he was a big bloke, and all the way back this bloke from our ship was saying, "Let me at him, let me at him." I said, "Cut it out, if I let you go you'll get killed." So I hung onto him and we got them back on board. I don't know what happened to the Pom, what happened to him, but our skipper, this bloke was put on captain's report of course, and had to go up and the captain said, "Well you're confined to

36:30 the ship until that ship goes out. I'm not going to let you go ashore and get killed." So that was Lance Lever again, that was the way he worked, that was the only punishment he gave him anyway. We went back, the patrol went back to the pub and we said to the publican, "Do you want any charges laid?" And he said, "No, it wasn't the Australian's fault, it was those Poms." 'Cause the South Africans hated the Poms.

37:00 So he said, "It was those Poms, your blokes, they were only reacting." So we took his word for it but we had our suspicion.

So you did patrol duty?

Like military police, yeah. We always ran our own patrol and that was anyone on ship, anyone that was on duty did that, didn't matter what your rank was on the ship, you were in the patrol.

37:30 **Would you only go ashore if there was an incident you heard about or would you just...?**

In some places, other places, places where we visited, which were hostile to us we'd go and patrol to protect our blokes you know.

Places like where?

East Africa, up the coast of east Africa there was some places that didn't look too kindly on

38:00 the Royal Navy and we were part of the Royal Navy sort of thing. South Africa was the same because the Boers, the Occifer Bronkwah [?] they called them, they were very hostile against the English because the English beat them in the Boer War you know, they were very hostile. You couldn't walk down the street on your own unless you walked down

38:30 singing out, "I'm an Australian, I'm an Australian," and then they'd welcome you with open arms. But if

they thought you were English anything could happen to you. Like one of our blokes, he got drunk and he wandered into this Occifer Bronkwah [?] club, dressed the same as the English Navy of course, and he wandered into this place and they said to him "Get out of

- 39:00 here you English dogs", you know. And he said, "I'm not English, I'm Australian, look HMAS." And they said, "You're all right, come in Aussie," and they took him in. When I say about the English and their relationship with their colonies, they weren't very good.

So did you ever discuss with them

- 39:30 **various battles, like if you were ashore and were in the pub and the British were there, would there be any conversation about what you'd both just experienced?**

No, never. We didn't liaise with them very much. We sort of mixed more with the Yanks more than we would with the British, the Yanks or the Canadians.

- 40:00 We had a great rapport with them.

Where did you have contact with them, what circumstance?

Everywhere, they were everywhere. They were in India, they were in, down in South Africa and then when we got in the Pacific they were all up there of course.

So you went off to the Atlantic?

Well that was our only sojourn into the Atlantic that I said, when we thought we were going to England

- 40:30 only to be disappointed. No, well then...

Was that an uneventful trip?

Yeah.

Tape 5

- 00:32 **So Ron, if you could tell us that story about (UNCLEAR)?**

Yeah, well that troop ship which I mentioned before was the only ship that we lost from one of our convoys, it was called the SS Yoma, and when I said that the Australians in particular, the people from the Gawler and us,

- 01:00 they didn't worry about the fact that there was a possible submarine in the place, your main aim was to save the people off the Yoma. So we launched both our boats, we had 2 lifeboats, we launched both of those and then some were even diving in and pulling blokes out by hand you know. We had some pretty good lifesavers on our ship, surf lifesavers you know, big blokes,

- 01:30 and they were diving in and the Gawler did the same, the sister ship. One of our crew who will have his chance, he's the one in Western Australia who's going to also have an interview, Reg Lewis, he was in the boat that was rescuing these people

- 02:00 and he looked over and the Gawler's boat was over a bit away from him and he saw his brother in the Gawler's boat that he hadn't seen for 2 years or something, didn't know where his brother was and they meet up like this in the middle of the ocean, in the Mediterranean. And he sang out across the water and his brother got a hell of a shock of course. So they established where they were and they used to meet ashore when they got ashore then 'cause

- 02:30 Reg Lewis didn't even know his brother was serving on the Gawler and I don't think his brother knew that he was serving on the Lismore, so to meet each other like that out in the middle of the ocean, it was an amazing coincidence. It was just one of those things that happen.

You were talking, we did touch on the sinking of

- 03:00 **Yoma and what an awful experience that must have been. I mean, I can't imagine how horrible that must have been. Can you tell us what was going through your mind, I mean you told us it sank in a matter of minutes basically and you were brining in survivors and I'm sure...?**

To see them lying on the deck of the ship, some of them died when we pulled them out of the water and lay them on the ship of course, see their injuries, there were all sorts of injuries, blood, what have you,

- 03:30 it was a real shock to a young bloke to see what war could do to men. Some of them were horribly mauled because some of them were caught below decks on the Yoma, as I said, it took, I think the official time was 7 minutes to sink and they had to get from below decks because they were at breakfast too, it was just at that time. On a troop ship they might be 3 decks, 3 or 4 decks down.

- 04:00 For them to have to get out, even if they weren't injured in the initial explosion, they sort of copped injuries on their way out. Most of them were injured in some way, some seriously, some not so seriously, but the trauma of being thrown into the water obviously would be horrific. I can honestly say while I was in the navy I never, ever
- 04:30 considered being thrown into the water. It's stupid I know, I didn't worry about the enemy ever hurting me, all I ever worried about was sharks. I had seen what sharks could do to a person and I was bloody worried about being in the water and being attacked by sharks but these, there were no sharks up in the Mediterranean, that was one good thing.
- 05:00 We manhandled them on board. Their lifeboat, they had a big lifeboat nearly half the length of the Lismore, and it came with a load of survivors. They all hopped out on to the deck of the Lismore and somebody said to them "What about your mates that are still out there?" "Oh (mumble, mumble)". They didn't worry about them, they were safe, that's all they worried about. So our blokes got permission to take over this big lifeboat and row it out
- 05:30 and rescue some more blokes. I met a Free Frenchman who was on the Yoma, I met him 2 or 3 years ago, and he said that "They were amazed that our blokes would take over their lifeboat and save their mates where they weren't prepared to go back and save them". That's just the way Australians think, I think.
- 06:00 **And personally what was your involvement in that?**
- I had no involvement of the actual rescue. I had involvement of when we brought them aboard, they were all covered in oil and we had to turn the hoses on them and get the oil off them, that's where I was involved but I wasn't involved in any heroics.
- So how did that experience, which was the first time you'd seen any sort of action I guess in the Mediterranean,**
- 06:30 **how did that change or affect your outlook on war?**
- Didn't really, as I was saying to you off camera before, that I, all through my experience, in the back of my mind, I was wondering why should we be doing this you know, why should we try to kill another person because he's German or Japanese or whatever he is, and that was in
- 07:00 the back of my mind all the time after I saw those first people killed and it just reinforced that I guess. War's a horrible thing and even though I was keen to join up and go do my bit I came to realise with experience that war is a shocking thing and there must be other ways of solving problems without going to war about it.
- 07:30 **Now you said you were in the magazine, so you'd be hoisting up the munitions, how often would you actually be in that position where you were passing up munitions and there was fire and danger above you?**
- Relatively speaking, not too often. You know, they used to have what we called ready-used lockers up on the upper deck, so they were handy to guns
- 08:00 and immediately we had action stations, we used to have to pass the stuff up to put in those ready-used lockers. They weren't kept up there because they were dangerous and after the action stations, we'd have to bring them back down into the magazine. But you know, life on a corvette was probably 80% boring routine duties and 20%
- 08:30 excitement. The only time I was in the magazine was in those exciting times.
- So what would go through your mind when you were at action stations and you were passing up the munitions? Was it just do the job or...?**
- Yeah, well you had to do the job but it'd go through your mind all the time what if a bomb comes through the deck there, how do we get out of here sort of thing? That was always in the back of your mind,
- 09:00 but you didn't have time to worry about it. As I've heard so many blokes say, everyone's scared when they're in action no matter what their situation is but it's learning to hide that fear and get on with the job that you really do, otherwise if everyone succumbs to their fear there wouldn't be any war.
- 09:30 **You were just talking about fear and coping with that, hiding it, how did you manage that?**
- It's just inbuilt I think, it's just what's drummed into you all the time that you don't succumb to fear because
- 10:00 if you succumb to fear you're an outcast, you're made an outcast. So you don't succumb to fear, that's it. Those that do, they call them "shell shocked" or "bomb happy" or whatever the term is, and they go off their head if they succumb to the fear.
- Did you see instances of that on the Lismore?**
- Not in my immediate vicinity but I saw

10:30 in a military hospital, a ward, which they called the "Nut factory", where all these people were you know, they really go crazy virtually. It does happen, there's a fair incidence of it but I never found any of it on the Lismore, perhaps because we were such a close knit company sort of thing.

It seems to me, yeah, that out there with the U-Boats [German submarine], no sharks fortunately, but there's....?

11:00 That was in the Mediterranean, in the Indian Ocean there was plenty of them.

But a sense of, some sense of vulnerability. I wonder if there were really times you came close to being in a situation that the Yoma was in for example?

Well, we came close to that position. As I said before, we classed ourselves as lucky ship. For instance, at Sicily when they were trying to bomb us one bomber straddled

11:30 us, you know, there was a group of bombs that side of the ship and a group of bombs that side of the ship and the closest one was about 10 feet, 3 metres or so, from the edge of the ship. Of course the spray comes up everywhere. I didn't see that fortunately because I was down in the magazine. But we felt the thump of it down in the magazine. Then again, later on when we were leaving South Africa,

12:00 we had a convoy to take further up and we came out of Durban and here was this submarine sitting, it was night time, and there's this submarine sitting on the surface just in front of us. Apparently, they saw us the same time we saw them, so they fired 2 torpedoes but 1 only came close

12:30 and our officer of the watch, he saw it coming and he turned the ship and it went right down the side of the ship. They're the sort of near misses that we had. And in the bombing raid up in the Mediterranean, some of those were torpedo bombers and one of the torpedos that they dropped went right underneath the ship. They must have had it set at a depth to actually get

13:00 the merchant ships but because we had much less draft it went right underneath our ship. That's why we came to think of the Lismore as a lucky ship.

Absolutely. Those 2 instances where you had the torpedo from the U-Boat then from the bomber or fighter plane.

Torpedo plane.

Torpedo bomber, were you still in the magazine at that point?

When it went down the side of the ship I wasn't

13:30 in the magazine 'cause it all happened so quickly, they hadn't even sounded action stations by the time the submarine let off a torpedo at us. We depth charged that submarine and our skipper thought he'd damaged it but we never had enough evidence to prove that we did any damage to it. But we searched for it for about 6 hours and a couple of other ships came out from Durban and we spent the next day

14:00 searching for it but we didn't find it.

It seems if you're on a ship in the navy, the enemy is in a way unseen, you never actually see the enemy face to face, it's a boat or a plane or a U-Boat?

The only enemy that I ever saw face to face, that bombing raid on us up near Alboran, up near Gibraltar, and there was, I just forget the number of planes that was shot down

14:30 by the convoy and it's escorts, something like 20 or something, but we were sailing along just after it and there's a German in his lifejacket and he's singing out, "Comrade, comrade!" And we weren't allowed to stop to pick him up because of the danger of submarines and that. And I know one of our crew members leaned over the side and said, "You should never had joined." Very callous I know but

15:00 that's the way you get when you're sort of fighting. But he was the only German that I saw face to face.

And what went through your mind when this guy is obviously stranded out there?

I just felt sorry for him, you can't feel anything else. But that time we were really hotted up because they'd sent over 50 bombers to try and sink us, and of course you more less say, "Oh well, fair game".

15:30 **What was that experience like? I mean, you've got 50 bombers up there and your convoy's under attack?**

Very worrying actually. I was on lookout duty at the time when they came across and actually I was next in the lookout, which was near the Oerlikon guns, so I thought here's my chance, I'll shoot down a bomber. And I strapped myself in the Oerlikon gun ready to open fire when he got close enough, the Oerlikon gunner came up

16:00 on action stations and tapped me on the shoulder and I had to get out and go down to the magazine and he had the Oerlikon gun. It's very worrying of course, very frightening.

Can you just describe the sounds, the atmosphere when that happened?

The atmosphere was, they looked like a flock of geese actually. They were flying

- 16:30 along the coast of France and they were low down on the water, it was just on sunset, and it just looked like a flock of geese and then someone said "They're bombers". Then they turned and came in. It was just a drone, you know, the noise of an aeroplane in the distance, drone, and that's what it was, this drone coming in. But after that I was in the magazine and didn't
- 17:00 hear anything, only guns going off and all that sort of thing. But the atmosphere, my initial thought was excitement, I've at last got a chance to have a shot at 'em, but it wasn't to be, not that I thought I could of hit one but still.

So it sounds like there was a bit of frustration on your part?

Yeah. At that time, yeah. 'Cause I always wanted,

- 17:30 I always regretted I hadn't done the extra course to make me a gunnery rating, so I could be on the gun you know. I immediately, after that, put in for a course, a gunnery course. This is in August 13, Friday the 13th was that attack. I thought I must get a gunnery rating so I
- 18:00 put in for a course and when we get on further later in the war, in May 1945, it came through when we were back in Australia, it came through that I had to go down to Flinders to do this gunnery course. That's how long it took for them to approve of my gunnery course and when I'd finished the course the war
- 18:30 had finished, so I didn't still get to fire a shot in anger. So I individually never fired a shot in anger, I never claimed that I killed anyone, which I'm grateful for really. I could never claim that I killed anyone or anyone shot directly at me, they might have shot at the ship but they didn't shoot at me.

Now earlier you were telling

- 19:00 **us about the tasks that the corvette, the Lismore, would undertake, the sub patrol and the minesweeping. You did tell us a bit about the minesweeping but could you just describe that in a little more detail just to get a really clear picture of what those operations were?**

Well, the task of a minesweeper would be outside every port, every port in the world actually, a mine field was sown by either the enemy or by us, depending on which port it was.

- 19:30 It was a means of protection, to stop enemy ships, submarines, be what they may, from entering the harbour. Now, the minesweepers job was to sweep them up of course and get rid of them, very hazardous job. As I said before, we only ever did any minesweeping at Sicily but there is a pattern that goes to it.
- 20:00 There's this special equipment, which is designed with Oropesas, or floats, they used to call them and they were out on a line and they had a cutting edge underneath them, which as you went along, all the mines at that time, they're different now of course, but all the mines at that time were anchored by an anchor down to the floor of the ocean and they had the cable coming up anchoring them there and they were usually anchored just below the surface.
- 20:30 So the idea was to cut that mooring line and the mine would float to the surface. Then you had to destroy the mine and that was the task.

How were they destroyed?

By rifle fire. You may see in the movie how they get the rifle and they fire it and the mine explodes. Well, if that happened, you were doing the wrong thing and you'd get punished for it. The idea was to

- 21:00 put holes in the float part of the mine, so that it would fill with water and sink. That's the ideal way of disposing of it. But they have horns on them and they're the detonators and if you hit one of those, the whole things blow up and is just as likely to do damage to your ship as anyone else because you're not very far off it when you're trying to sink it with rifle fire. So that's
- 21:30 it. When you see it on the movies when the mine floats up to the surface, they all get on their rifles and they aim for the little horns on it instead of aiming for the actual things. It's just one of those things. More spectacular of course.

But that's the movies. The particular hazards of that were what, that if you missed one...?

Well the ship could hit one of course, because the ship

- 22:00 itself had no defence against it, no protection, but the idea then was you went in a flotilla of minesweepers and each one was covered by the other bloke's cables going out from it, they got in behind it, so the ships were staggered like that. But the leading bloke, he had no protection and if he was unfortunate enough that he ran into
- 22:30 a mine, well that was the hazard. That happened to one of the ships, one of the corvettes, that was after

the war when they were minesweeping. Even when the war finished all these mines had to be swept up and this ship, one of the mines, they cut the anchor cable on it but the mine swung back and hit the

23:00 ship on the side and it sunk the ship, sunk the corvette. So that was one of the corvettes that was sunk. It was always a hazardous operation. In fact, there was oodles of minesweepers around like around the coast here, German and Japanese submarines laid mine fields around the coast here

23:30 to sink allied ships and they had little minesweepers, some of them were virtually yachts, and they'd go out and sweep the mines and it was a very hazardous sort of job. Fortunately, we came through.

When you talk about the Lismore escorting,

24:00 **you're talking about troop ships mainly?**

All sorts of ships, tankers. We had a tanker, they were a ship, I'd never serve on a tanker because if they were torpedoed, they just went up in a ball of flame you know. I met a bloke in Alexandria actually and he was up the mast when they were hit by a torpedo, he was probably

24:30 50 feet above the deck, and he was all burnt down the face from the flames that just shot up and got him. I've seen tankers with great holes in them, holes as big as this room you know, where they'd been torpedoed but because a tanker is divided up into tanks, they were able to save the ship, it could get back into port. I've seen some horrific sort of

25:00 results of torpedos in tankers. So much so that I always used to hate when we had a tanker in our convoy but we always did of course, there was at least one of the ships was a tanker.

You might have told us before with a convoy, with an escort convoy, what the composition of that was. What was the normal composition in terms of ships?

Ah well, I suppose the biggest convoy we ever escorted had 50 ships but the smallest would be 1.

25:30 There'd be them and us, we'd get the job of escorting one ship from here to there. Normally, I'd say around 20 to 30 ships of a normal sized, though much more on that trip up to Sicily, that's where we had one with 50 ships.

That's including the escorts ships and the..."

No, 50 merchant ships plus and there'd be 8

26:00 escorts escorting them.

Of those 8 escorts, how many of them would be corvettes or battleships?

7 of them. There'd be one, in our escort group they used to call, we had an English sloop was the commander of the escort and then there was 8 corvettes beside him, so 9 really, 9 escorts. There were 4 Royal Navy corvettes and 4

26:30 Australian corvettes.

Did you ever, you might have been escorting troop ships or merchant ships, did you ever have much to do with the people?

Nothing, not even our captain had anything to do with them. On the convoy they had the commodore of the convoy they called him, he'd be in one, he was a senior naval man, and he'd be in the main

27:00 ship, merchant ship in the convoy and he was called the commodore of the convoy. And then you had the commander of the escort group and they would have relationships, but not down at my level. I often spoke to them ashore you know, meet them and they'd say "What ship are you on?" You'd say "What ship are you on and so on?" You'd discuss experiences and that.

27:30 That's about all, met them socially but not officially.

Now we might sort of head back to, we got off on a bit of a tangent here. I think before lunch we had sort of discussed Sicily. Was there anything more about Sicily that you could think might be worth telling us? That was obviously the landing, the Allied, I believe the first ground assault on German occupied?

28:00 Yeah, on Europe. It was the first real invasion of Europe. No, I don't think I've got anything more to add to that really.

Was there much resistance?

Yeah, there was, but we didn't see much of that of course, we weren't on shore.

But in terms of, were their defences that weak that you weren't under threat at all being at sea?

28:30 Only from the aircraft. Like the aircraft tried to bomb us but apart from that we weren't close enough to

see the actual action. We could see through the binoculars, we could see the landings going on but we couldn't see what was actually happening, it was just like seeing a movie. And having the battleships fire over us sort of thing. And our planes, our planes were bombing

29:00 it. But that's about all of that. And as far as we were concerned that only went on for 3 days at separate times, the initial landing, then the next lot of reinforcements and then another supply ship virtually, and that was our involvement.

29:30 **So what, as far as your time in the Mediterranean went, what after Sicily was the next major movement?**

Well there was the one where we went up, right through up to, and we had that skirmish up at the other end and then we came back and by this time we were needing a boiler clean. Periodically, the boilers of a ship have to be scraped out and cleaned of all this muck in them and make them clean.

30:00 So they sent us to Haifa in what is now Israel of course, they sent us there to have it. At this time of course it was British, it was controlled by the British, Palestine, and the Jews, the Israelites weren't Israelites then, they were Jews, they were battling to get control

30:30 of Israel. So what the Palestinians are now doing to the Jews, at that time the Jews were doing to the British, all these terrorist tactics and that. So when we went there they said "You can have leave, you can go to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv but it's very dangerous." We were going to stay at the King David Hotel in

31:00 Tel Aviv and just before we got there the Jews had blown it up, so we didn't get to stay there. It's a big flash hotel, it was. But that's what was going on when we were there but we were only there 2 days and then we had to go back to the ship.

But you were on leave those 2 days?

Yeah, that was the first decent leave we'd had while we were over in the Middle East, was that 2

31:30 days. We could choose for ourselves whether we went to Jerusalem, which was another hot spot or whether we went to Tel Aviv which was virtually the sea port of the, you know, the beachside port. And so we decided to go to Tel Aviv anyway. But it's always amusing me now how Palestinians are doing horrible things there but the Jews were doing it back in our time. Because they were trying to get control

32:00 and they were blowing buses and all that sort of thing. And we were driving down by bus down from Haifa up to Tel Aviv expecting the Jews to jump out and blow the bus up any tick of the clock. Fortunately, we got through it all right.

What did you get up to in Tel Aviv?

Couldn't get up to much at all, we actually only had 1 day in Tel Aviv, so couldn't get up to much, just a bit of sight seeing.

So how long had it been since you'd had your last bit of proper

32:30 **leave?**

Not since I'd left home. Oh well, I had virtual leave while we were in Colombo and that sort of thing but that was only, we were living in barracks there and used to go into the town each night or something like that. But other than that, hadn't had leave since I'd left home. So we got that 2 days. All the rest of the time the only leave we had off ship was when the ship was in port and you were allowed to go

33:00 ashore for the day, you know, report back at night. That went on all the time. I was on it until we got down to South Africa and then we got some extended leave, but that was later on.

So after then, Palestine, where did you go from there?

Well we came out of the Mediterranean and we resumed what the Lismore had been doing for the previous 2 years of escorting ships

33:30 around India and up to the Persian Gulf, around the Persian Gulf, down to all the islands in the Indian Ocean, used to take ships there. Then they decided it was time we had a refit and they sent us down to South Africa for the refit, to a little town called Port Elizabeth. We had 7 weeks there.

34:00 7 weeks, mainly because these Occifer Bronkwahs [?] again, they were on the ship doing the refit. You know, they hated the British and hated the war and all that sort of thing but they still got paid for doing the repairs to the ship. Apparently one of them dropped an important part of the engine over the side, so we were only supposed to have 3 weeks down there

34:30 we finished up having 7 weeks. Which we thanked him gratefully. So that was a very good interlude down there because they sent us up to the country. My legs were covered in tropical ulcers then because of the food situation you know, we didn't get much of the green stuff, and I had tropical ulcers on my leg and they sent me up to this farm that was run by 2 old

35:00 widows, they were ancient widows of about 50 in those days, I was 17 years old. Real mother figures, you know. They said "We've been told we've got to clear up your legs while you're here". So I had 10 days there and they had one of those milk containers and they stood that on the edge of the kitchen and they said "We're going to check that that's all drunk during the end of the day between the 3 of us".

35:30 There were 3 of us that went up there. So that's what we had to do. That's all we did up there: drink milk, eat and play a bit of tennis because they had a tennis court. It was beaut.

You were there for about 7 weeks?

No 10 days.

And the rest of the time?

Rest of the time we were back on the ship helping with the refit and just getting night leave, like we normally got, well not even night leave.

36:00 I never stayed ashore, just go ashore at 4 o'clock and be back on the ship before midnight sort of thing.

What sort of recreation was there to be had on shore?

Well, as I mentioned before, we played rugby against the locals. They were always arranging something. The Navy League there arranged dances for us and all that sort of thing.

36:30 Cricket - we played games of cricket against the Poms. But you know, just kept ourselves happy.

Tell me about the cricket? Did you guys whip their asses?

Well we never lost a game. All the time I was in the Lismore, the Lismore never lost a game of cricket. We had some pretty good cricketers, we had a bloke who played for South Australia, he was our captain, we had a bloke who

37:00 played district cricket here in Victoria, and some from the other states that were pretty good cricketers. And I always got picked because I was big enough and ugly enough to stand in the slips and take the odd catch. We used to have fun. It was a release from the normal run of things and really we recovered all our

37:30 war weariness, I s'pose you'd call it, while we were down there and the locals went out of their way to make sure we did. That's about all I can tell you about that really.

Did any of the sailors make girlfriends for example?

Oh yeah, yeah.

38:00 But they weren't allowed to marry, a few of them wanted to get married and the skipper refused them permission and they were very crook on him for awhile but they saw wisdom of it afterwards. But there were a couple that did marry, they went back or they brought their South Africans over here and married them. But I reckon it was a mistake because I don't know how a South African girl, although they do it now,

38:30 would cope 'cause they had servants galore, you know. Even though they were only working people they still had servants, black servants and for a woman to have to come out here and do all her own housework and that, I don't know how they'd cope. No, there were a couple.

Did you do any courting while you were there?

Not really, no. I wasn't interested in girls at that time.

39:00 I was only, how old was I down there 18, 19? No, I wasn't interested in girls. Fact I was never interested in girls until I met my wife to tell you the truth, she interested me in girls.

I'm not sure if I believe you but ah... So from 7 weeks in South Africa. Now that refit, was that just standard repairs?

Yeah,

39:30 well they virtually pulled the engines to pieces and reassembled them and all that sort of thing, just like refitting a car or doing a service for the car. But the ship hadn't had one since it left Sydney beginning of 1941 and this is 1944. I think they're supposed to have it every 12 months, so everything was wearing out on the ship and this was the first chance it had had to have a proper refit.

Now you'd been on the ship, by that stage,

40:00 **about a year or so?**

Yeah, about a year.

Were there men on the ship who'd been there from the very beginning?

Nah, they'd all been relieved by then. Fact I was starting to be an old hand by then. They virtually got rid of all the original crew in January 44, there was a big turnover of crew in January '44 in Bombay. We were in Bombay,

40:30 all these ones from Australia came and the blokes that had been on it for more than a couple of years were transferred off and they were sent home. So I was then becoming one of the old hands by then.

Tape 6

00:31 **Okay, we were talking about Bombay I believe?**

Yeah, well in Bombay in early 1944, January 1944, there was a big influx of replacements of the crew. Those that had been on the ship from the beginning in 1941, they were being replaced by virtually a new crew, I would say at least

01:00 50% of the crew anyway. So all these people came, they came from all places. There were people who had served on cruises, people served on destroyers, all sorts of experience, more experienced than me. There was some that had been in the navy since the start of the war and all that sort of thing. But they all came on in Bombay in January 1944 and that was really to be the major replacement

01:30 of crew until we got back to Australia in early 1945. But some of them were in for a rude shock because I know a particular friend of mine, I hate to say this, he's dead now like most of 'em, he came on board, he was from the [HMAS] Hobart, the cruiser and on the cruiser discipline was that strict you know.

02:00 You had to be dressed up no matter if you were painting the ship, you virtually had to be dressed up to the nines, and as he walks over the gang plank to come on to the Lismore he sees 2 blokes sitting down doing some splicing of rope and they've got a dirty pair of shorts on, a big knife like seaman's dirk strung around their waist and that was it, no cap, no anything. And he thought God, what have I struck here? And he came to love the ship.

02:30 He was one of our leading people in the formation of an association and that sort of thing. He said "He couldn't believe that the navy operated like it did on a corvette because all his experience had been on the big ships where you were a number not a person, you were a number". So that was the difference. And anyway, we're back in South Africa and I said

03:00 that's, I don't know what I said.

Bombay or South Africa?

Bombay was before we went to South Africa. You were asking about how the locals, how we benefited from our time in South Africa and I said it took all that sort of tenseness, and what have you out, of us, and brought us back to human beings virtually. And

03:30 then came the time when we had to say goodbye down there, and we still communicate with some of the people over there. I still communicate with the secretary of the Navy League over there that used to run the dances for us and all that sort of thing. And we headed off again. Then we had our brush with that submarine that I said before, where we caught them on the surface and they fired the same time as us. We both missed each other fortunately.

04:00 **So that was in Indian Ocean?**

Yeah, outside of Durban. 'Cause there were submarines that used to be there all the time blockading South Africa virtually. And then went from there back up to the Seychelle Islands, across to East Africa and then continued doing what the ship had been doing for the previous 2 years, escorting convoys

04:30 all over the Indian Ocean and up the east coast of India up to Burma. And then we continued to do that, all routine stuff until the end of 1944. End of November 1944, we got the signal to say we were to return to Australia,

05:00 the ship was to return to Australia. Which we did in November and we arrived back in Melbourne in December 1944 and on our way, just as we were to enter Port Phillip everyone's getting ready for a run ashore, home after 2 ½ years in my case, and

05:30 we got a signal to say that a submarine had been sighted off the Otways, it had shelled a Greek ship off the Otways. So we had to turn around, there were 3 of us, the [HMAS] Maryborough, the [HMAS] Burnie and the Lismore, and we had to turn around and go and search for this submarine. Fortunately, the Lismore struck a big wave, which one of it's, it's

06:00 port engine stopped, blew up and so we had to limp into Port Phillip while the other 2 went and spent the next 3 days searching for this submarine. They always reckoned we did it deliberately, which we didn't. And so we came up the Bay and the skipper said over the public address system, he said, "All Melbourne natives,"

- 06:30 understand natives is where you come from, "All Melbourne natives are excused of all landing duties." And we were allowed to head off the ship as soon as we tied up. So we headed for Williamstown and by this time it was about 11.30pm at night and the last train left at 11.50pm from Williamstown pier I think,
- 07:00 and I lived at Northcote, so we're all tearing up the road up to the station to catch this last train, which we did. But I got out to Northcote and it must have been about 1 o'clock in the morning and the whole place, our home was all locked up and everything. There was only my mother and my sister there of course. I knocked on the front door and my mother sung out, "Who is it?" I said, "It's Ron."
- 07:30 And she said, "It can't be, he's overseas." And I said, "Well he's not really, he's here." And there's pandemonium of course. I'd been away for 2 ½ years, half the time she didn't know where we were. But we had to be back on board at 8 o'clock the next morning and so we didn't get to bed that night and finished up getting back on board at 8 o'clock.
- 08:00 We were there until after Christmas, tied up at Williamstown. They gave us leave for Christmas Day, so we could have Christmas dinner at home and then we got a recall. A policeman came and knocked on the door and told me "I had to get back to the ship". So I went back to the ship and we had to go out minesweeping. We had to mine sweep down to Wilsons Promontory.
- 08:30 Mineswept on the way down there, never saw a mine, anchored down at Wilsons Promontory for the night and then mine swept on the way back. So instead of having a good leave over Christmas we spent the time going down there. Somebody in the navy headquarters had this bright idea, we've got a couple of minesweepers in the port, why don't we use them? We never saw a mine.
- 09:00 So that was it. Then we left Melbourne, we had to tow a floating dock to Sydney, sorry it was being towed by a tug but we had to escort it. And we went off to Sydney and we arrived in Sydney in early January '45 and that's where the second half of our episode started. That was where I met my
- 09:30 wife. Made me interested in girls. We've been together for 56 years now, so the navy did me some good anyway, found me a wife. Then after we'd been in Sydney a short time we were sent up to New Guinea and we, up to Morotai actually, and we,
- 10:00 from there we escorted ships, we escorted ships up to the Philippines and then we used to have to do an anti submarine patrol all the way around the Philippines and that sort of thing. Then we took part in the invasion of Okinawa. We had to take ships up for that, to Okinawa.
- 10:30 At that time we were part of the British Pacific Fleet and we were what they call part of the Fleet Train. Fleet Train is the supply ships for the fleet, so we used to have to escort these supply ships to the fleet. Wherever the fleet was we had to escort these supply ships to them, so that they could replenish the fleet. And so that's how
- 11:00 we got up to Okinawa. Then we came back to Philippines from Okinawa and then we came back to Morotai. It was while we were in Morotai that my approval for my gunnery course came through and by this time it was about April 1945 or a bit later. So I had to fly home
- 11:30 from Morotai. I was put on a [Douglas] Dakota, they used to call them in those days, which they used to use for the paratroopers. All they had in them was a canvas seat down both sides of the plane. We flew from there to Darwin, Darwin to Townsville. When I got to Townsville, there was an officer who had a higher priority than me. I was only coming down to do a gunnery course, I don't know what his priority was but I got kicked off
- 12:00 there and had to come from Townsville down to, no sorry that's wrong, I came to Brisbane by plane and was kicked off there and came from Brisbane to Sydney by train. Did the radar part of my gunnery at the radar school in Sydney and then down to Flinders to do the gunnery part. And while I was down at Flinders,
- 12:30 the war finished. So I was part of the victory march through Melbourne and all that sort of bump. Then they said "There's a new ship being commissioned in Brisbane, being built up in Brisbane and we want the gunnery crews for it", so all the class that I was doing my gunnery course with, including the instructor, were all drafted
- 13:00 to the Murchison, the HMAS Murchison. A frigate that was, which was a luxury ship compared to the corvettes. So we went up and stood by that while it was being finished and then commissioned it. Then we were sent up to Morotai again, went up to Morotai where they were assembling the convoy for the occupation
- 13:30 troops of Japan, for Japan. So we escorted the occupation troops up to Japan. We served up there, I went up there and spent about a week up there then came back to pick up the second convoy. When we got back to Morotai, my discharge had come through.
- 14:00 I had to sit in Morotai waiting for transport down to Melbourne to get discharged. And that's where I started to have trouble because I was very low priority. Anyone that was coming down to get out of the navy had zero priority virtually. So it took me about a week sitting in a camp up there, living in a tent,

and

- 14:30 so I eventually got on another Dakota, flew down and that's when I was kicked off it up in Darwin. We got to Darwin and they said "You're priority doesn't permit you to go any further, you can stay here". So I'm stranded in Darwin for, I think it was 5 days. Then I flew to Townsville, stranded in Townsville because someone else with higher priority than me took my seat,
- 15:00 and I was stranded there for another week. Then they said "You haven't got a high enough priority from here on to get on a plane, so we'll send you by train". So we got on this train and it took us over a week to get from Townsville to Brisbane. We went right out the back somewhere. I never know the towns we went through, they were little tin pot towns right out the back of Queensland and we used to reckon that even one of those hand trolleys
- 15:30 had priority over us, we'd have to shunt off the line to let them go past. But it was full of troops all coming back for discharge. And I can remember the incident I most remember of that, is we pulled up at this little country town, I've never been able to remember the name of it, but it had one dirt road right up the middle of the town and they had one pub and the pub had dirt floors and bat winged doors. And of course the publican's day
- 16:00 was made because there must have been 200 troops on this train coming down, so they stopped there. Whether the train driver had sympathy on the troops but they stopped there and he said "I've got to fill up with water, so you can go down to the pub while I'm filling up with water". When I give a toot of the whistle, it means we are leaving. So everyone bowls down to the pub expecting Hopalong Cassidy to ride in through the bat winged doors at any time, that's the sort of place it was. And
- 16:30 so anyway, suddenly the whistle toots, and me being a very obedient sailor I started to walk back to the train but there was only about half a dozen of us walking back, so he toots again and a few more start wandering back. So he gives a half dozen toots and a few more come back. So he got a bit wise then, so he started the engine off, blew the whistle then started revving her you know, this old steam train. And these 200 blokes came from
- 17:00 the pub all racing up the main street to get on the train. So that was the recollection I've got, the main recollection of that trip, because it was such a boring trip. Anyway, we got to Brisbane and then down to Melbourne and I got my discharge. And that was the end of my service.

It took us 5 tapes to cover 12 months and then half a tape to do

- 17:30 **2 years or something. So we're going to go back a little bit because there are so many interesting things we covered there. But where to start? But why was it the Lismore left the Mediterranean? Was it because...?**

Yeah, well our job had finished, that was a phase and was over and they reckoned they had enough ships to cover what was left there. Because having invaded Sicily and then Italy, which we had no part in,

- 18:00 the Germans had no control over the Mediterranean at all. The subs had been squeezed out, planes didn't have any bases, German planes had no bases and that, so there was virtually a lot less need for ships than there had been before.

And then in the Indian Ocean you were doing that route from South Africa, East Africa and up the east coast of India, Burma?

We criss crossed all over.

And how long was

- 18:30 **that all over? How long were you doing those?**

Well, from September '43 till December '44. As I said before, 80% of life on a corvette is boring, escorting convoys, fuming at how slow the convoys were going and all that sort of thing. But it was very boring work and out in the Indian Ocean it was probably, 10%

- 19:00 was excitement.

So how would you occupy yourselves in the down time when you weren't working?

Well, they kept you working on the ship of course and you didn't have much spare time. Any spare time, if you were seen standing around doing nothing somebody put a paint brush in your hand or something like that and said "I've got work over here for you".

So there wasn't simple things like playing cards?

Yeah, when you were off duty, yeah.

- 19:30 Writing letters home or reading letters from home.

You were saying earlier when you'd write letters to your mother and obviously they were censored, that first one from Alexandria,

No, that was from Colombo.

Sorry, Colombo.

I was a better son than that. I used to write more often than that.

But you were saying she also seemed to get a sense of where you were. How did you manage to get that across?

Ah, well,

20:00 I learnt how to do this, the old blokes told me how to do it. You'd mention something which she'll know is a certain country, like you might say like when we were up in Alexandria and Egypt you'd say, "Aren't the Sphinx a wonderful carving or something like that?", and she'd immediately know. And that's how my grandfather got

20:30 on to the fact that I was in Alexandria and that's when he asked that question about telling me to go down to Sister Street, or something like that. My mother was horrified when she found out that's what it was.

Do you think the censors would've picked up on those things?

As time went by, again Lance Lever, he insisted on the ship's officers doing our censorship and they were much more lenient than the censors ashore.

21:00 Because they'd put the censored stamp on it and that was enough to get it home. Now I know of some blokes who were, some of the officers, they put what they liked in there, in their letters and got them through but ours always had the appearance of being censored anyway. But we managed to get a few things through that we could identify, not we're

21:30 at a particular place but we were in that area.

And in those letters home, letters to your mum, if you'd been through any sort of touch and go action would any of that...?

No, never tell her that. No, as far as she knew I was on a world cruise having a great time. She used to worry.

22:00 I guess she could read me like a book, should be able to after all that time. And she could read between the lines anyway.

What other ports did you see? You were in the Indian Ocean for a good bit of time, what other ports did you visit?

Well, we touched on every port surrounding the Indian Ocean I guess and up in to the Persian Gulf.

22:30 We were up around there, we had to do a patrol across like the ships are doing now, inspecting every ship that came in and out. Terrible place that Persian Gulf, I pity the, although they've got air conditioned ships now, our ship wasn't air conditioned. But we used to make our own fun. The skipper said "You could take the whaler ashore and have a swim".

23:00 So we rode it ashore and we were in neutral territory or course, we weren't supposed to go ashore, we were supposed to swim off the boat, but of course we went ashore on the sandy, great sandy cliffs going up the thing, and this day we were there and one of the blokes looked up and there's these Arabs up on top mounted on their horses, just like a scene out of Beau Geste, and

23:30 I don't know who got the biggest fright, them or us. It would have caused an international incident if we were on neutral territory, so we piled into the boat and rode madly back to the ship, and they turned and went the other way as fast as they could. I don't know whether they thought it was an invasion or what. They're the sorts of humorous sides that happen, but it was a terrible place. We used to patrol out at sea and they used to have these sand storms, you probably read about the sand

24:00 storms in the latest Iraqi business, and we'd be patrolling couple of miles off shore I suppose and the sand would still get out on the ship. It would blow from the shore out on the ship. It was stinking hot, you couldn't breathe you know, it was that hot. We were always glad when we got the signal that our, we'd probably spend 7 days' patrolling up and down, all these big tankers go in.

24:30 And that was one of our biggest dangers, getting run over by a huge tanker going in and out at night. This happened to 2 or 3 ships up there, they were sunk by these tankers running into them, they wouldn't stop for anything. But we were always glad to get out of the Persian Gulf, glad to get back to somewhere like (UNCLEAR)

25:00 **From that period is there any other impressions that are particularly strong, be it a place or an event?**

Well, most of those places over there, those countries over there, what struck us about it was the big margin between the rich and poor. You saw the rich people riding round in big cars with all fine laces and satins and lace, and the poor lying out in the street,

- 25:30 living on the street virtually, beggars and all that sort of thing. And that's my main memory of the place really. Calcutta for instance, people used to live and die on the street, you'd walk along the street and you'd be tripping over bodies on the street and every morning there'd be a bloke go round with cart picking up the dead bodies and they'd throw them down into the Ganges.
- 26:00 That's how they used to get rid of their dead, by throwing them into Ganges, into the river, and we're tied up in this river. A mate of mine, he, we were tied there and the gangplank on a corvette's only about 12 inches wide and he came back after a good night on the town, very drunk
- 26:30 and when he went to walk up the gangplank, he missed the gangplank and went down into the water. He came to by feeling this hand and he thought it was someone giving him a hand to get out and he grabbed hold of it and the hand came off in his hand, it was a corpse. He said "He sobered up very quickly". They're the funny things we can remember, you know. Like another one,
- 27:00 another mate of mine, he lives up in Brisbane now, we used to have to provide sentries on our ship down in South Africa you know, and you'd walk up and down with a rifle slung over your shoulder, and it was very cold down there at the time, it was in April, March, April. And he's walking up and down with this rifle over his shoulder, you had to walk the length of the ship you know, march the length of the ship each way, and we're at the end of the wharf of course, and he went to sleep walking,
- 27:30 he actually went to sleep walking up and down and he walked straight off the end of the wharf. He said "He came to in freezing cold water, and he's got his great coat on you know, struggling to get out and when he got back on deck, and came on deck, first thing the officer asked him was, 'Where's your rifle?'" And he says, "Bugged if I know, down in the water I guess." And the officer said, "I'll have you charged for losing it.
- 28:00 That's valuable equipment." And he said, "Well I'm not diving in to find it again, so you can charge me." So we always have a go at him on the reunions about that, for a bloke to go to sleep marching up and down on sentry duty, unbelievable. They're some of the funny stories we talk about at reunions.

I've read some stories about how ships

- 28:30 **were camouflaged as such, the paint jobs were done. What was that and how, why?**

Well there was different camouflage depending on where you were serving. For instance, when we were up in the Mediterranean we had a sort of a wavy camouflage which is supposed to make it hard for a submarine to work out the size of the ship.

- 29:00 If a submarine's looking at you through the periscope it disguises the size of the ship and the speed the ship's going. That was the theory, the scientists told us that. So that was the idea of camouflage. They had all different sorts, some of them had like a lightning flash, ours was a sort of wavy one, but lightning flash. But then when we came back to Australia,
- 29:30 apparently the Pacific Fleet, they didn't believe in camouflage, so we had to repaint the ship and instead of having camouflage we had the back half a dark grey and the top half a light grey. And the theory there was it still made it hard for a submarine to work out the size of a ship. Whether it did or not I don't know. But I know it took a lot of painting to change the camouflage and that sort of thing.
- 30:00 That's the only part I know about camouflage, is being over the ship painting it.

So it's the Indian Ocean, we sort of covered a lot earlier on in the tape, it was back to, where did we go from the Indian Ocean?

We came home.

Yeah, you come home, that's right. Williamstown and the train to Northcote.

- 30:30 Yes, and then we went up to Sydney of course. Sydney was virtually our home base, so we went to Sydney while they worked out what they were going to do with us.

So it was your reunion with your mum and your sister and you didn't spend Christmas at home and it was up to Sydney?

No, I had Christmas dinner at home but I was supposed to have,

- 31:00 see in the navy if you've been overseas for 12 months, you were supposed to get 3 weeks' leave, well we got 3 days' leave. I'd been overseas for 2 ½ years and I got 3 days' leave. Then we went up the coast to Sydney and then we got to Sydney and our skipper, this Lance Lever again, said, "Righto, now we're sending you up north, I'm not taking the ship
- 31:30 to sea until my men have had the leave they're due." Well, the navy didn't take kindly to that, one of their officers telling them what to do, so they said, "Righto, send all your men on 7 days' leave and you pack your bags and you can go up to New Guinea." And he was port officer in New Guinea sitting in a little port up there and they called him port officer and he spent the rest of the war up there as far as I know. But he wasn't going to let

32:00 us be jibbed out of our leave. Didn't do him any good. So then we got 7 days' leave, including the time it took us to get from Sydney to Melbourne and Melbourne back to Sydney. So that's when we had our reunion with our families. Then from there, as I said, we went up to New Guinea and round

32:30 New Guinea and up to the Philippines.

Can you tell us before we get there in more detail about that reunion? I know you got home and your mother didn't believe it was you?

Ah yeah, well that was natural because she still thought I was overseas. I hadn't written to her, well the letter wouldn't have got to her if I did write to her. I was still over in Colombo, the last letter she got was from Colombo and she still thought I was overseas and wouldn't believe,

33:00 she thought someone was trying to put something over her I think. To be woken up at 1 o'clock in the morning, it's understandable I think to have that sort of reaction.

That must have been a real special time for you after 2 ½ years?

Yeah, oh yeah. She at least had one son home, but it was only for a night. But still, she had seen me and saw that I was all right.

33:30 Then we had to go again. But that was war, that's what happened hundreds of times over of course, with families. You very seldom saw your family once you got away, especially if you were overseas you know, you couldn't get home for weekends or anything like that. Then we went up there and...

34:00 **You met your wife in Sydney '45, that was before the end of the war?**

Yeah.

But at that time I take it everyone, there was a sense the end of the war....?

Oh no, no. The war was still, well going. Everyone knew that we were winning, the Allies were winning, and the Japs were being, like the war with German had finished.

34:30 When did that finish, '44 wasn't it, but the war with Japan didn't finish till August '45 and it would have gone a lot longer if they hadn't dropped the atomic bomb on Japan. So everyone still reckoned there was a lot to be done. If they hadn't of dropped the atomic bomb and they had to invade Japan, there would have been a lot more trouble, a lot more killed.

35:00 No, no, the war was still at full tilt then. See the war collapsed right at the finish, it was still going full tilt, they were pushing the Japs back from island to island up here, but it was still very much a serious war.

35:30 So we didn't have any thoughts of it being a pleasure cruise when we went up north, we still expected to have to face various things. And we saw a lot of this because we used to have to escort the battleships, the cruisers and those that had been damaged in battles, we had to escort them back from Okinawa up there and escort them back to safety virtually.

36:00 But we didn't actually see, up there we didn't actually see any fighting. We were in the invasion of Okinawa but it was more as support role sort of thing. So we'd seen our last action anyway.

So where were you when the war ended?

Down at Flinders Navy Depot doing the course. Teaching me how to shoot a gun

36:30 and not being able to put it into practise. The funny part about that was, as I said, the whole class doing the gunnery course down at Flinders were drafted to the Murchison to make up its gunnery crew including the instructor who was a gunner's mate, which is a very strict man in the navy, gunner's mate.

37:00 So we all went and we all arrived up and went on to the Murchison and every time we did an exercise on the Murchison he'd say, "That's not the way I told you to do it down at Flinders." And of course we'd all join in concert, "Yes it was, yes it was chief. That was the way you taught us." He couldn't take a trick because we all ganged up on him and told him that that was the way he taught us to do it, so we should do it that way. "Well now, I'm telling you to do it a different way," was his answer.

37:30 He enjoyed it too, he reckoned, he knew we were putting it over him but he reckons that's the sign of a good gunnery rating that have the initiative to get out of any trouble. Which was hilarious to us at the time, probably not to anyone else.

So the Lismore was up at Morotai for a while and then you came back and did the course?

Mmm.

I'm just trying to get the sequence right.

38:00 **And then it was the Murchison and you went back up with the British, the occupying forces. So what was the Murchison?**

Well it was a frigate. It had a similar role to the Lismore, to a corvette, but it was a bigger ship, more modern ship and more comfortable ship too. But there were quite a few frigates about at that time.

38:30 Murchison made its mark after the war actually, in the Korean War, it sailed its way down the Chinese Yangtze River, is it, under fire from both sides and then after that it was part of the atomic bomb exercises out in Montebello and those places.

39:00 She made her name after the war really, after I got it off it. It became an efficient ship after I got off it.

Tape 7

00:30 One of our tasks up there was to bring this British cruiser, which had been attacked by suicide bombers and to bring it back to safety. At that time their kitchen had been knocked out, their galley, been knocked out by these kamikaze pilots, so they couldn't do any cooking, so we used to sail alongside them

01:00 and our cooks used to make bread for them and do cooking for them and we transferred it over to this big cruiser you know, 3 times the size of us. Which was interesting and again showed us the futility of war, where people are knocking each other out sort of thing.

So what situation was it, a kamikaze bomber just flew straight in to it?

That was at a time, Okinawa, of course, was

01:30 at a time where the kamikaze bombers, these suicide bombers, the Japanese trained these young blokes, the plane they flew was virtually a bomb and they just, instead of dropping the bomb they flew their planes into the ships. That happened with the [HMAS] Australia, the Australian cruiser and [HMAS] Canberra, that happened to them, they got hit by these kamikaze. Suicide pilots they were virtually.

02:00 They only had enough fuel in their aeroplane to take them out, not enough fuel to get back. They went out with a mission just to kill themselves and take a lot of people with them. Very fortunate, we never struck them.

So the time you were in the Pacific, were you under more threat there or was it quieter?

There was still the threat, there was still Japanese submarines

02:30 but it was winding down by that time. Once the Americans had beaten the Japs on Okinawa, that was the beginning of the end but there was still a lot of work to be done. And there still would have been massive loss of life in trying to take Japan, so that's when they dropped the

03:00 atomic bomb and, cruel and all as it sounds, I think they did the right thing actually because, although there was a lot of civilians and that killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I saw the results of that when we took the occupation troops, they took us down to Hiroshima. We sailed the ship down there and saw the actual damage the atomic bomb had done.

03:30 It was unbelievable you know, the whole city was flattened, there was hardly a building left in the whole city. And it was in a basin, hills all round it and they reckoned it would have been more widespread if it hadn't of been for those hills. It flattened everything in that saucer sort of thing. It was horrific when you went and saw it, just mind boggling to think what it would have been

04:00 like to be a civilian living in Hiroshima at that time. The same thing happened at Nagasaki, of course.

What an amazing thing to witness at the end of your time in the war?

Yeah, yeah. Well I had mixed feelings there too because you know, my brother had come by this time and I saw what the war had done to him, the Japanese had done to him,

04:30 which they didn't need to do, so my heart was very hardened by the time I got up there. All I could think of was good enough for them you know, they did that to my brother. Like he suffered all his life from what they did to him up there. In fact, he told me that he was down for execution when the war finished. Said if the war

05:00 had of gone another week they would have executed him. Because he was one of these that got out and got supplies, you know, got under the barbed wire and got out and he got caught and he told me that if the war had of gone another week he would have been executed. So that's another reason I was [relieved] the atomic bombs had shortened the war.

So when did you see your brother

05:30 **again?**

I was still down at Flinders when he came home. He came home with the first wave of ex prisoners of

war from Japan and I was able to meet him in at Spencer Street Station, and we had a couple of days together actually, doing the town and that sort of thing, and then I didn't see him after that. I didn't see him for 3 months.

06:00 **What sort of state was he in when you saw him at Spencer Street Station?**

Well he surprised me. I expected to see him emaciated and skin and bone and that sort of thing but he was fat. I was a bit shocked at the time and said to him "How come you're so fat?" He says that "The beri beri, fills their bodies up with fluid", that's one of the diseases up there, killed a lot of prisoners of war apparently, and he was suffering

06:30 from that when he got home. But it made him look real healthy. After 6 months at home he lost that and he was back to skin and bone. He went away weighing about 14 stone and came back weighing 6 stone after he got rid of the beri beri. So it did do a lot to him. He had all sorts of things, he had suffered from cholera while he was up there, all different things. He suffered all his life from it actually, from different things.

07:00 **So you had a couple of days with him in Melbourne?**

Mmm.

You said doing the town. Where do you begin to catch up after you've both had experiences that extreme?

Yeah, you don't, we just carried on as though nothing had ever happened. That's what I thought would be the best thing for him. Just make out we'd been away different places together and just met up again and carried

07:30 on with our life virtually. But he was never the same again after his experiences up there.

Did you feel that you needed to debrief or needed some sort of counselling? Would you have liked that back then?

Not me in particular, he would have, he would have loved it, no I wouldn't say he'd loved it, he needed it very badly.

08:00 Because, as I mentioned before, he was never able to talk about his experiences. I think it would have done him the world of good if they had of had this grief counselling or whatever they call it now, trauma counselling. They never had it in those days of course, especially in the army, you were supposed to be man enough to get over these things.

08:30 **So he then went to live with your mum when he came back?**

No, he got married soon after. My mother, dear old mum being like she is, loved everyone, he met a girl before he went away, so my mother undertook on herself to look after that girl for him

09:00 and she virtually came into our family, stayed with us. My mother sort of said that "She felt that she owed it to protect this girl while he was away". And so my mother was then

09:30 secretary of the War Widows Association and used to have these war widows functions and she used to take this girl with her everywhere. If I came home on leave, I was told that "I had to take her out, take her to the pictures or something". And she was 7 years older than me and I said "She's an old woman, mum" but that was it. She was

10:00 waiting for my brother when he came home and they wanted to get married straight away and we think this was an area of conflict with my mother and her daughter-in-law, was that she wanted to hang on to my brother for 3 or 4 months because she'd been without him for so long but they wanted to get married, so they got married. My mother accepted that but apparently my sister in law didn't really

10:30 accept it and so, whether that was the cause of her not liking our family or not. But anyway my brother, as I said, was never the same when he came home and he drifted away from the family virtually.

So what did you go on to do when you arrived in Melbourne?

Well, I got a job after I was discharged I got a job as a draftsman in the Board of Works, Metropolitan Board of Works.

11:00 I made that my career, I was there for 37 years and I finished up chief technical officer in the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works when I retired. My responsibility as time went by was the design and construction of water supply mains and sewerage mains and

11:30 I had a crew of 50 people working under me doing that. That gave me great satisfaction for the rest of my life, rest of my working life.

Did you need training to take on that job?

Yeah, I'd never done it before. It was just something I plucked out of the air that I wanted to be a

draftsman. Don't ask me why, I never showed any inclination or anything to be a draftsman but I plucked that out of the air when they asked me

- 12:00 what I wanted to do and so they got me a job at the Board of Works, the navy, or the rehabilitation people, got me this job at the Board of Works where I was an untrained draftsman to start off and was only by hard work and a bit of study that I got up to be a technical officer and then worked there for the rest of my working life, as I said.

So there was a rehabilitation...?

Oh yes.

- 12:30 I could have done a course in anything. When you came out of the forces there was a rehabilitation scheme where you could go to university, go to anything you were qualified to do, you could go and do and they paid for it, engineering, any of that sort of thing. Well I finished up with an engineering certificate but I didn't go on to get a degree because by that time

- 13:00 I was getting married and having children and I said "No, I'll work for my living". So I didn't do the study which I regretted some time after but that was the circumstances of life.

Yeah, that's sort of how you did things (UNCLEAR).

I came out of the navy and after 12 months working

- 13:30 I got the job and was working for 12 months and on my first leave after my 12 months I decided to go to Sydney and get engaged to the girl I'd met up there, like we'd corresponded all the time. We got engaged and then at the end of 1947 we were married. Even that was a sort of a drama but I don't know if that's of any interest.

Tell us?

Ah,

- 14:00 me old father in law, he worked in the coal mines up in New South Wales and he said "Don't get married, no". We were going to get married at the Easter and he said "I can't get my holidays at Easter, why don't you get married at Christmas?", so we had to bring it forward. So we got married at Christmas

- 14:30 but a week before the Christmas there was an explosion in the coal mine and he was put in hospital, so he couldn't come down to the wedding anyway. So my wife says "We're not going to put it off again, we've made all the arrangements" and so her mother came down and represented the family, you know. So we were married at Christmas and everything we did seemed to be a drama. And being

- 15:00 married at Christmas of course, I couldn't get anywhere decent for our honeymoon, so we finished up, everywhere was booked out, so we got a pub down in Geelong, real romantic honeymoon at a pub in Geelong, and I only had, I didn't have my holidays at that time and I only had enough to last us for the days between Christmas and New Year, so that's all we had.

- 15:30 Anyway, it must have been successful because it's now 56 years and we're still going.

When you came back from your honeymoon where did you live?

We lived with my mother for a start and then my grandfather died, he owned a shack down here in Chelsea and he died and the property had been left to my mother by her mother

- 16:00 but he had to live in it for the rest of his life. He died and my mother offered the property, which was just this shack and a block of land, to my 2 brothers in order of age. They both knocked it back and said "They didn't want to go right down to Chelsea, it's too far". So we had no money, my wife and I, so we said "We'll take it". So we moved down here and I built a house and we've been here ever since.

- 16:30 55 years we lived in that house, until last January, we moved into this retirement village.

So just in your courtship period with your wife, she was in Sydney and you were in Melbourne.

Yeah, very difficult. Mainly by correspondence, we didn't have a telephone and she didn't have a telephone, so it was all by letter.

- 17:00 **Did you write her poems?**

No, oh no I wasn't game.

Why not?

Well I didn't think much of my poems and I didn't think anyone else would think anything of them. My poems were only a means of recording what I thought of places, not written with any sense of being a great poet or anything like that. It's only my way of setting it down on paper.

- 17:30 So then...

But you like writing?

Yeah. So then after 11 months our first son was born, which threw everyone into a panic because we were supposed to have been married at Easter and we put it forward to Christmas and then our son was born 9 months after we were married. My wife was showing pregnant at some time and everyone's

18:00 counting the figures. But we tricked 'em. We were within the right time limits, so it showed that we were pure all along. So then he was followed 2 or 3 years later by a second son, '51 he was born and then '56, we went 5 years then,

18:30 and the third son was born at the time of the Olympic Games in Melbourne. And then we went to '63 then, that's another 7 years and our daughter was born. And then we gave up, not that we'd really tried any time, nothing was planned.

19:00 Since then we've been involved in the community activities in Chelsea. I've been secretary of lifesaving clubs, I've been secretary of football clubs, I've been secretary of cricket clubs, I've played cricket, football, anything the kids were engaged in, I got tied up in. So we've gone on since that time

19:30 and now we're here, hibernating into a retirement village and determined to enjoy the rest of our life.

You said before that you have reunions with your mates.

Ah yes, well that's something I didn't bring out was it. In 1986... nobody was interested in... after the war, as one bloke expressed it, I asked what he was going to do after the war he said, "I'm going to put an oar over my shoulder and I'm going to

20:00 set out into the Nullarbor Plains and as soon as I reach a place where somebody says, 'what's that you've got over your shoulder?', that's where I'm going to settle, as far away from the sea as I can." That was the attitude of most people, they thought we've been together all that time, we don't want to remember, we'll get away from them and go on with our life. So we

20:30 got on with our lives and it wasn't until 1986 that there was a reunion of corvette people in Melbourne. And everyone gravitated there and someone there said "Why don't we have a Lismore Association?", and they said "Who's going to run it? Who's going to be secretary?" And of course everyone took a step back except me and they said "Looks like you're going to be secretary". And I've been secretary ever since.

21:00 Now our major get-together has been, I say has been knowingly, every Anzac Day in Lismore, New South Wales, the town after which the ship was named. We go up there and we do a pilgrimage up there every year. We started off, we used to get the best part of

21:30 100 people there. Now of course, they're falling by the wayside, sick or dead or. Now our honour roll that we've got, we've got more on the honour roll than we've got in the association now, they're dying off like flies. But there's always a few go up there. Last year we had 20 up there, this year, like next year I expect

22:00 it'll be down around the 10 and so on. 'Cause it's a long way to go but everyone feels an attachment, even though the ship itself didn't have any relationship to Lismore apart from the name and the fact that they donated a plaque to be put up on the ship. The council support us very well, they gave us the freedom of the city and we march through the town with flags flying and all that sort of thing.

22:30 A constable comes up and challenges us and we tell him "Look, we've got the freedom of the city, so we can march through it". They usually give us a lunch and a something like that when we go up there. But it's getting beyond our blokes now, even me. I felt it last year. I used to drive up there with no effort but last year it was a big effort and I don't think

23:00 we'll be going there much longer. But we have the occasional lunches down here in Melbourne for the Victorians, we have a lunch somewhere a couple of times a year. We try to keep together. I get out a newsletter, I compile the newsletter, the members send stories and let us know how they're going, so that all their mates can read about how they're faring.

23:30 It's a bond. It's a pity we didn't start it much earlier. It happened with all the corvettes, they all started their associations about the same time, it's a funny thing that. We thought we should have done this years ago but they're all saying the same thing. It was all for the same reasons that, they had their lives to lead and family to bring up, raise. It was different from the First World War,

24:00 they virtually started their reunions immediately when war finished, 'cause I can remember my father telling us he was going off to his reunions and that sort of thing. Anyway, we've got it now and we enjoy it, it keeps us with some link.

24:30 When I joined the navy, talking about hair on chest, you know, the navy was the dickie front, in front of their uniform and all the ones, manly ones have the hair going over the top of that, well of course I didn't have a hair on my chest when I joined the navy at 17. One of the old seaman down there said, "I'll tell you what I can do for you son, I can get some hair and

25:00 sew it into the top of your dickie front, so that it looks over the top." I said, "Nah, I don't really want to go to that." But anyway, the first time I came home on leave and my mother saw a hair up her, ah she went into raptures you know, that I had a hair on my chest. You brought that to mind and then it started to grow until I looked like a gorilla. Going from somebody who didn't have a hair on their body when I joined the navy

25:30 to look like a gorilla.

So you really grew up in the navy?

Yeah. The old saying was it turned boys into men and it's the fact with me for sure. I went away being a very naïve boy to coming home a worldly sort of bloke, who had seen a lot and had experiences, both good and bad and I was

26:00 a man when I came home, anyway at the age of 21 I was a man. I look at young blokes these days having their 21st birthday and I think geez, I was a lot older than you at 21 and I can only put that down to war service. For instance, my granddaughter is just going on 18 and she says, "What were you like at 17, Pa?" And I said, "I had my 18th birthday

26:30 up in the Mediterranean and," I said, "I'd seen a lot by that time, ohh." They just haven't got the vision that we attained by our war service virtually. So it was a terrible war, I wouldn't have missed it for the world and it gave me a lot of development, it developed me. I've often said

27:00 if you could get away with the actual killings in war, it would be a great thing if you had a war every now and again, so the young ones would grow up, learn some self discipline and grow up. But the unfortunate thing about war is you've got to have people killing each other and nobody wants to see that.

So what is the main thing about it? Is it the mateship or is it the tough...?

Definitely, mateship. Without

27:30 doubt the most lasting impression I have about war is the mates I developed. It's the sort of thing, you know, I've played in football teams, I've played in all sorts of clubs, belonged in all sorts of clubs but never do you get the same sort of mateship that you got during the war that lasts, well over 60 years now.

28:00 We all consider ourselves great mates still. We cry with blokes that are having trouble, we laugh with blokes that are having, you know. A couple of our blokes just lost their wives and we felt it as much as they felt it. This is the sort of thing, this is old blokes nudging 80 or over 80, that because of the mateship they developed back in those times

28:30 we feel that close to the people still. I think that's something you can't get without a war but whether a war's worth it to get that is another thing.

It's that sense that everybody's depending on each for survival.

Yeah, well that's it. I was talking before and I mentioned you had to learn to trust your mate.

29:00 Trust the bloke alongside you. If you didn't trust him you were in real trouble 'cause when there is action you don't get time to think, you've just got to have blind faith in the one alongside you and unless you've developed a mateship with him, you just can't do that. If you've got to stop and think will he back me up or something like that, well you'd never get through it.

29:30 **I was going to ask you before, the reunions that you have been having is that all the guys from the Lismore meeting?**

Yeah, we let our wives come. In fact, we make our wives come is probably a better way of putting it. My wife finds them a bit boring at times but it always amazes her

30:00 when you look at all these old blokes, she says "You can never imagine them ever being young, fit blokes. Every one of them's got something wrong with them, either their legs or their lungs or whatever", and she said "You could never realise that they were all young, fit blokes". You had to be fit to get into the services of course.

30:30 It's good to get with them anyway and have a natter and carry on.

Do you reminisce about the things you experienced?

Only on the good things. Everyone has a shot at everyone else of course. That's another thing about mateship, you can say what you like about each other and nobody takes offence. Some of the things we say about each other, if it was someone else they'd

31:00 be very insulted and get upset but we don't. Mmm. Yep, so I think that covers that. I can't think of anything else.

Can we talk just a bit about that time from when you

31:30 **said you came back and felt that you'd really grown up and matured, so I gather you were feeling pretty confident? Were you?**

Well it gives you confidence, yeah. I noticed it, as I said before, with my being in charge of 50 in this drawing office. The ones that went to Vietnam for instance, the young blokes went to Vietnam, they came back from Vietnam, and I know everyone says

32:00 "Vietnam ruined them", but they came back from Vietnam that far advanced on the blokes that didn't go, it wasn't funny. Not advanced in the technicality of their job but in their general makeup, they exuded confidence and you know, I think we must have been the same.

32:30 You've learnt to look after yourself in other words, you've learnt to do things and keep going and doing it.

So have you had much contact with Vietnam Vets [Veterans]?

Had some contact, yeah. I received training through the RSL [Returned and Services League] and Vets [Veterans'] Affairs for a welfare officer and I

33:00 met a lot of them there, the Vietnam Welfare Officers. The Vietnam Veterans Welfare Officers are the best welfare officers there are anywhere, take it from me. They're very good. They look after their men very well, in fact by looking after their men, they've got benefits for us that we would never had got if it hadn't been for them

33:30 'cause they go out and fight for them. They don't only chase it for the Vietnam Vet people, they chase it for all ex servicemen. Well they chase for the Vietnam people but they don't care if it rubs off on the rest of us, and we're grateful for it.

Well that brings me to that time, like coming back and yes, you were feeling confident. How was

34:00 **the community, how were you accepted?**

Very good. We weren't like Vietnam people, they were treated terribly. That's always given them that chip on the shoulder sort of thing, because they were treated so terribly, it wasn't their fault, they were only doing the job that they were sent to do. In fact the rights and wrongs of it weren't anything to do with them, they were employed to obey orders and they obeyed orders.

34:30 They suffered for it. I think it must have been because all those who were anti Vietnam couldn't get at the government, so they got at the soldiers - that was a terrible state of affairs.

So you came back feeling, how did you come back?

I'd done my bit. The thing that I'd joined up to do, I'd done. I didn't want to be a hero or anything like that but I

35:00 felt that I'd done my bit, done my share. And I felt that it was appreciated by the general public, well that's what it looked like because they were always patting you on the back. But unfortunately, the Vietnam people didn't get this recognition and I can understand how they felt so bitter.

35:30 **I want to ask you about the book, the book that you've written on HMAS Lismore and why you decided to do that.**

I didn't decide. It was the same as when we formed the association. They said "We should have set down, in writing the story of the Lismore" and everyone agreed, great idea. "Well, who's going to do it?" We had journalists in our

36:00 association and none of them offered to do it, so we run in to a bit of a brick wall. Then I said, "Well being secretary of association, I feel some commitment and," I said, "If you will all send me contributions, I will compile a book of your stories, not my stories, of you stories." And it grew from that really.

36:30 Then I researched it up in the archives up in Canberra and Sydney, Melbourne, everywhere and gradually got all the written story like the captain's reports and all the official story. I eventually got all that after many hours researching and from that I built the book. It's not

37:00 my story really, I built it from information I gained from everywhere. It's not a novel or anything like that. A story of my life's going to be a novel.

It must have been interesting discovering information that you didn't know when you were back on the Lismore.

Yeah, that's right. See the Lismore lasted 5 ½ years from the time it was commissioned until it was sold off to

37:30 the Dutch after the end of the war in 1946, and I was on it for 2 ½ years, so I was only on it for virtually a third of its service. So there was a lot went on before I joined it or after I left it that I didn't know

about until I started researching for the book. For instance, after the war the Lismore was engaged as the support ship for the

- 38:00 group of people that had been set up to get rid of the Japs out of all the little islands in the [Dutch] East Indies, which is Indonesia now. And of course they had to go around and chase the Japs out, pick up the Japanese who were war criminals
- 38:30 and bring them back to Darwin, and this is what it did after the war. There was a lot of stories in that that I've heard but they weren't my story and they're all in the book too. So that was an interesting time for those that were on the ship after the war.
- 39:00 'Cause there was still a bit of an element of danger there because there were pockets of Japanese still in these islands and that's what the Lismore was for, to have a big gun in case the soldiers found any trouble as they were going round rooting out these Japanese and putting them on ships and sending them back to Japan. She had a good life, the Lismore apparently, and even after they sold it to the
- 39:30 Dutch it sailed many, many more miles all around the world in the Dutch Navy, and it was in 1956 it was eventually scrapped, so it had a life of 15 years actually, which was a long life for a ship of its sort.
- Are corvettes still built?**
- No. There's one down at
- 40:00 Williamstown, a museum ship, tied up at the Gem pier down at Williamstown, open to the public to go on. It's the ship my daughter, when I took her down over it, she couldn't believe that 90 people lived on it. We had 2 showers, 2 shower rooms with 2 showers in each,
- 40:30 and she says "How did 90 men shower in these?", and I said "With great difficulty. You had to be quick in and quick out."

Tape 8

- 00:31 I was asked the question earlier on in our interview of what my feelings were when I was a young bloke overseas in the war zone. Perhaps it's best if I read some poems that, I got into the habit of writing poems
- 01:00 of different places I visited, to put my impressions of that place on paper, so that I'd remember in later years. So perhaps if I read a few poems, it will give you an insight into what I thought of the countries that we visited and also my thoughts on war come through out of these poems. The first one I'd like to read was written in July 1943
- 01:30 and it was written about Egypt:
- \n[Verse follows]\n "Pharaohs, rulers of lost ages\n Sleeping in your night tombs\n Do you wonder as you lie there\n What is going on up here?\n Of the armies fight strongly\n On the hot and dusty sands,\n As they struggle back and forwards\n To control your ancient lands.\n Has the Sphinx gazing up on us,\n Smiling with an enigmatic grace,\n
- 02:00 Seen it all in years before us\n
- Men behaving with disgrace.\n Did men then kill each other\n In those days of ancient lore\n Battling in the sandy desert\n Fighting someone else's war?\n Will men never learn together\n How to love and learn to thrill\n So that science can find time to\n Give us tools to cure our ills?\n If they don't they'll find their last place\n
- 02:30 Neath the sand they will be hid\n
- But they will not sleep in comfort\n Like you in your pyramid."
- As I say, that was written in July 1943. Next one perhaps is of an air attack that we suffered out of Alboran Island, which is off the coast of France, in the Mediterranean, and it goes like this.
- \n[Verse follows]\n
- 03:00 "Silently off in the sunset\n
- Drones the messengers of hate\n Seeking out our plotting convoy\n On Friday the 13th, ominous date.\n Alarm bells sound as they head for us,\n To attack is their intent,\n Guns are manned to fight this menace\n As we wait, our anger to vent.\n 20, 30, 40, 50\n Those cursed planes drop bombs like rain,\n
- 03:30 But hitting our ships as they would cherish\n
- Seems to be a wish in vain.\n Now the tracer makes a pattern\n From the ships it soars like a flash,\n Reaching for those winged assassins\n Bringing them into the sea to crash.\n Now they are gone and as

the red ball sinks the sun\n Into the sea as well,\n We form a convoy

04:00 on this peaceful ocean\n

Which just before had been a man made hell.\n Why do they do it?\n Why do they try?\n Must men batter each thus?\n Surely we could live together\n With brotherly love and mutual trust.”\n

And that was written in August 1943. Another one, this is a bit romantic. “The Red Sea” it was, a beautiful stretch of sea.

\n[Verse follows]\n

04:30 “Hot, hot windless days\n

On a smooth and glassy sea,\n Orange sunsets on the horizon\n Silhouette sails out to the lee.\n Moonlight shimmering on the water\n Makes the sailor yearn for home,\n Thinking of that same moon shining\n On his loved ones all alone.”\n

That was written in September 1943. This is a little thing and shows how the young sailors felt.

05:00 It’s called “Home Sickness”.

\n[Verse follows]\n “Sad heart feels it will burst\n Thinking of my friends so thick.\n Wonder what they must be doing,\n Is this what it means to be homesick?”\n

Again in September 1943.

Do you remember where you were when you wrote that poem?

Yeah, on the Red Sea, all very romantic.

But the home sick poem, where were you when you wrote that?

Same place. Right.

05:30 “Convoy”. I was asked what it was like doing convoy duties and this perhaps spells it out.

\n[Verse follows]\n “To see again out through the boom net\n We watch as merchant ships come out.\n They form into long straight columns\n As the escorts chase about.\n So we start the long slow journey\n How many days will this one be?\n Dreary days like the age old shepherd\n To 10 flock on an unforgiving sea.\n

06:00 Yeomen tell that ship she makes smoke\n

That tanker there is out of place,\n So the Skipper frets and worries\n As his charges line his face.\n So we zig zag as we search for\n Those elusive submarines,\n Ping, ping goes the Asdic\n As we steam long moonlight beams.\n But the convoy plunge the air onwards\n Cargo, troop ships every

06:30 Size,\n

Is that tanker going backwards?\n She will be an easy prize.\n So we must fall back to screen her\n From the underwater menace there.\n Wished they get her engines working\n To avoid a shot fair and square.\n Then at last we reach the harbour\n After days of care and strife,\n As we sweep our flock to safety\n Someone says ain’t this the life.”\n

February 1944.

07:00 I wrote, in an earlier tape, I read the thoughts as I steamed away from Melbourne for the first time in my young life and these are the thoughts I set down on our return to Port Phillip Bay in January 1945.

\n[Verse follows]\n “Many months ago away I sailed\n Full of patriot verve and full of zest,\n To see the world and meet the foe\n

07:30 Hoping my manhood stood the test.\n

Through all those months and weeks and days\n Spent endless hours on tasks so drear\n With convoys of ships both large and small\n I’ve been to lands spread far and near.\n To all these places where I have been,\n To everyone I applied the test,\n I never found one that I could say\n Changed my opinion that home’s best.\n To see man’s

08:00 waste of youth so fine\n

Has been my lot, I’ve seen them claimed,\n Now I’m glad to turn my face\n To turn my face toward the land from whence I came.\n Finish with engines comes the Captain’s cry\n As we tie up to my country’s shore,\n And I pray as I realise we’re home\n May I stay here forever more.”\n

January 1945.

08:30 The other one I would like to read was one I wrote just after the war when all the greenies and other do gooders were criticising the observance of Anzac Day, and I set my thoughts down on this question

when so many of them were having their say on the media and it's called "Anzac Day Remembrance".

\n[Verse follows]\n "Why do we remember

09:00 on this day of the year\n

Those days of so long ago?\n As we grow older and our minds are cast back\n To the times when we
faced up to the foe.\n Is it war that we ponder\n As our thoughts go back to the horrors that men did to
men?\n Submarines and torpedoes,\n planes with their bombs\n All tried to destroy fellow men.\n Tell
them we do not commemorate war\n That is something to remember and hate,\n The cream of our
manhood who selflessly gave\n

09:30 all

We pause to recall on that day,\n Sacrificing they gave us a life free to do\n What pleasures we now can
to yearn.\n May it not be forgotten as time hurries by\n Tis this great debt of which we should learn.\n Yes our minds fill with memories of men\n Who as lads shared our lot with great zest,\n These mates
stand beside us in spirit this day\n

10:00 To remind us that they were the best.\n

These men who grow not older as we who are left\n Joined together with us in our tryst,\n The trials of
war and the ravages of time\n Have taken our mates from our midst.\n Those of us left have a duty so
great\n To keep faith with those who are gone,\n By our actions\n

10:30 to remind those not lucky to know\n That true mates are never alone\n These mates and those like
them\n Have left all the debt for the heritage they have passed down,\n By their suffering and striving
have given all the right\n To choose a way of life of their own.\n"

And that was written a few years after the war.

11:00 Sorry for the emotionalism. I don't think there's really any more that I'd like to read. Except to bring us
up to date, I wrote a poem when we had a reunion for the 50th Anniversary for the commissioning of
HMAS Lismore, 24th January 1991 and I call this "Fifty Years On".

\n[Verse follows]\n "Fifty years on and

11:30 still we meet\n

To remember those days when we were lads.\n How full of life and foot so fleet\n When we took on
whatever the world then had.\n Old offal-barge us safely through, she brought,\n She showed us things
both good and bad\n Now we still live all those lessons taught\n Of selfless endeavour for the other
lad.\n

12:00 Now the ship is gone as are some of the men,\n

Those who are left are no long sory.\n The years have changed the men we knew\n But the spirit lives
on and we know why.\n Let us remember those who grow not old\n Our mates who have crossed the
final bar,\n Remember them all, their hearts of gold\n And pray that they have their just reward.\n"

Ron, thank you.