Australians at War Film Archive

Thomas Russell (Tommy) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 3rd June 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/400

Tape 1

00:35 **Okay Tom, if we could just start with a bit of an overview of your life starting with where you were born and where you grew up?**

Right. Well I was born in a suburb of Sydney called Waterloo. And I wasn't born in a hospital, I was born in a little cottage, it was in Brisbane Lane, Waterloo. And my mother was attended by a midwife, Nurse Penrose.

01:00 And strangely enough, I went to school with her grandchildren later on in life. But I spent most of my early growing up in that Waterloo area and did all the things that most young blokes did around that time. We went through the Depression years in that time. And I was asked just recently about the effect that the Depression on me, but as I said, I

01:30 don't really feel that the children were affected that much, they just kept on with their simple pleasures, and our pleasures were very simple. But I do believe that they parents, obviously, were going through a very stressful time. Later on my mother and father moved up to the St. Georges district and from there on I've lived in the St. George district until I was married. And then when we were married,

02:00 Nina and I, we came out into the Sutherland Shire and we've been here now for fifty eight years. And it doesn't look as though we're going to leave, ever, I don't think. I went to a High School, I wanted to become a teacher and High School with the languages were very few and far between and I had to travel from Waterloo to Randwick, Randwick Boys High.

02:30 And the Depression forced me to leave school in the second year. My Mum was offered a job for me through the Scout Master. And although she didn't want me to leave school, I thought I might be contributing a bit to the family by going to work. And I worked, firstly, I worked a beam wireless and then I worked

03:00 in the Taxation Department. And it was a temporary job with the Taxation Department. And I finished up getting a job with the railways until the war came. And I went overseas. And that's just about the start of when I went to the war. When I came back I went again and started to work for the railways but after being away for so

03:30 long, I didn't want to be inside so much. And through my father, he offered me work if I got myself a truck, and that's what I did and that's how we started off.

Can you give us an overview of your war service, you service life?

Well, firstly, on a Sunday

04:00 night, we used to all gather. There was my … Nee was my girlfriend and her sister had her boyfriend, Lionel Cole, and we used to gather at their home at Wiley Park on a Sunday evening. And we'd have a very nice meal prepared by Neen's mum and then we'd all gather in the lounge room and we younguns would spread out on the floor and we'd listen to

04:30 what was known as the 'Lux Radio Playhouse', and then 'World Famous Tenors'. And on that fateful night in September of 1939 when Mr. Menzies came on at that time. And I think the word was something like – Germany has invaded Poland and as a consequence England is at war with her

05:00 and we are at war with Germany. I went home … we all became very sober and I went home. I had to walk to Kings Road from Wiley Park, and my Mum was waiting for me. And she begged me not to go to war. And that if they came here, she would fight them with me. As a mother would say. Unfortunately, my mother died within a month, she

05:30 had a couple of strokes and she died. And I didn't feel that I was held to any promise, she had not told me to promise not to go to war. And I decided that I would join up. I'd always wanted to be in the air force if war came. I'd seen the men that came back from the First World War who'd been in the

trenches, and they had trench feet

06:00 and mustard gas burns. And I felt, well if I got in the air force and I wanted to be a pilot, I felt that if anything like that happened to me I'd be gone and I wouldn't have those terrible injuries to carry for the rest of my life. I finished up going in in February of 1940 and my wife's cousin was with the recruiting centre and he said, "Well they're not taking

06:30 applications for pilots because they're doing cadet courses. Why don't you come in on the ground crew and be a clerk and then you can re muster." And that's what I did and I finished up then being called up for Number 16 course. I did my initial training at Glenfield in Sydney. And then I went to Narromine and we did two months there learning to fly Tiger Moths.

07:00 And then, I think, the August of 1941 … I might have gone on a little too quickly then. I had a fair break between when I joined and when I went into aircrew. As you can imagine, I spent a lot of that time down at Air board as a clerk. But they we went … our next one after Narromine was going to Wagga and it was Number

07:30 Two SF, the air service flying training school, and that was obviously, sixteen course. And we were there and our training was stopped in December because of the invasion of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. We eventually were … finished our course and then we were sent … two of us were sent to an OTU [Operational Training Unit] at

08:00 Sale. And we met up with four other fellows there and apparently we were all posted to 3 Squadron in the Middle East. We did our OTU, went down to embarkation depot and in May of 1942 we embarked on the SS Coramba, which was an eight thousand ton cargo boat. And we were bound for the Middle East. We went almost down to the Antarctic,

08:30 I think, when we left Melbourne and then came back into Fremantle and then we went up through the Indian Ocean to Colombo. During the time we were going up through the Indian Ocean, that was went the submarine attack on Sydney Harbour occurred. And of course, we were all a bit upset and obviously we wanted to be back here, but that wasn't to be of course. When we got to Colombo the captain informed up that he couldn't take us any further because

09:00 he was going to Calcutta, and we had to get to Bombay to get across to Egypt. So we arranged with the RAF [Royal Air Force] that they gave us the train trip up through India and we joined some other fellows at Bombay who were going on the squadron and we all went across to Suez together. Our first place there to go to, the six of us, was to a place called Nina,

09:30 it was called Wing Base and that was for No. 239 Wing of which 3 Squadron was a part. And that was located almost adjacent to the Sphinx and the Pyramids. And we had a lot of fun, obviously, flying around and looking at those from all sorts of angles. And we did our conversion onto Kittyhawks there. Very, very brief, just three or four or five hours I think we had. And then we were sent up to the squadron.

10:00 The squadron was at a place Amiriya which is just up near where Alamein was fought and they had been back there, I think, since the June. Rommel had pushed the allies way back to there and except for the fact that they had no supplies, the Germans, I don't think we would have been going to 3 Squadron there. I think he would have pushed the Allies right out of Egypt. We spent a fair bit of time there just being

10:30 trained on Tomahawks and Kittyhawks. And as a matter of fact, quite a few of us were sent back again for a little bit of further training at the Wing Base or over on the west coast of Africa. Eventually I did my first operational flight on 24th or 25th October. It was the night after the bombing commenced for the advanced or the Battle of Alamein. And then of course, from then on, we were

11:00 on our way up through the desert. And it was stop start and the Germans were being pushed back continually. And the first place we moved up to was a place called El Daba and that had been a 109 base [Messerschmitt 109] I think, I think they were there as well as at Fuka which was the next one. And they'd go out so quickly that the mail hadn't even been opened from the

11:30 last mail that came in. And I was fortunate, I got a gun sight from the 109 in a box all with spares and everything on it, I've got it still. I put it in the back of my Kittyhawk and carried it with me most of the way up through … well I didn't leave it in my aircraft because other people flew that aircraft as well. And eventually, just making … very quickly, I wont tell you details of operational flights or anything, you just want an

12:00 overview. And we eventually arrived at Tunis, and Tunis had fallen. And we … the Germans had got out and we of course were doing our best to stop as many as we could by different ways. And eventually that was all finished and we were given a weeks leave. Most of the fellows then … there were plenty of trucks and cars being left by the Germans

12:30 for a start and most of the blokes at the time were looking for a motor vehicle. And I was fortunate enough to find that an American colonel had been careless in leaving the keys in his car and it was up. I'd gone up to Tunis with the stated idea of … I'd already had two trips up with a friend and we didn't have any success, but I saw this one, it was opposite

13:00 the American Air Force headquarters. And there were two guards outside with their rifles at ease, sort of thing, but I thought I could get away with this. But I talk a walk around the block to get myself in the right frame of mind for it. I met some of our ground crew and I asked them whether they were going back to squadron and they said yes they were. And I said, “I’ll give you a lift back in my car if you like.” And one of them said, “Tommy, you haven’t got a car.”

13:30 And I said, “I’ll have one in about five minutes.” So we got the car, I got the car and we took it back and some of the ground crew spent about three hours on it, changing the colour, changing the engine number, doing this and putting our squadron sign on the door. And then I invited three … for the weeks away, I invited three … one

14:00 ground crew corporal and two other flight sergeant pilots to come with me for a trip to Algiers, which we did, took the week. We just drove down, we only had one day in Algiers and drove back. And then I had two fellows from the squadron, ground crew, who were going back to the [Nile] Delta and they took the car back there with them, that’s the last time I ever saw it. Within a few days of that we’d flown across

14:30 to Malta and we only stayed at Malta for about nine days and then we went to Petchino in Sicily. And I’d just come down from the first operation of the day and our CO was Reg Stephens because Brian Eton had remained in North Africa in hospital. So Reg had been appointed CO for the time. And

15:00 he told me, asked me would I go down and supervise … they boys were delousing a house and were going to have it as a pilots’ mess. And unfortunately some petrol exploded and I was burned on the hands and on the face but I had my flying gear on. But one poor young fellow with me, they of course had very short, skimpy shorts on and [(UNCLEAR)] boots and no shirts and he died … they flew us across and he died at Malta. And I was taken down

15:30 to Cairo and I was in the burns unit there for about three weeks I think. When I came back the squadron had moved to Agnonie, but by that time I’d been on the squadron for around twelve months and the CO said, “Well I think you’d better have a rest.” And they put me off for the rest period. After you’d down a tour of ops, you were supposed to have a six months rest period. On my rest period,

16:00 Reg Stephens had recommended that I be repatriated to Australia. But they apparently needed some instructors at an RAF station down near the Great Bitter Lakes at the bottom of the Suez Canal, called Abu Suweir. And I was there for eight or nine months and my job, I did air flying instructors’ courses and my job was to give new pilots going up to No.

16:30 239 Wing … there were other pilots in the flight with me that had already been through 239 Wing and they were instructing as well, and we gave them their conversion onto Kittyhawks and the basic fundamentals of battle formation flying, dive bombing and strafing techniques. And then I came back to Australia. When I came back to Australia, I found that … well they

17:00 found that I’d been wounded and I actually had three numbers in the air force. When I joined as a clerk my number was 14238 and then when I went to air crew, I went in under the citizens air force number 264812, and when I became an officer I became A4812. And when I came back

17:30 they couldn’t find my papers, but they knew somehow that I’d been injured. And I was perfectly fit, nothing wrong with me at all. And I was messed about for about six months, and they wouldn’t do anything, I begged them to give me a full medical certificate and so on. Anyway, eventually everything turned out and they sent me down to Deniliquin which we called a Scrub School. They apparently had so many …

18:00 the pilot losses hadn’t been anywhere near as bad as they thought they would be, and they had so many pilots. They were just telling pilots who, like myself, who had been and done operational flying that our flying wasn’t good enough or something of that nature. And you had to get required standard, so I did get that. And then I was posted down to Point Cook to do an air …

18:30 I forget the exact thing, but do a course on the use of oxygen when you’re at a high altitude. And then I was sent to an ex army base and we did jungle training. And obviously I was destined then for New Guinea. But before that I was sent to Mildura and did a course on a Mustang. And by that time

19:00 the war was just about over and because I’d been in the air force for almost … well five and a half years almost to the day, it turned out when I got out, and so long overseas, if I wanted my discharge I could have it. And of course, Neen and I by that time had been married. And I thought, “Well it’s time to set up our married life together.” So I left the air force on 19th September,

19:30 1945.

Wow. And that’s the overview, wonderful, okay, thank you very much. Now what we do, I go right back to the beginning and we just have much more conversation, I’ll just ask you questions about a whole variety of things and we’ll go through the rest of the interview like that. If we could start with your growing up

20:00 **years during the Depression, you said before that it didn’t affect you very much as children but what sort of things would you get up to as kids?**

Well, as I say, our pleasures of that day were very simple. You mean … first of all I'll tell you the legal ones, there're not too many illegal ones. But the … we had played marbles, the girls would

20:30 play hopscotch or skip. The boys, we'd play handball against the next door terrace house to where our school was. Swimming, we'd go out to the beach, the beach was a great place to go. And we all wanted to be able to ride surfboards and they only one I ever got was my grandmother's old ironing board. But by and large, it was so simple, the pleasures.

21:00 You know, you did the things that kids get up to, at night time you'd go and knock on the door and run like hell and let somebody come and answer it and nobody would be there. And then sometimes you'd go over to places where there's fruit trees and you'd hop the fence and pinch a bit of fruit. I'll tell you a little story about that, we used to go out to Kingsford, near Kensington in Sydney, we jumped over a fellow's

21:30 fence, he had plenty of fruit trees and plenty of fruit, he wasn't growing the commercially so we weren't interrupting that. But anyway, as we were on our way, one of the fellows got caught by another fellow down the road. And he said, "You've just been up pinching Mr. Smith's fruit." And he said, "Yes, I have, I'm sorry, I'll put it back." "No," he said, "Pinch mine, my fruit's as good as his." That's not really true, but that's one of the stories we liked

22:00 to tell about that time. But that was the simple things that we did. And schools were much different then than they are today. There wasn't … we all wanted to learn, everybody … there was no not wanting to learn. And the teachers were so … they were terrific. They would give their time after school to help you and so forth. So growing up in the Depression years, I'd say was … we went without,

22:30 but there was none of the peer pressure, there was none like today when the kid down the road gets a new scooter, you wanted a scooter, that just wasn't on. He was lucky to have a scooter, you didn't envy him at all, you may have envied him or thought about it in that way but not to the point where you wanted your Mum and Dad to go into debt to get you a scooter. But, as I said before, the parents, I feel, must have had a terrible time to try and make ends meet. We weren't

23:00 very well off at all. And my Dad lost his job because he was working in the building trade and that was the first one to stop. And as a matter of fact, his last job that he got from the … the builder he worked for, was cleaning the windows on a big hotel in Taylor Square in Darlinghurst. And my brother and I and my mother, we helped him do the windows. So that was our thing for families then.

23:30 **Can you describe what life was like at home and the house that you lived in?**

Well we lived in very basic homes. But they were always clean and there was always food of some kind. And again, our food habits were so different to today. Nobody went past a Sunday without the Sunday roast, and that was cold meat for then … and

24:00 dripping, the dripping that came from it, we'd have that on bread, bread and dripping and pepper and salt on it, and that was a delicacy. And you know, people today, they turn their nose up at something like that. But no, the home, we didn't have television, we didn't have wireless in the early days, it wasn't until … I forget what year wireless came in or radio came in. But we didn't have that but we had other things and of course we read and we did

24:30 our homework and I think … there was no pattern set, it just that … and I think that children helped more in the home in those days. There were things that you would do, you know, help to wipe up or wash up or whatever. But I doubt that a lot of them do that today.

25:00 **Was it a close family, did you get on with your mum and dad and …**

Yes. Actually, it was just my brother and I and my mother and father, of course. I would say that my mother and father lived a reasonable life together. They didn't always agree with each other but we never ever … and they might have a row occasionally, but there was never any much …

25:30 it would be done and over with. Much as Neen and I don't always agree with what we … what's going on. But we don't get it into the situation where it can't be dissolved. But my brother was quite different to me, he was two and a half years older than me. I was a more studious type of bloke and a very quiet fellow at that time. My brother was a very good footballer,

26:00 young footballer. And he was much more outgoing and I think my father probably leaned a little bit to him but not to the absolute detriment of what he felt for me. But I think he was probably proud of Jerry's achievements in what he did. But by and large, I'd say that my home life was quite happy.

Did you have many friends around the neighbourhood, the ones that you'd go and nick fruit

26:30 **with?**

Well, yeah, I was in the Boy Scouts and you had your own friends from school. And we didn't nick the fruit all the time, I wasn't a habit, but on a Sunday afternoon, maybe, you might just take an idea, let's go and get some fruit. But we weren't thieves in that way, it was just a fun thing. And it wasn't because we were hungry, that

27:00 wasn't the reason for it either. But we used to go over to … odd things we did too, at that time, we might be … where the old showground is in Moore Park area, they used to have, on the showground, they used to have motor bike racing. A very famous pilot, Lionel Van Prage, who was decorated. He was on bombers over in England and he spend about twenty four hours

27:30 or something in the North Sea holding up one of his crew after they had ditched. I may not have all the fact incredibly right on that, but I know that that type of thing took place. And Lionel Van Prage used to ride his bike there and we knew his father, they had a little chocolate

28:00 place and they used to take … they had a stall down at the markets in the Haymarket, Paddy's Market. And we used to go over and to get in, of course, we used to jump the fence and get in. But that was just another thing. Centennial Park was another great place for us to wander around because they ponds and everything in those days and it wasn't as pristine as it is now. And we used to have wonderful

28:30 times over there.

What was it about Centennial Park that was a great thing, it would have been very bushy back then?

Just the area, just the area, yes. And we'd … and the ponds, we'd probably do things in there that we shouldn't have done. We probably jumped in or something, memory's a bit dim, but it was … and I don't know that they had as many ranges then as they would have had now. There always were ranges

29:00 there but you couldn't … as I say, it wasn't as clear as it is now and you could … we just … like being out in the bush, I guess, doing the things you do out in the bush. The bush in the city.

Fantastic. Did you ever get to the pictures or …

Oh, the pictures were special, the pictures were special because … Saturday afternoon pictures, they were special.

29:30 And there was a picture show in Botany Road, Waterloo and my Mum used to give me sixpence to go to the pictures on a Saturday afternoon, but before I go that I had to clean the leaves on the aspidistra and do a couple of other little jobs and then I got my sixpence. And that was threepence into the theatre, a penny for an ice cream cone and a penny for a caramel bar

30:00 and a penny for two Woodbine cigarettes. And that was one of the things we did, so I began to smoke from an early age I think. But that was only then, I didn't continue smoking through my school years in that way, you know, but that was just the thing that was done, probably I followed somebody else's habit in that.

Do you remember how old you were when you gave it a try?

30:30 About ten, nine or ten. But I also used to smoke the fig leaves in the back, off the fig tree in the back, when they got dry. But it wasn't new, I wasn't only bravado, it was only … it was not smoking as smoking is, you know. Not like it was with the Woodbine cigarettes, that was smoking.

Were you interested in

31:00 **sports and things at school, favourite games?**

Oh yes, yes. I played rugby league, I played soccer a little. But then my main game I liked was tennis, and I played that particularly when I got to high school, I took on tennis, that was my favourite sport. But there wasn't much else really going.

31:30 We had a teacher who had come up from Victoria and he was teaching us how they kicked and so forth in the AFL [Australian Football League]. But AFL didn't take on in Sydney in those days. It was just rugby league. And rugby union was all right I think, probably the same relationship with league as it's got now. But soccer wasn't a big, big thing. But tennis was always …

32:00 we used to go to White City courts and watch them there, the old tennis players. Jack Crawford and Denny Pale and John Bromwich, all the old ones, you know.

Before, you called yourself quite a studious fellow at school. Was education important to you or

Well, as I say, I wanted to be a school teacher. I wouldn't say I was the best of scholars.

32:30 I wanted to do it, but I was more of a reader. I liked to read books and they weren't always school book. I always had a book with me no matter where I was, just about, when I was that age. You know, I'm talking now about twelve, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and so forth. But, as I said before, I had to leave school. I didn't have to leave school but I left school in the second year and then went to night school to do the remainder of my

33:00 schooling.

Did you have favourite books from those times?

No. I think Biggles books were one in the earlier part, but no, oh, well Westerns, Westerns were the go at the time, a lot of the time. There were some wonderful Western books out and of course they had a lot for you to be interested in, you knew the goodie was going to win in the end anyway.

33:30 But that was the same as Western on the film, they were always popular, you know. But no, I didn't get into deeply into books, not into the deeper books. I probably more favoured fiction than fact ones. Because I suppose I had enough fact books to read at school and whatever. But

34:00 no, I think when I say studious, I was quiet, I was a quiet lad. And Neen always tells me that I was absolutely changed when I came back from overseas. She might have seen the difference in me.

Can you tell me about meeting Nina and …

Yes, I can tell you about that. You don't want me to recite a thirty page, thirty verse poem, do you?

A couple of your favourites would

34:30 **be good.**

Well, this is a very true story. When I was in the railways, I was doing … I was a booking clerk and I was on relief, what they call relief, I'd go to different stations. And one of the stations that I went to was Punchbowl, and at that time there was no station, no railway station at Wiley Park and Neen

35:00 lived at Wiley Park. And apparently, she and her father would walk to the train to Lakemba. I might have this back to front, Lakemba of a morning and when they came home at night they'd come back from Punchbowl because it was down hill. And I was in the booking … I wasn't on the booking window all the time because they had senior men on there at Punchbowl. And railway travel was

35:30 big for the population at that time. And so much so, that on a Sunday afternoon they would open an extra window so that people could come up for a stroll and buy their weekly ticket and not have to line up and queue on a Monday morning. And I was on this window and suddenly this vision appeared before me. And I might say …

36:00 I've just gone a little bit past myself there. There very first time I saw her, she hadn't quite turned fourteen and this would have been in 1935. And another thing I was doing then was ice skating and a friend and I … I'd been working at Punchbowl Station and so had he and we knocked off

36:30 and we were going to go in the [(UNCLEAR)] skating. And we were on the top waiting and then a lot of people had got off the train and suddenly I saw Neen coming up in her school uniform. I remember the first time I saw you, coming up those railway stairs, slender and lovely in the uniform of school, with golden flowing hair. I said to my friend beside me, my head

37:00 was in a whirl, "You see that vision coming up the stairs? I'm going to marry that girl." Alan said, "Tom, don't be a fool. Hurry up or we'll be late." So we hurried on down onto the train, and off to the ice to skate. And then … I didn't speak to her then, of course, but then she appeared at the window and I asked her … In those days young'uns

37:30 had to have … by this time she'd left school and started work, so it wasn't just … it could have been six months later. And they had to have what was known as a half fare authority so they could get a half fare ticket for the weekly ticket. So I asked her if I could see her half fare authority and she flicked it to me like that and I said, "No, I'll have to see it please." So I got it because I wanted to get her name from it you see. And the

38:00 station master was near by me and he was looking at me a bit quizzically wondering what was going on. And Neen wasn't very happy at all. So I got it from her and off she went. And then the next time I saw her, I was on the barrier at Town Hall Station and Neen had left and was working and doing wig making

38:30 at a place in Bathurst Street. And she came through the barrier and I said to her – oh, you're Miss Redell. And of course, she got a bit of a shock wondering how I knew her name. I said, "My name's Russell," and I said, "I know your train leaves in a few minutes but I knock off in ten minutes' time. I wonder if you'd wait for me." And, "I'd like to talk to you." I didn't know …

39:00 she went off and went down the platform, but lo and behold, when I got down there she was there. And she lived at Wiley Park and we were living at Tempe and I made the greatest mistake, almost, of my life. I got off at Sydenham and said bye bye to her and let her go. And it progress from there and eventually we did spend … and one of my verses goes – Some happy years of courtship, then a war

39:30 that tore us apart, your letters helped me bare that time, and you're always in my heart. And that's how it was. And on her twenty first birthday I was … we'd just started up on the Alamein, going up from Alamein and we were a fair bit up the desert. So I asked my father … I'd written to my father and asked him would

40:00 he give Neen my mother's engagement ring and that I was going to ask her would she marry me. Unfortunately, the telegram got a little bit convoluted, I put down – very proud and happy if you announce our engagement. She got – very proud and happy you announced our engagement. But fortunately, she let that slip by and she got my Mum's

40:30 engagement ring for her engagement ring. So that's just about how we met and when I came back from the war I asked her to marry me. I don't think she was always quite sure that she wanted to get married, but I'm so very pleased she did and we've had fifty nine years almost, fifty nine years in December. And it's always been that we've

41:00 worked together pretty well, we've been lucky. We've had our disagreements, obviously, it's lovely afterwards, I can tell you. But no, that's about how I met her and I was very, very fortunate I think.

Tape 2

00:32 **Tom, you mentioned before about the day you heard the war declared. I was wondering if you could tell me what you'd heard about Hitler and what was happening in Europe at the time?**

I don't think we'd heard a lot. I can't remember and I would feel that the younger people weren't all that interested. We'd heard of course, that Mr.

01:00 Chamberlain went across and we'd heard all of this, we knew there was talk of war and there was talk of what was going on with Germany having invaded those countries and just about over run them. But then Mr. Chamberlain came back from the meeting and, "Peace in our time." Poor fellow, he'd been absolutely misled. And I don't feel that we younger people some how or other … it wasn't as close to us.

01:30 And you know, you hear of some of the people here, and Neen only spoke of this the other day, that people more or less said … and Australia had never seen a war. And yet they forget Darwin and they forget the fact that there were aerial attacks down, way down on the west coast of Australia and way down as far as Townsville. So, I mean, but even so, when Darwin was bombed,

02:00 whether it was by design by our government, but we in the southern states didn't know a lot of the detail about it. And Neen's brother, he was only sixteen and a half, seventeen, he was up there on an anti aircraft gun. But we in Sydney didn't really get a lot of it. But going back to the first part of the question, I do feel again, that Australia as a whole, probably, had not

02:30 been that thinking about it, hadn't been thinking about it that much. That's only from what I can remember now because we just didn't seem to alter our lifestyle or worry about it. But of course, as soon as war was declared the … and the poor fellows of the 6th divvy [6th Division], they reckoned they were the fellows that owed maintenance to their wives and wanted to get away and all that. But I don't think … that's just another war story too.

03:00 **What had you heard about World War I? Did you know any veterans from that war or …**

Yes, and this was one of the reasons … I mentioned before about me wanting … my desire to be in the air force. My Uncle Tom, after whom I was named, had been away at the war. And he came back, but he came back … he wasn't injured or damaged in any way.

03:30 There was my mother's cousin, a chap called Ambrose Pracey, and unfortunately I got his name as well, and he also seemed to come back quite good. But there was another person, Herb Kerslake who'd married an aunt of my mothers and … I'm sorry, he married a cousin of my mothers, and he came back with

04:00 shocking trench feet and he'd also been burned on the face when he lifted his gas mask, when the mustard gas was around. And I think that was … and I talk about different times and I always say there are so many different types of war in any war. Some people have a vastly different type. And I find, by getting onto the internet and accessing some of the wartime stories,

04:30 you find that people … the war they had was so foreign to what you could even imagine. But that was about my contact with people who had come back from the war, apart from all the others. But bare in mind I was only … I didn't know there and then, and I was only born in 1917, but it wasn't until I got up into six, seven or eight that I realised … maybe

05:00 nine or ten when I was reading the books, the boy's books and the boy's annuals and that and the air force stories that were in it. And I think that possibly … that's what I told them recently at Williamtown, at a dining in night there, that was when I made my decision that if a war did come that I wanted to be in the air force and if possible I wanted to be a pilot.

What had those boys' books told you about the air force, what was your impression of being a pilot from

05:30 **those?**

Oh it was wonderful, oh it was wonderful. And the pilots in the mess after [(UNCLEAR)] in the films that we saw. And drinking their wine out of glasses and then all of them smashing them into the glow and, "Here's to the next man to die." It was all real terrific, it was going to be a wonderful experience. It was nothing like that, of course. But no, I can't remember anything else

06:00 but they, you know, there was always a hero in any of the books and he always sort of, usually, came out on top.

I heard from another pilot that in a lot of those boys books as well, they would talk about the German flying aces and you almost had a quite a respect for them as well and their skill. I just wondered if you'd heard anything about the Germans.

Well

06:30 everybody heard about the Red Baron, von Richthofen, whose name from a very early age, everybody knew about Von Richthofen. Little did I know then that he would be … that our squadron, Number 3 Squadron would have the honour, I guess, of recovering his body when he was killed and also his aircraft. And that is made more so because

07:00 our wing master, his father, Captain James Lee Smith DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross], he was the officer commissioned by the CO [Commanding Officer] to recover it. I always thought that Von Richthofen crashed fairly closed to 3 Squadron base but apparently he was a little way away so they went out in a tractor type truck and they hooked onto the aircraft and took his body out

07:30 and brought him back. And they buried Von Richthofen with a full twenty one gun salute and that was the officers and men of 3 Squadron carried that out. And I do believe that an amnesty was called at that time, and a single German aircraft was allowed to fly over with a wreath and drop a wreath. So I

08:00 would say, otherwise than that, I knew very little. But I have learned a lot from them by books I've read and things that I've … I have inside there, I have the aces of the First World War, and I've learned a lot from that. And also, again, on our web site there was a section on the First World War and it shows a lot of information that otherwise we wouldn't be able to get

08:30 to.

Can you tell me … you mentioned the night that you heard the war was declared, what was your reaction to that, to that news?

As I said, we all became very quiet. I think we realised that … I don't think I quoted Mr. Menzies words absolutely correctly but we all

09:00 realised then, I think, particularly Neen's mum. Her son was in the room and he was only sixteen I think, or something around that age and I think her first thoughts would have been for him. And probably, I would think, the way she was and the wonderful woman that she was, she would also have been thinking of Lionel Coles and myself, and possibly for other people, friends' children

09:30 as well. Because I would say that's the first thing a mother would think of is, that the boys have to go to war. Not knowing that during that war, so many women would play such an active part in it as well. And it's more so now where they're flying fighter aircraft and so forth.

Were your immediate thoughts at the time that you were going to join up?

No. Well, I can't say

10:00 that. I can only say that I had to get back home to Kingsgrove and maybe … no, I don't think I did, I don't think I thought, oh well, King and Country, I've got to go. I really don't think so. But my Mum, as I said, didn't want me to go. But obviously, after her death and I was back at work and the fellows were going and I couldn't see anything … maybe then I … I

10:30 couldn't say that we were patriotic, don't think that's right because I think a lot of people just went for the adventure of it. And there may well have been people who – for King and Country and so forth, but I do really feel that it was the adventure. The opportunity to go overseas and see places you probably would never see otherwise.

I guess

11:00 **we take for granted now how easy overseas travel is, but in that day to travel to those places would have been a rarity, wouldn't it, there wouldn't have been …**

Well, the only way to go anywhere was by ship. And by ship for our sporting teams, cricket teams and things like that, took six weeks by ship. And I couldn't, actually … there were boats going up around the islands, the same as they are now,

11:30 but it was thirty five pounds for a two week trip or something, you just couldn't save thirty five pounds. There was no such thing as air travel. And when we left in that little cargo boat, we … I'm not sure just how long we took to get up there from Fremantle, maybe fifteen, twenty days. But it was a long way to go

12:00 and you had to get them to move people, to get heaps of troops over from one place to another, it took a long time.

Can you tell me about your enlistment day, what you had to do to enlist?

You want to know the whole story?

That'd be great.

Well, I went down to the enlistment and I

12:30 can't really remember now whether I enlisted immediately or was told to come back. I think I enlisted immediately on that day. And they gave you a quick medical examination and then we were taken by a truck. Where there was a hotel right opposite, so we managed to slake our thirst there before we went

13:00 and then we were taken up to Richmond with a couple of stops on the way, necessary stops. And we were taken up to the orderly room and greeted. And then we were issued with our palliasse and … that's a bag with straw in it for your mattress, and bed boards they were, you slept on. And we were allotted the bed we had to go to. There was

13:30 a fellow there called Bill Sponburge who came from Lakemba, near where Neen lived, and his brother was quite a famous football player. And he was a strong, strong … they weren't married and they … I think they could have been islanders but a very, very nice man. We became very firm friends. And he apparently stopped more often

14:00 than we did and we had to get him sober. And we had to put him in the shower before we took him up for the meeting. But that was all right, and from that moment, from the very first moment we arrived at Richmond, we realised or became to realise the absolute power of the disciplinary corporals of those days. They were

14:30 gods, they could order you around or do whatever they liked. I think I might have to stop.

We were talking about your enlistment Tom, and you were telling me about your first day and your trip to Richmond.

Well, that's basically all that happened on that first day. But obviously Richmond Air Base was a very different configuration then to what it is now.

15:00 And we were housed in huts that were known as Tin City. But by and large we were received pretty well and the accommodation was basic but it was quite okay and the food was good. That's about our first day. From then on we were drilled and drilled and drilled and we had to learn basic things.

15:30 I'm going to have to end again.

You were telling us about your enlistment, but I was wondering, can you tell me about any of the blokes you might have met on your first day?

Yes, there was Bill Sponburge, that I spoke about and a fellow called Harry Smith. And the three of us were posted down, after the end of our two month course there, we were

16:00 posted down to [(UNCLEAR)] in Melbourne. And we were there for quite a long while and I was the Secretary to Group Captain Jones who happened to be … was a World War I pilot and he eventually became Marshal of the Air Force. And we boarded together out at a place in Middle Park in Melbourne. And we had very nice times there and we

16:30 met a very lovely Irish lady, Julie Barrett, and she was a house keeper for the Myers Baillieu families, one of those. And we used to go out and visit and they knew we would visit and they didn't mind that she entertained us and gave us something to eat. And later on she was with WS Robertson who was Mr. BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary] at the time. He wrote a book which he …

17:00 during the war he was financial advisor to Britain and Australia and I think America took his brains too. And he wrote a book in which he said, "Never sell real estate, and buy BHP." And he was a lovely bloke and he also knew that Julie would have us over for an afternoon and give us afternoon tea and he didn't mind that at all. And then

17:30 my Mum having died, and she had adopted a little girl in 1938 and my Mum was forty three then which would be difficult for people to do now. And my aunt was taking care of her and I went to see Group Captain Jones and I told him about my family, that I needed to be up there to help close

18:00 off my Mum's estate and so forth and he arranged for me to have a transfer to Central Area headquarters, which was out on Point Piper and it was Sir Alexander McCormack's old home. Probably be the pick of Point Piper, beautiful views and everything there. And so I came back from there and Harry Smith never wanted to go, he just wanted to be a clerk, he didn't want to go in aircrew. But by leaving there I missed out on going on

18:30 Number ten course, because Bill Strongburg and another fellow called Alec Wale, who we'd met there, they went in on ten course, and I, by coming back here, I finished up going in on number sixteen course. But I lost … Bill and I wrote to each other occasionally. And Julie Barrett wrote to both of us and Bill, unfortunately, he went onto bombers as did Alec Wales

19:00 in England. And for the first thousand bomber raids, they put up everything that could fly in the air and carry a bomb, and Bill got killed on that raid. And he hadn't been there very long at all. I don't … Alec Whales went through two tours of operations, I believe, and got a couple of DFC, DFM or medals such as that. But I never ever met Harry Smith again. Didn't know what happened to him.

19:30 **Did you … you joined the air force wanting to be a pilot?**

Yes. That's why I said that I would have applied for it but they were still doing cadet courses. That's a funny thing too, when we went up to Richmond, that very first day I enlisted and they would come over … they were testing parachutes

20:00 and they'd come over and down would come this body on a parachute. And you'd hear them say – there's LAC [Leading Aircraftsman] Wood doing his jump again. And we really … at first we thought it was somebody doing a jump but it was a lump of wood shaped in a shape of a bit of a man. But LAC Wood, that was it, they just through him out and he did the testing of the parachute. Yeah.

When did you find

20:30 **out that you were going to be doing ground work rather than in the aircrew to begin with?**

Well that was from the first … well before, I'd spoken to Neen's cousin and he told me … suggested I come in and then go down. And then later on, just before I was selected for aircrew, we had to do what they call the Twenty One Lessons, for people who hadn't been conversant with

21:00 logarithms and trigonometry, we had to do a bit of that. And then, actually, I think your part, whether you're going to be aircrew was decided on what they wanted and when they wanted them. And some fellows waited such a long time to get into aircrew and when we went in and went to ITS [Initial Training School], then

21:30 they decided there, it was virtually decided there, what part of aircrew you'd be. Whether you'd be a pilot, navigator, an observer or an air gunner. I have another little funny story about that too. The squadron leader bloke there, he loved rugby union and we were told about this and so you'd go up to be interviewed by him and he'd ask you what sports you played.

22:00 So you'd start off with rugby union and maybe say tennis and do a bit of swimming, and rugby union's my favourite and mention that about five times. And so you got your bit of Q in there that you wanted to be a pilot. And then I tell the story that the final thing was that you had to go for an examination after they had first of all picked out all the

22:30 academics to be navigators, all the steady blokes to be bomber pilots, all the devil may care fellows to be air gunners and what was left, they looked in one ear and if they could see right through, you were a fighter pilot. So that's how it came. It's probably not true but … well Robbie Gibbs wouldn't agree with that anyway.

23:00 **Can you tell me about the clerking work that you were doing within the air force?**

Yes. Incidentally, when we first went down Air Board was at Victoria Barracks and there was a Mr. Fennessy there and of course he set up the filing system virtually unaided and he did it with his brain. That, as a letter came in, he set up a folder and say – that goes into that file.

23:30 So the filing system was set up. And I was in the Directorate of Training and our job was to control, I guess, or keep records of each and every course that went through, from cook's courses to mechanics, aircraft hands, anything. And the pilots, obviously, were on that too, the pilot course were on that too. But

24:00 it was quite an interesting one and then later on the Air Board moved us up into Century House which is opposite … it's on Swanston Street and it was a very nice place to work. One day we were in there, sitting there, and Hubert Hoffman … do you know Hubert Hoffman? He came in and he'd been seconded into the air force and he was going around giving talks,

24:30 I think, and showing a face to the troops there. But it wasn't very involved and we had one man there, a Warrant Officer Arnold [(UNCLEAR)], a permanent air force fellow, he was a very, very competent man in his job. And he was given the job to theorise, I guess, on pilot losses right from the start. And I often think to myself,

25:00 how difficult a job that was. He would have been privy I guess, to lots of information that we wouldn't have been such as which aircraft are the enemy aircraft and what was happening in different theatres of war. But obviously something went wrong because there were so many pilots left over. But I often thought that was a very difficult thing for him to do. But by and large it was just virtually

25:30 clerical work and there was a [(UNCLEAR)], I think he was a Squadron Leader Scherger at that time, and he … I remember, I took a memo from him … we'd also been, in between Victoria Barracks and Century Building, we'd gone out into a new building out along St. Kilda Road. I remember taking a memo from Scherger to Group Captain Jones and

26:00 he said, “Am I DDT, Deputy Director of Training or am I T2?” And if he’d been T2 or such and such, he probably, instead of being a squadron leader, should have been a wing commander. I think that was it, I don’t know what ever happened about that one. But also, one of Scherger’s good mates was a fellow called Dixie Chapman, I don’t know … I think he was a squadron leader at the time, maybe a flight lieutenant.

26:30 But he was to be posted overseas and be posted as Commanding Officer of 3 Squadron, not for a very long time. And people have said there were reasons that he didn’t stay, I’m not privy to anything of that type because he was there and gone before I got there. And I’ve always felt in all things, and in particularly in wartime activities, you can’t take

27:00 innuendo for a fact, you’ve got to know the facts yourself and that applies to people who … We had one man who came back in the early days and claimed four aircraft destroyed, but unfortunately for him he hadn’t had corroboration of it, but I think that he eventually did manage to get that and he was credited with it. But, I mean, there’s always a doubt that people … somebody

27:30 had to see the aircraft crash or have corroborating evidence that gave you that victory. But I think that about covers what was there at Air Board. I really wasn’t there all that long, but we had a lovely time in Melbourne, people were very hospitable and it’s quite a lovely city except it does get very cold.

28:00 **Were you every worried that you might not get the chance to re muster?**

I think … I had my name in and I knew it was happening because we saw that through the records that we had in our office. And I was a bit disappointed when the boys went in on 10 Course, and I was still up here. But at that time I was enjoying myself and I was close to Neen, I could see Neen.

28:30 But I was quite happy when I went in on 16 Course eventually. And I didn’t meet a chap called Nev. Austin, who became my very good friend. I went in with … I’ve got a photograph there, two fellows, Keith Row and Joe Saunders. And Joe became one of the top men in Shell after the war.

29:00 And we did our Narromine training together and went to Wagga and we did it there. But at Wagga, Joe hit a tree at night flying and it put him back a course, so we lost contact then. The next time I saw him, I was very surprised too, he was doing aircraft delivery from England out to Cairo and he knew where I was and we contacted each other and had some time in Cairo together. And

29:30 Keith, I don’t know what Keith went on and did.

Can you tell me about when you were re mustered and you began your course, what the training involved to … I guess, you mentioned you were flying Tiger Moths, and just what that training involved?

Well, there was such a thing as a Link Trainer, they called it …

30:00 I’ll think of the name in a moment, the modern name for it. But Link Trainer is where you fly an aircraft but you don’t leave the ground. It’s in there and you fly just by visual, and it’s very, very good for training. But we started off with, obviously, duel instruction and they took us up and showed us, first of all, to fly the aircraft. And we had

30:30 to be able to fly the aircraft straight and level as well as doing all turns or whatever, and we had to learn how to trim the aircraft so that it virtually flew itself, and that makes it not so exhausting for the pilot if … Same as these on the modern day planes where they’ve got the automatic pilot. The pilot just has to keep his eye on the instruments. Then they gradually moved into more involved training.

31:00 We had to learn how to force land the aircraft. They instilled in you, and I think that without knowing it, you were getting disciplined, you were learning discipline. And we had a theory of flight instructor who told us why and how the aircraft flew, why it flew and why it got off the ground. And we learnt so many things, so that eventually they

31:30 got you to the stage … they taught you how to do a precautionary landing, where if you only had a very, very small paddock to land into, you came in … brought the aircraft in just above the soil in a high altitude, and you know, nose well up in the air and tail down, and just got over the fence and pull the throttle off and let it drop down to the ground. So they covered all the aspects of the safety elements needed should

32:00 you desire or have to make a forced landing. And then we got onto night flying. They went through virtually the same procedure, but they made it a little easier for you there because of the night. The lights in the street were a great help. They’d say – well do you first turn here, over this light and do your second turn over the next light and down wind and do your third turn there and then turn into wind when you see

32:30 that tower over there, lined up or something. Helpful things like that, that after all, later on you probably used without even knowing it. But you needed some … you kept the flare part in sight all the time. They taught you blind flying, they put a hood over the cockpit. Mostly we did the blind flying training more at

33:00 Wagga on the Wirraway aircraft. So that you knew that you could fly the aircraft by the instruments only without seeing where the ground or the sky was, but you knew that you could control the aircraft and not get into trouble.

Can you tell me about your first flight, the first flight that you had?

No, I can't.

33:30 It was just circuits and landings. And they did tell us, the old Tigers that we had, they didn't have a tail wheel, they had a tail skid, and I think that later on they might have put a wheel on. And they used to make … Narromine airfield was grass and bumpy and it used to make a hell of a noise when you came in to land. And one of the things

34:00 they absolutely impressed upon us, that if we weren't happy with the landing, put the power on and go around again and come in. Well, eventually I had to do my test for going solo, and I had this flight Lieutenant Lonnergan, he was one of the local people from a grazing property, and was also the CFI, Chief Flying

34:30 Instructor there. And Narromine is made up of two square three quarter mile paddocks, so one length of it is a mile and a half. And he dropped off on this day, he took me around and let me land and then he said, "Right, I want you to go solo now." So he got out and I went solo

35:00 and when I came round to land I heard this terrible thing and it didn't seem right so I went around again, and it must have been five, six times I went round. When I came down he'd gone, and I believe he went … my instructor was a flying officer White, and he was in the mess and Flight Lieutenant Lonnergan walked in and White said, "How did Russell go?" He said, "I don't know, he's still up there doing

35:30 circuits and landing." So that was my first solo flight. The Tiger Moth, I think, is the best training aircraft for somebody learning to fly. Of course, they have more modern aircraft now, they do, but people always said, "If you can fly a Tiger Moth, you can fly anything." And it was, it was a … I wouldn't say it was a difficult aircraft to fly but it had all the functions and everything about it

36:00 that you had to be able to do to make the aircraft fly properly. And you could drop it in at night, flying around or anything like that, from eight or ten feet and … it was a sturdy aircraft, you know.

Can you describe the blind flying to me, the first time you did that?

Well, the old saying from the First World War was … and some people were using … He flew the

36:30 aircraft by the seat of his pants. You can't do that. You wouldn't have to do that if you could see, but if you can't see, it's pitch dark and you can't see, then you need to use your instruments. If you try to fly by the seat of your pants, you could be doing a gliding turn to the left

37:00 or a diving turn to the left instead of a climbing turn to the right, you think you're doing … That sounds unbelievable but I'll put it more simply, you might think you're flying straight and level but you're not. So that's what all the blind flying is about, you've got to be able to fly that aircraft by those instruments. That training, I think, saved my life later on

37:30 when I was … after I'd left the squadron. Do you want me to tell you about that?

Yeah, that'd be great.

That was when I was at Abbot's Weir and the CO said that … there was a dentist there that had to be flown up to Palestine, would I like the trip and have a couple of days if I want to , up there. So I said, "Okay, what will I take him in?" And he said, "Well take the [(UNCLEAR)]." So we took the [(UNCLEAR)]

38:00 and we just got half an hour on our way and it got an oil leak and started to come out on the wind screen. Not fully covering the windscreen but we knew there was trouble. So I turned around and took it back and we got back and we got back safely. And I went and saw the CO and he said, "Well you'd better take the Harver. So I took the Harver and we kicked off again.

38:30 And we got over Sinai Desert and we ran into a sand storm. I couldn't get over it, I couldn't get around it and I couldn't get under it. And I turned … by the time I'd tried all that, the sand storm was on us. And I thought, God. I had to find a way to get back. So I put my seat right down and started to fly on my instruments. And I

39:00 turned round and headed west again, or towards the west again. And it was going all right, I felt it was going all right, and then suddenly, some way or another, I saw a little break in the sand, in the storm. So I dived down through that and I found I was near a beach and I went out to sea a little bit, turned round, I was still quite a bit of sand but much lighter

39:30 than it was where I'd been. And I force landed on the beach. It was just east of Port Said, and it was near a place called Romani, where our Australian Light Horse had been in the First World War. And there was still heaps of bully beef tins from the First World War there, practically covered by sand. But that showed the training and that showed … if I had tried to find my way back through that, I

40:00 probably could have come back by flying west, but of course, the temptation of seeing something, being able to get down on the ground, was too great. We stayed there overnight and the next morning I … there was some Arabs all around and there were two British fellows in a small shack and they were monitoring something or other, I never ever got … they didn't allow me inside or the dentist

40:30 and we just camped outside somewhere, there was nowhere to sleep. And the next … he went down and I asked him to tell them would they keep away from the aircraft. And we went down the next morning and they all helped us push it out on the harder packed sand, and I took off and went back to Abbot's Weir. And I don't know what ever happened to the dentist, how he ever got up to Palestine. But I unfortunately didn't get to see

41:00 Palestine.

Tape 3

00:32 **Tom, I was just wondering within you experience, can you talk us through the difference in the training that you received from the ITS to the EFTS [Elementary Flying Training School] and then the SFTS [Service Flying Training School]? SFTS?**

Yes, SFTS.

Yeah.

Well the ITS was purely and simply ground subjects. We did, you know, as far as

01:00 training I suppose, early training, for the people who were going to be navigators. And they were all ground subjects there, nothing else. With the EFTS, I think then we got the basic rules, as I say, of learning to fly the aircraft. And from then we went onto SFTS, where they introduced other things such as formation flying and dive bombing and so forth. And

01:30 I think it was basically still the same, but more … leaning more towards what would happen within the squadron, but in a very, very lower sense of it. And we were supposed to then, go to an Operational Training Unit, but unfortunately ours was … the people that gave us our course had only come off two courses ahead of us, they'd never been in operations, so

02:00 it was considered more or less a waste of time. And we were very pleased that we got such good training when we got to the squadron. But basically, in the flying training, I think they're similar with a little difference of being more advanced, that's all.

You were saying earlier that it was pretty much regarded if you could fly a Tiger Moth, you could fly anything. Can you actually,

02:30 **I guess, walk us through as if we were sitting in your seat, a take off? Basically from sitting in the seat what you would do and the instruments and how you would read them to get the Tiger Moth up into the air.**

Well, you obviously … the Tiger Moth had a climbing speed of sixty six feet a minute, not per second from memory.

03:00 Let me say, it had a dedicated climbing speed. And the gliding speed was virtually the same. But the instructor would tell you that the speed you had to have and at what speed you should get your tail up and at what speed you should begin to see if the aircraft wants to leave the ground, just by pressing … Obviously, if there's a head wind, if you're going into a severe head wind, obviously

03:30 you're taking off into wind anyway if there is any wind, but you may have to give it more throttle. You may have to … to keep the speed or to get to the speed you want, you may have to give it more throttle. But once you lifted it off, then you were supposed to get it into the climbing attitude and you weren't supposed to turn until you had a certain speed on your indicator. And that was virtually

04:00 all that was taught to you. And an aircraft … if an aircraft is properly trimmed, it will take itself off the ground. So getting it off the ground is not a lot of problem so long as you've got plenty of power and everything. Getting it down becomes a little bit more difficult and takes, I feel, a lot more skill than getting it off the ground.

Can you walk us through a landing?

04:30 Well, again, it comes from your training, that they've trained you and if you were going to come in and do your landing, you do your final cross wind before you come … into wind landing some of the time. And by that time you've assessed

05:00 more or less the strength of any wind and you know how far you have to stay back from the perimeter of the aerodrome, how much space you have to give yourself to do the landing. If you misjudge that, well

you could quite easily undershoot the aerodrome, and mostly they had fences around it and you could really hit a fence. So it all comes back … to do a landing, if you follow the training you've had

05:30 and if you've got that into your mind completely and absolutely, as they wanted it to be, it shouldn't be any worried about coming in to land. And then of course, you just bring the aircraft down and then you have to decide … get yourself into a landing situation, and you have to gauge how far you are from the ground. And for instance, with a Tiger Moth … with a Kittyhawk later on, you weren't allowed to do

06:00 three point landing because you had no forward visibility. With a Tiger Moth, a three-point landing was no problem.

Can you run me through the exact details of a three-point landing?

Well, it's where you get the wheels and the tail … if there's a tail wheel and the two … the three of them hit the ground at the one time. In this case, if course, it was a skid.

I understand that,

06:30 **as you've rightly said, landings were one of the biggest problems in training. Do you see many of the other fellows having trouble with landings and were there many incidents or crashes or anything?**

Well, I can't be specific on crashes like that, not from an ordinary landing. But there must have been some where they didn't do it correctly. And some of them, you know, didn't complete the

07:00 course at Narromine. Some because of the fact that it wasn't as they thought I think. I don't mean to say that they wanted to get out because of any lacking in morale fibre or anything like that. But maybe they couldn't learn it and it was too hard for them. And there were others, one or two of them, who would become ill and sick and

07:30 vomit when they were up there. And that was always, the real deal was, whoever did that had to clean to mess up. You couldn't expect a person on the ground crew to come along a clean it up for them, you had to do it yourself. Fortunately, it never happened to me.

Was that kind of air sickness a generally common kind of problem there?

No, I don't think so. There

08:00 may have been some … you'd know if they'd been ill, but you wouldn't want to be ill in a high speed aircraft because you couldn't put you head over the side, it'd get knocked off, thrown back and hit hard. But there may have well been people who suffered but I didn't know of any. And probably they … a lot of them were so keen to carry on and to still be there, they would have hidden something of that I guess.

08:30 But if it became apparent, well they'd have to find out whether the Commanding Officer or Flight Commander was going to allow them to continue in their training.

I've heard that, I guess, from a certain perspective, that being a pilot had a certain element of romance to it

09:00 **or sense of adventure. I mean, everybody was competing to be a pilot. Was there much competition amongst guys in training, sort of scrambling for that position before the selection committee?**

No, I don't think so. I think that most people would have accepted what they got. I don't think, and I don't know, maybe some

09:30 of them wanted to be, but then of course, you became what they told you. I mean, you didn't really have a choice. You couldn't say – well if I'm not a pilot, I'm not going to join the air force, because you've already joined. And you're there to do … you've got to do as you're told. Same thing that happened with jobs, if we had to do such strafing jobs, we didn't want to do them, didn't always want to do them. Strafing inanimate things like trucks and so forth, but if you had to

10:00 strafe troops, it wasn't pleasant, and if you were told to do it, you just had to do it. So I guess that once they told us you were a pilot, that's what you were. And I don't know, maybe sometimes a gunner might have moved up to a pilot later on, might have applied, I don't know. But the gunners, they were brave, brave people, the gunners and as far as the bomber pilots I have …

10:30 the bomber crews I will say, not just the pilots, the bomber crews, I have the utmost regard and admiration for them, they did a marvellous job.

Did you know about the odds of …

Survival? No. You quickly learned when you got there. You quickly learned and if your name went up

11:00 on the board for first show in the morning, mostly they'd all ease off to bed a bit earlier out of the mess, they wouldn't stay in the mess. And I always remember reading a book by Sailor Milan, who was probably the ace fighter pilot of all time. And he explained to this to me. I had said to Bobby Gibbs on

one occasion and he's … on our net,

11:30 you'll find a thing from Bobby Gibbs about the fear of a fighter pilot. And I said, "Do you ever get scared, boss?" He said, "All the time, Tom, all the time." And Sailor Milan put it very strongly in his book that once a fighter pilot loses his fear, he's of no use to the squadron. And that means that if you leave the formation, you're weakening the force and

12:00 you've got to go … you can't be … some of the wanted to be a Von Richthofen on their own. And a lot of those didn't survive. But the fear of a fighter pilot, and I've written … I wrote a little poem about this too, about joining the squadron and one of the verses went something like 'When the time arrives for us to take off,

12:30 we would walk to the aircraft, three peas and a cough, into the cockpit they'd help you strap tight, and a tap on the shoulder comes us, you'll be right.' From the moment you turn the engine on, any thoughts you had, and I know this from many, many, many pilots, you were so busy, you had no other thoughts in your mind. You didn't go out

13:00 there saying, "If I see them I'm going to get out the road and I'll survive." You went out and did what you had to do. And as I say, you were so busy, particularly is somebody was shooting at you, you wanted to not let that happen, but you weren't fearful of it happening. I think there was one fear that never disappeared from a pilot though, and that was the fear of fire.

13:30 I think that was the thing that every pilot would have feared most of all. We all knew that if somebody came up and attacked you and shot you, you were dead, in most cases you were dead. Sometimes, probably, they might have been wounded but in the most cases dead, crash, bang, you're gone. So you didn't have any fear, you knew that was something

14:00 that you were going to have the opportunity to combat, to stop them shooting them down. But if by any chance … you see you could have been put on fire by ack-ack [anti-aircraft fire] from the ground, not even an enemy aircraft in the sky. And when we were escorting the bombers, a lot from Alamein, that's what we did, we escorted them and went each side and we used to go … and they'd just flew straight through the ack-ack, they didn't move. We weaved a bit. But the ack-ack used to, in

14:30 most cases, find us and be bursting around near us, not often you got hit with it, virtually. But I'd say that most pilots had, not only fighter pilots, I would say bomber pilots as well, was the fear of fire in the air.

Were there any … did you ever see any situations where fellows

15:00 **couldn't take it, you know, cases of LMF [Lack of Moral Fibre – cowardice] as they call it?**

Well I know one person, but I didn't know his predicament. And my theory on that, I don't think Bob Gibbs would agree with me, maybe lots of people wouldn't agree with me. But I think for a pilot

15:30 to have the courage to go to his commanding officer and say – I won't fly. I know of another one on the squadron who … this first person was put off LMF. I've got a feeling there were two or three over the time of the squadron, I'm not sure. But I know another one, and I know our Padre, Fred McKay

16:00 spoke about him. I know him very well, as a matter of fact, I think I gave him is conversion onto Kittyhawks at Abbott's Weir, and he went to Fred and told him he was frightened. And Fred spoke to him and he kept on. Now, that man must have gone through torture. And he didn't go to the CO and say I won't fly, he did the best he could and

16:30 he survived the war. But I do feel, the ones that go up and admit it, I'd never condemn them. We don't know what another man's thoughts are. I would really feel that there would be very few pilots there who would say – oh, if I get killed, I'll get killed. Nobody wanted to die. But if the fear of dying came into it, then I think you were in trouble.

17:00 But I had so much to come back to, didn't I? A beautiful girl back here waiting for me. But as I say, nobody ever spoke … and the big thing, and I spoke about this recently, I never knew a pilot on 3 Squadron in my time to go, knowing that somebody else was in trouble.

17:30 The spirit in 3 Squadron, as I'm sure it was in all of the squadrons, fighter and bomber squadrons, was that mateship in that way that they'd never leave you in trouble if they could help you. And I think that's … that was one of the things that saved a lot of people. And you know, as I say, it's … even though … we were attacked once, five

18:00 of us by fifteen [Messerschmitt] 109s and we were split up everywhere. And yet one fellow came back and he was coming back looking to see who he could find because we were everywhere. And I'll tell you story a bit later on maybe, if we get onto that thing there. But no, the question of fear, if it were there I think they handled it pretty well. And we've got to

18:30 remember too, the ground crew also had reason to be fearful. Our ground crew were strafed and bombed as were most other … we did they same to them, we did the same to them.

Leads me onto my next question, just about the relationships between aircrew and ground

crew. I mean, almost unsung heroes perhaps. Can you

19:00 **tell … I mean I assume … did the aircrew mix a lot with your ground crew?**

Well, we were broken into two flights for a start, so the ground crew in B Flight, they weren't too familiar with the pilots in C Flight. And one thing that's got to be … when you talk about relationships between them, there were some wonderful relationships

19:30 came up, that exist right till today. Unfortunately one or two of the pilot or ground crew is gone, so it's broken in that way. But ground crew, some of them were there for three or four years. They formed strong bonds between themselves. And in that time, there'd been pilots come and go. And some pilots didn't last too long and some lasted, as I did, for twelve months or more.

20:00 But you knew your fitter and your rigger. And to them, we … let me say, lesser pilots rather than the CO and the flight commanders and the older pilots, when we first got there, there was still some wonderful men there that had been there for quite a while. Danny Boardman and Keith Cooee, and they were the flight commanders and they were only sergeant pilots,

20:30 they would have been flight sergeants at the time. And they did a wonderful job and they were very, very helpful to us. But we got to know … we didn't … I'm sorry, the point I was going to make there was, virtually those people … you didn't get your own dedicated aircraft. We didn't have enough on the squadron for that, for a start. The top echelon had

21:00 their dedicated aircraft, the bottom echelon, two people might share an aircraft. I shared Beaut B for a while with Alan Raggetty. But you'd get to know the fitter, the rigger, and the armourer. The cook, of course, you got to know the first day you got there. But … and they would dedicate to you in this way, they called you 'my pilot'.

21:30 And in the conditions they worked under, their service record on our squadron, as it was on, I'm quite sure, on the other Middle Eastern squadrons, was absolutely top class. And they did everything they could to assist us in the job we had to do. And again, on our web site, Bob Gibbs has a most wonderful tribute to the ground crew, on that

22:00 web site. And it's … I think it says what each and every pilot who went there would think of them. I met a lot of them after the war that I didn't know in the squadron and we've formed very firm friendships with them.

If I can just take you back to your training days for a moment, was there any particular

22:30 **part of your training that you would say … out of … with the SFTS and the FTS that you felt best prepared you for what you were going to be doing?**

I'm trying to think of the actual meaning of the question. I can't get to it … basically,

23:00 everything prepared us for what we were doing. I think, from a point of view of safety, I think blind flying was one you would have to assimilate the information that the instructor was giving to you. And you had to apply that. I think that the rest of it, anyone can fly an aircraft, it's … the aircraft can fly itself by trimming, as I say, it's designed. I looked at that marvellous

23:30 Concorde, the other day in the sky and how could that get in the sky you'd think. But the theory of flight would tell you how it could get there. When we went from Tiger Moths to Wirraways, we looked at the Wirraway and thought, look at the size of that, how could that get in the air? Same thing when we saw a Kittyhawk, and the Kittyhawk's a heavy machine and it just gets into the air and then with you can throw it about or do what you like with it.

24:00 So, no, I think that … I still get back and I always say – the training we had … I was speaking to a fellow just recently, he absolutely disagrees with my description about discipline. He didn't consider that happened. My considered opinion is that the discipline was instilled into us and we really didn't know. And that's how

24:30 I feel, that the training that we had in Australia could be second to none and the training we had on the squadron from the senior pilots and from their eager help or whatever, we couldn't have wanted for better. At least, whether we could become a fighting ace or not, at least we could fly the aircraft, keep in formation and so the ordinary jobs like dive bombing or

25:00 strafing, they were carried out. We were told how to … how we should approach, how we should attack them. We should make sure that after our attack, you know, strafing attack, that we made sure we took the proper evasive action. So the training right through, I think, was top class.

What kind of training did they give you in relation to strafing, what were the exercises, if

25:30 **at all, that they would get you to do?**

Well we had one exercise … we didn't do it very often because once you were told how to strafe … and that was approaching the … as a matter of fact, when we were strafing from Amiriya, and before the Germans

26:00 had begun to move back … I mentioned Daba and Fuka, and Fuka was the main aerodrome for the 109 and I think there were 109s in Daba too. But Bob Gibbs used to take us and there'd be twelve of us, two sixes, and he'd take us out at nought feet, and it was all radio silence, RT [Radio Transmitter] silence. He'd take us out at nought feet over the Mediterranean. His uncanny

26:30 ability to find a target was incredible. And then we'd go up and he'd waggle his wings for us to get into line, a twelve line abreast. And obviously, there's not much you can do as far as weaving if you've got twelve aircraft lined abreast, you can't laterally move very much, and he'd take us in and we'd come up over the sand dunes straight onto Fuka aerodrome and we'd strafe the aircraft. And then once we'd got past, then we'd shoot a bit off to

27:00 different ways. And of course, we could be at different heights, some go in different heights. But coming in, approaching, we were all at the one height. And we wouldn't be right dead up against one another but that was it. But later on when we were at Tunis before we went across to Malta, we had a little bit of shadow firing which is virtually strafing a ground target. Because

27:30 one aircraft would fly along at about five or six hundred feet and cast a shadow along the ground and you'd attack that shadow. So that was further training for strafing and what ever, probably for moving targets.

And what if anything, did they, I guess, instruct you in terms of dealing with weather conditions in the desert, things like dust storms

28:00 **or anything like that, did they prepare you at all for dealing with those kinds of things?**

I don't think they could prepare you really, apart from what they've done, what they have done. As I mentioned, in that sand storm going up to Palestine, if you can't see out of the aircraft because of sand storm, well you've got to use your instruments, and you've got to try and maintain height and make sure that you're heading in the right direction until you either run out of the sand storm or

28:30 whatever. And they were never always localised, they could last for quite a while. We were at one particular place and if you left you tent, it was so severe, if you left your tent and wandered away a bit, you know, you had to find your way back. But we weren't … we'd have them, small ones here and there but they weren't

29:00 constant. But to answer your question, I think that they couldn't tell you more, you just had to rely on the training you had.

That's obviously where your blind flying came in very, very helpful.

Yeah. Same as in a storm or whatever. We didn't get very many storms as such. When we first moved up to Daba, again after the Germans had moved away, it took us, I think two days to get up there because there was constant

29:30 rain and very poor conditions. But we didn't get that very often.

Was much news of what was happening overseas coming to you while you were doing your training, did you hear much about what was going on?

In Australia? Not very much because the censorship of the letters was pretty severe.

30:00 I was censor officer on the squadron at one stage. Bobby Gibbs would give us little jobs like that, I was parachute officer another time, he would give you jobs you had to do like that. But Neen's letters would have been censored. As a matter of fact, I have a copy of the Sun, the Sydney Sun, from Monday December 8th. And that was reporting on the attack on Sydney Harbour by those

30:30 midget submarines. And Neen sent it over to me. Well you can see it afterwards, and it had so much cut out of it, and yet that paper was sold on the streets of Sydney. But the censor wouldn't allow it out of Australia without cutting, what he thought, would be the parts out of it. Yes, it's a very interesting thing. But the interesting thing too, about is, I tried to find

31:00 in that edition of the Sun in the library, but I couldn't find it. We found some with some stories about it but not … and I have those somewhere too, but not like this one, not with the same thing.

Do you know where you were when you heard the Japanese had entered the war?

We were halfway up the Indian

31:30 Ocean on the SS Corimba when … the captain used to allow one of us to go up to his cabin of a night and listen to the news and then we'd come back down and have to tell the others whatever news was on. So they didn't give out a lot of news over normal news bulletins about troop movements or happenings because, obviously, that's security. That's why I say, people down south didn't really know a lot

32:00 about what happened to Darwin. But no, we were in the middle of the ocean in that and it was … I think we were … I can't remember the exact day but that's how we heard about the midget submarine attack.

And then I got that paper from Neen and I tried to get from it a bit about it, but as you'll see, a lot of the main stuff had been cut out.

Was there

32:30 **much talk amongst the squad about the fear of the Japanese invading Australia? Was there a feeling that that would happen?**

No, I think that the majority of us and the majority of the Australian overseas in whatever theatre of war, they were. We would have loved to have been back home defending our own country. I mean, that's why Mr.

33:00 Curtin did such a wonderful thing when he brought back the troops that he needed here to help defend Australia. But also, we also knew that we were actively engaged in another theatre of war that had to be prosecuted as well. And I think that the fellows that were defending Britain, I think that they … in those times, the ties between Australia and Britain were very, very strong.

33:30 And they would have felt that they were defending their homeland, or the homeland of Australians. So I don't think there was much going on that we could have been privy to anyway.

But was there a genuine fear, do you think, that Australia was at risk by the Japanese?

Well, again we knew

34:00 that they'd been here. Before we left Australia, we personally knew that they had been up there. We had … when we learned about the Darwin bombing and knew of it, we had no idea of the breadth of the attacks by the Japanese on Australia. That they'd ranged right down the Western coast and down the Eastern coast. But we did feel that we knew that

34:30 the Australian squadrons were up there, 75, 76, 77, and whatever ever other squadron. They had boomerangs up there, there even had Wirraways as you know, in the early times. But I guess … not that we felt satisfied, I don't think we really had the time to give terribly much thought to it apart from what I'd

35:00 said, if we'd had the opportunity and they offered us to let us come home and defend Australia, we would have come back home.

When you were, I guess, getting towards the end of your training, do you remember getting the news that you were finally getting posted to the Middle East?

I can't really remember the day and the way it happened.

35:30 We were told, I think, at Sale and we were given a weeks leave. And we'd already been fully equipped, but obviously, when I knew I was going to the Middle East, I think I took my winter flying gear but I must have had to take all my gear. But I said to Neen the other day, I don't really know what happened to that flying gear.

36:00 We did have it … when we went to Mena Wing Base when we first got to Cairo area, we were … six of us were in a tent together, in what they called and EPIP tent. And Nev Austin and I had just come down from flying and we were going into the kitchen, the mess, to have something to eat, it was early morning and somebody said, "There's a tent fire." Well it turned out to be our tent. And our

36:30 tin trunk, we each had a big tin trunk, and we lost some uniforms because the heat burnt them inside. They were replaced, but whether that's where I lost my winter flying suit or not I don't know, but I never ever needed to use it so that was fortunate. I could have got another one.

Was there anything that stands out in your memory of what you did on the final weeks leave before you

37:00 **headed off to the Middle East?**

Came home and I took Neen down to a nightclub in York Street … not Romano's … and Chips Rafferty was there, and that was a bit of a thrill seeing Chips Rafferty. And that's about the only thing that stands out. Of course, apart from five, six days with Neen.

37:30 You'll cut that out, I know.

Had any other verses come to fruition at that time, of your poem to Neen?

I don't think I'd been game to play around with words then. I always loved poetry, I always read a lot of poetry, Australian poetry particularly and Neen's mother was a great lover of poetry

38:00 too. And after the war, we had a Volks [Volkswagen] mobile campervan and we took Neen's parents with us, not camping, we'd stay at motels, we took them with us for three or four holidays. And mother always wanted to be up on the front seat so she could spout poetry and we could talk about poetry. But I'd always like poetry but I don't think at that stage I'd started writing poetry.

38:30 But … I don't find it easy and I know that my poetry … somebody said, "When are you going to put that

in a book?" I think it was one of the blokes from the squadron. And I said, "Oh, it's shoved in a drawer somewhere." Well I haven't sorted it out and as I say, I'm a bit proud of the one I got in the twenty five year time capsule. I borrowed a little bit from another

39:00 poem and then embellished it and I think that it quite … I was very honoured, I think, by the fact that Air Vice Marshal Bob Treloar who is a wonderful bloke, he was CO of 3 Squadron at Williamtown and he'd become a very firm friend of many of the 3 Squadron people. And at a dining-in night that

39:30 was up there about two or three years ago, he got up to respond and he asked .. he turned and he said, "I'd like to ask Tom Russell's permission to read his poem." And I thought that was very nice. And it does say a little bit of what I felt or thought about 3 Squadron, a very short poem.

I'll have to get you to read that for us later, if you could?

Well, we'll see.

Tape 4

00:33 **Tom, I was wondering, before we actually talk about the Middle East in detail, I was wondering if you could tell me about the trip over there? You mentioned you stopped at Colombo and I was just wondering if you could tell me about that trip?**

Yes. Well, as I've said, we left Melbourne and there was quite a bit of submarine activity, German submarine activity in the Indian Ocean. As a matter of fact, after I'd come back from the war,

01:00 a friend of mine who knew that we'd gone, he heard that there'd been … he thought we'd been … a submarine had shot the ship I was in. But there was quite a bit and when … you know, just a tribute to the people of the Merchant Marine, an eight thousand ton cargo boat with a tiny gun on the front and just staffed by lascar seamen and just

01:30 travelling all over the world as though there's no problem. But we left and we went way down south, it was very, very cold and then we came back up and went back into Fremantle. And then … we were fortunate there, as a matter of fact, we met a couple of girls and one happened to be Elsie Curtin who was John Curtin's daughter and we were invited out to their home. And we went out and had an afternoon

02:00 tea there, it was quite nice. John Curtin and his wife weren't there, they were in Canberra at the time. So then we went, and as I've mentioned too, half way up we heard about the … The ship was comfortable, just getting onto that. It was a sort of central saloon with the cook's area going off it. And there were six

02:30 of us, there were two Royal Navy fellows going back to somewhere or other. There was an old fellow, a civilian, going … he told us he was trying to get to China to get a job as an engineer. And there was Ted White who was with Time Magazine. And Ted and I became a bit friendly on the trip and for many years he sent me copies

03:00 of Time Magazine. I gave him my address in Australia in case he came out to see us there, ever came out to visit us. So that was … there were ten on board and we got into Colombo Harbour, I'll call it Colombo in Ceylon because that's what it was. And they had a boom gate across the harbour and we went in there and

03:30 while we were there we had a trip up to Candy because we had had to leave the ship. And we had a trip up to Candy where there were some Australian VAD [Voluntary Aid Detachment] girls, and it's a beautiful, beautiful area. And also we had a visit by British Enso party, as entertainment party there. We had a trip out to the coast area,

04:00 a place called Mount Lavinia. And we saw the girls doing lace work out there and I bought a table cloth for Neen which she uses to this day, I sent it home from there. We went to the RAF headquarters and we told them the trouble we were in, that we'd been off loaded from the ship because he wasn't going round to Bombay. So we got first class train tickets

04:30 up through … we went up by train to a place called Trincomalee, on the north of Ceylon and then we went across to India by ferry. We had to do a passport check there because … or whatever, identity card check. And then we got on this train with about two hundred Indians up on top as you see in there, and we went up, it was very good, very entertaining. We saw a couple of parts of

05:00 India we wouldn't have seen. And we arrived in Bombay, and when we arrived in Bombay nothing was done about any accommodation. So we looked around, we picked one of the very … Green's Hotel, it was one of the very good hotels. And we went out and booked in there and we were there for about eight days, I think. And we were getting roasted because we should have gone out to the transit camp apparently.

05:30 And there were other fellows out there who were on their way to 3 Squadron as well. We eventually joined them and we all went by the SS Talma, and that was captained by a very nice Australian chap, a very small fellow, quite different to the captain on the SS Corimba. He was all right I guess, but not all right, he wasn't a friendly type.

06:00 And then we just went across and landed in Suez. And from there, as I said, we made our way to … It wasn't the … the trip on the boat, we filled our time in with reading and sun baking and we played deck quoits and I have a couple of photographs of that. And we also had the crossing of the line ceremony where we were shaved, supposedly, and dunked

06:30 in water and so forth. I have a very natural photograph of me in the dish, with nothing on of course, but quite discreet. Yeah, so the trip was … We played cards down in the … when the days were crook or at night time or read in the dining room, dining area. But the time went and

07:00 we got there, that was the main thing, we got there safely.

What books had you packed to take with you? Had you packed any books to take with you on the trip? You mentioned you were reading a lot.

Yes, but I was in a different world now. Reading a lot was in my civilian days. You didn't get very much time to read once you got into the forces, particularly when the training

07:30 was on. The books you read were training books. As a matter of fact, Bob Wardrobe, who I met overseas, he was delivering aircraft as well, and he killed himself in an accident over there, but he … we had this very good accommodation down at Wagga at the SFTS. It was a long hut with a central alleyway and single rooms off each side

08:00 of it, so we each had our own room. One end were the ablutions and the other end were the toilets. And there was to be an examination the next day, and one of the questions … one of the things I was finding a bit of a difficulty was about the [(UNCLEAR)]. And that's the thing, like on a motor boat, a motor bike, you couldn't ride a motor bike if it had it fixed,

08:30 the front wheel as to be able … the front assembly has to move up and down. And Bob came in, said hello and came in and I said, "Bob, I can't understand this blasted [(UNCLEAR)]." And we talked about it and he told me about it and it came up and I think that helped me get very good marks in the examination. But no, I think the books took a bit of a back …

09:00 because you couldn't get books in the desert anyway. And I think, with our training, there was so much else to do that your day was pretty well fully occupied. And, you know, at Wagga we'd go to the picture occasionally, a couple of nights a week maybe. Or we'd have a night out if we had leave, into the town. So reading took a backward spot then. But I got back onto it when I came back and we had a

09:30 newsagency, so we read the books we wanted to read. And we kept quite a few from there, the only book that I didn't keep that we sold, was Learn to Live with Retirement. I think I should have read that book.

You're waiting one day to retire?

Well, I told my foreman … he's told me that I told him twenty years ago I was going to retire at the end of the year. But I only do,

10:00 I'm cutting down, I am very interested in our business. And I know that some of my contemporaries think I'm crazy, but I'm not a club or a pub man for a start. We love travelling but we've travelled a lot in this country of ours particularly. And I just … I think I'm more or less doing this, I suppose, to help my son as well. He's managing the business now, but I think he depends

10:30 upon me to do an odd thing or two and be there as a support. He doesn't ask me for that and he tells me I should be doing something else. But we are planning that we're going to have … a have a couple of trips a year somewhere, for a week or so, that's all you need. And Sydney's a lovely place to see.

I was wondering if you could tell me about your impressions of the Middle East when you first

11:00 **arrived, what you thought of the place?**

Well, if you'd asked me about Ceylon, I would have said disgusting, with the beetle nut. Cairo and Egypt were obviously … seeing meat hanging outside with flies on it, it wasn't real crash hot. Cairo was quite a nice city and not bad, and fortunately for us, the New Zealanders had a club there and the Canadians had a club there.

11:30 And that's where the men went when they were in there and they could stay there and they could eat there, so we used them a lot and it wasn't bad. But we realised we were in a different type of country. And you always had to be … you were told you weren't to drink the water from the, what we called, the Sweet Water Canal. You weren't to drink water without boiling, you know, having been boiled or

12:00 whatever. So we were warned about it and we were warned about … we were told to go and see the museums to see what the diseases that were rampant in those type of countries. But it wasn't that bad, see I've always believed anyway and particularly since the war, when we were travelling, you can't go to

another country and expect them to put on Australian food for you, you've got to live

12:30 by the country's standards and by their rules, I think. But when we got into the squadron, of course, we had no … we had our own cooks and what they did was absolutely incredible with what they had available.

You mentioned having to go to the museum to see the diseases, what was that?

Well, sexually transmitted diseases. As a matter of fact, we'd had

13:00 a lecture on the boat coming over by one of the officers in charge. And that was one thing they did, apparently, to every detachment of people that went there. And they said it wouldn't be any use they telling us to be aware of these things, it would be better if we saw the results of it, and it was quite a horrifying situation. They had things in … all

13:30 different organs in glass jars and so forth. But it sure was a shock and I think you got the message through.

It's amazing. When were you … from Cairo, when were you … when did you meet up with the rest of No. 3 Squadron?

Well we went to the

14:00 wing base first. And I'm not quite sure how long we were there but my log book tells me I only did about eight flights, eight to ten flights. The first one was on a Harvard with a fellow called Flying Officer White who'd been … he'd been a Sergeant White, he'd already done his tour on the squadron, and he was back there giving us

14:30 our conversion onto that. It was used as a wing base and the other squadrons on the wing also used it. And then from there we went up to the squadron. But, as I mentioned earlier, apparently we weren't trained to the required standard on Kittyhawks that Bob Gibbs expected. And quite a few were sent back for further training,

15:00 particularly after a fellow called Ian McTaggart, a lovely big, beautifully built, big strong blonde fellow from Queensland. And he spun in and killed himself, and I think Bobby Gibbs then looked at the rest of us. And I don't know if there were any that came with that draft who weren't sent back, I only know there were a lot. And some were sent over to the west coast of Africa, as

15:30 I've mentioned, quite a ways away. But then we came back, well he considered … and he trained us on the squadron before we went into operations.

Do you remember the first time you met Bob Gibbs?

I guess he must have addressed us when we got there, but I just can't bring it to mind.

16:00 But my first impression was, how would he see out of a Kittyhawk. He's quite a small man and I said to him once – boss, how many cushions do you use? I thought he was going to court martial me or something. But he's an incredible man and he must have addressed us. But he was a very, very strict … some of the ground crew,

16:30 I think, didn't take to him very well. I think they thought that his treatment was such … but I found him to be very, not harsh, very strict, but I thought he was fair in what he had to do. Although I disagreed with him on the matter of the lacking in morale fibre, I think that he and I had different opinions on that.

Can you tell me, generally,

17:00 **just about working with him as the boss, what he was, what your relationship was like?**

Well it was just master and servant, virtually, as it was with everybody else. But I always felt comfortable, not only with him leading, but Danny Boardman, Keith Killday, Crawford

17:30 and one or two others who were the senior pilots and they … some of them were an officer and some were only sergeants. But with Bobby Gibbs in particular, his ability to find targets and his ability to keep you together … if you got jumped, if we got jumped by 109s, he had the ability to keep you, get you back together as a squadron because

18:00 in number there was strength. Once you were scattered, and the Germans had their own particular way of attacking. Since the days of our early people, like under the command of Squadron Leaders then Wing Commander Peter Jeffrey, they learned very well. After 3 Squadron had gone through Hurricanes at that time and onto Kittyhawks, Kittyhawk could out turn

18:30 a 109, it couldn't out climb, but it could out dive it too because of it's weight. But the Germans learned very quickly against Peter Jeffreys and his men, not to fight on an equal level. So they would stand up above and come down and pick you off if they could. But Bobby Gibbs knew that if we were separated and isolated we became easy pickings, whereas if we were in a group,

19:00 even turning in circles, two or three circles, they couldn't get within the circle to shoot you. It obviously succeeded on many occasions I would say, but that wasn't their normal pattern, their pattern was to stand up above and pick you off. And they normally flew in fours, where we flew in sixes at that time. Our squadron later on, after I'd left, in Italy,

19:30 they finished up flying in fours and they would have free fluid fours instead of two sixes. And I really consider, I think, that I would have preferred to fly in the fluid fours. The six became a bit cumbersome particularly for the inside people. And it gave you greater … to have three … you had three trained people leading these four

20:00 and you had a great cover and a better cover because you could step them up a bit better whereas you can only step the one six above the other six, but you had a double step up with the others, back and forward and up, sort of thing. I think that's probably how they did it, I've never discussed it.

How would Bobby keep you in formation so well, what would he do? Or

20:30 **keeping you together, you mentioned, you know, you keep your numbers together.**

I don't know because once we're attacked there was no reason for radio silence. Once the Germans attacked us we could yell out or talk or do what we'd like. And he'd see and aircraft over there, he'd say – so and so, over there, come over here or whatever. He'd get you and pick you up out of the sky and be able to tell you. I don't say he was always successful but he was very,

21:00 very good at what he did.

Must have been an amazing skill to be able to see everything …

I don't say he got us back in but he'd get us to be close enough to be closer together, I don't say get us into perfect formation. Particularly not if the 109's were lurking about up above. So I might have mislead you there, thinking that, but what I … keeping his group together even after, you know, even after you went down

21:30 to strafe, you could always get separated. It was getting you back together that was his forte I think. But he was just a good solid leader. He was the best leader I ever flew under although I can't take much away from Danny Boardman and Keith Killday. I know I'm just picking two out there, and the other boys, Garth Clavan was another one, Garth was a good leader. But they'd been trained and lead by

22:00 Gibby and by Keith and by Danny. So they … and they'd been put in positions in the formation where they … where something happened to the leader, they took over. So there was always a deputy there to take over, so they trained him in that way. But the big thing in the desert, as far as a leader was concerned, was finding the target, the correct target. And we Australians, or the Australian

22:30 blokes I flew under, they seemed to be able to find it most of the time.

What made them so effective at finding the targets, what skills were involved in that, that they …

Very simple, be an Australian. I couldn't say, I don't know if there was any different thing about it. I'm not saying the same thing didn't happen on other squadrons, but I know that one particular squadron, I won't name, that I looked up in the book the other day, I think on two occasions

23:00 they lead and we gave them top cover and they didn't find the target. So … but we generally found the target. There's no streets and no street lights or anything in the desert. There's one road that … in those days, there was one road that ran straight around the shores of the Mediterranean. If you got lost you flew north till you found the road

23:30 and then turned east and came home. That was the easy way.

So would you be, whatever you were going out … if you were going out to strafe something, would you be given co-ordinates on where to go or rough co-ordinates.

Well, we'd be taken by the leader. He was privy to that, he'd get that from Wing Headquarters and then he'd discuss it with … if there were two other squadrons going with us, sometimes you

24:00 might. Now when the marathon was on, they had multiple squadrons then. On one occasions they had four squadrons go out together and we lost five aircraft on that day, not from that one operation. But, you know, you think that forty eight Kittyhawks would be invincible, but the 109s came out with Macchi 202s and I think Münchenberg was leading.

24:30 I wasn't on that show but one of the fellows that went across in the boat with me, Bill Dean, was killed. And a fellow called Allan Tonkin, his very first operational flight, he was killed. Bobby Gibbs, I think, was shot down. We lost five from that lot, that's right, seven all told. And Norm Caldwell was

25:00 shot down and he finished up in hospital and he was still there when we moved forward and rescued him. And I just can't recall the other one but Bobby Gibbs got back, he was missing for a few days but he got back. But the other two boys were killed. You'd think, as I say, 48 was impregnable, but no, as far as getting away when you're strafing, well again, you've got all your time with getting back in.

25:30 Well again, I think I've answered that one, yeah.

How did the Kittyhawks compare as a plane to the 109s? I mean, not that you would have flown a 109 but just …

No, we did get a 109 on the squadron. We found a 109G at Garbutt. We'd been flying against Ds and Fs on the 109. But the Gs had come out and one of their most famous pilots, Johann …

26:00 I'll come back to that in a moment, you can wipe that out, can't you? Hans-Joachim Marseilles, he claimed a hundred and fifty odd aircraft destroyed in the desert, we were a bit doubtful about it and yet the fellow who was supposedly rewriting two books, Fighters Over the Desert and Fighters Over Tunisia,

26:30 said that he could justify a hundred and twenty seven of them. But we tend to think that they might have claimed aircraft shot on the ground down there. But he was to kill himself in a G, he'd already was on fire, well he did catch fire, there was a big of an oil thing and he botched getting out and he got hooked on his aircraft and he killed himself. Münchenberg, who I've mentioned before, he killed himself about six weeks

27:00 after … six or eight weeks after the job I was just telling you about. He was attacking a Spitfire belonging to an American group and he got too close, blew the Spitfire to bits and part of it fell on his own plane and he killed himself. But … what were we talking about?

I was just asking about the comparison between the Kittyhawks and the 109s.

Oh yes. Well, that's right, and I broke off there.

27:30 And Gibby wouldn't let us fly the 109, he flew it and Randall Watt flew it. And we did have another 109 earlier than that and Reg Pfeiffer, I believe, flew that one. But that one that we got from Garbutt, Ken Macleay, our engineering officer, needed a cockpit so they got a cockpit from another one. The boys

28:00 got it fixed up and they got it into flying condition and Bobby Gibbs took it up and flew it. He was then going to try and get it back to Australia some way or another as a thing for Australia. But the boffins came out from Cairo and said they wanted it for evaluation because that was the first 109G they'd seen in the desert. So Bobby Gibbs had

28:30 to fly it back down to Cairo. And because of it being a 109, for safety, he had to be escorted by a couple of Kittyhawks. Anyway, that 109 finished up over in England in a shed for thirty odd years. And a flight lieutenant, Englishman, got the idea that he'd like to restore it and I have photographs of that and I was restored, it flew.

29:00 But the first fellow that flew it, tipped it and broke the propeller and they had to have a propeller made in Germany and sent over for it. And Bobby Gibbs and Ken Macleay were invited over for the flying of it and I think Bobby sat in the cockpit again. And that went on after all the years of endeavour by those people in restoring it, some air marshal said he wanted to fly it.

29:30 It was only supposedly going to be taken to air shows, and I believe he wrote it off. So there you are.

That's great. With the being in the desert, what did you know about the German air force, had you been taught much about their tactics or their … what

30:00 **to expect?**

Not specifically, not specifically. You learn fairly quickly and I will admit on the first two or three trips, we'd come back and the experienced pilots would say – did you see those 109's somewhere or other, or did you see this or did you see that? And we new sprogs hadn't seen it, you know, we just kept in formation

30:30 because your first job was to be as a number two behind the leader and most sproggies' job was to be behind the CO, and you didn't weave, everybody else weaved. And the CO didn't weave, he just kept on his compass course that he wanted to keep on or whatever. So …

How was the discipline within

31:00 **the squadron, how was discipline maintained?**

Well, it was maintained by the various people who were there to do it, by the sergeants on the ground crew, they had quite strong discipline as well as very, very strong friendships with the men. And I think, as far as the ground crew particularly are concerned, I think the

31:30 discipline must have been marvellous because I think … probably more self imposed because they were so proud when they did a job and in the conditions. They'd have to put cloths over the aircraft sometimes because of the sand storms that we did get or dust blows or whatever. And I think it was just accepted, and of course, well, when you're a new pilot of the squadron,

32:00 goodness gracious, those ones before you, they're like heroes, they were like the really and truly the bold and the brave, you know, you were just a sprog. So, and I think you were just so keen to learn and they were so keen to tell you too. I can't remember any of those pilots, asking them a question and them not having the time to tell me, or tell us, we all got the same treatment.

32:30 What you'd do, you know, and how about this and they'd give you tips on what to do if a certain thing happens or whatever. Even to the flying of the aircraft because we had very few hours on the type in the early days. Later on I had the honour of that being happening with me, when I new bloke comes on the squadron, one or two of them, and tell me – what about this, and so on and so forth. There was very little rank

33:00 given in the squadron, I would guess that would be the same out here. All the young blokes and that, the ground crew call me Tommy, well I'd never ever got off flight lieutenant. And that's the way it was, Bobby Gibbs again, one of his things, he speaks of it as a family, and I do recommend to any body who is … if this is on the tape, eventually on the tape, I do recommend

33:30 to anybody that they do read our web site. And it's quite easy, you just put up 3 Squadron and it'll come up. To have Bobby Gibbs talk and other people and they tell you of their tales of escape, and that again, is where the discipline came in, comes in, that you were told the best way to do things from what had happened to others, the experience had come from them.

34:00 What to do … not to travel by day, travel by night and all of those things. And to be very disciplined, we had to destroy the IFF, Identification Friend and Foe, we had to destroy our parachute if we … not to leave it there. And if we thought the aircraft was in a position where there was no hope of our people salvaging it, we were told to destroy that as well. But you'd have to be very sure.

34:30 And we never ever had cause, I don't think any of our people who did force land in the desert, because the march and the German retreat was pretty swift, it was pretty quick, it kept on the go all the time. Except when we got to the Mareth Line near … that was one particular spot where the Germans had this marvellous eighty eight millimetre gun that they had, it could fire from

35:00 right over the top, it was the most amazing gun. And that took a lot of the … the New Zealanders were really trapped coming up from a place called Enfidaville, I think it was. And we had to go out and do a lot of strafing at that time against the German convoys and so forth, that were bringing up supplies for Mareth Line.

Tape 5

00:36 **Tom, I'm wondering if you could detail for us the first operation that you flew in El Alamein?**

Well, I can't detail it in any great length, but it was … the first flight that I had I carried a five hundred pound bomb and we had to go out,

01:00 obviously, we had to go out and create as much pandemonium as we could, that apparently was the idea of it. But I simply know that we went out and we went up and we were told when we were going to drop our bomb and we went down and dropped it. As a matter of fact, I thought about that a few days ago when I was looking through my log book, and I thought, gee, it was probably a bit of a dicey thing to send me out, send a bloke out on his first thing, and I thought, well,

01:30 we had been taught and trained. They taught us how they wanted us to dive bomb, so I think it was just … we followed the others a bit and took notice of that. But it was just over the … of course, by that time the Alamein push had begun the night before. And I guess I didn't, as I said before, the others would come back and say what they'd seen and I can't

02:00 remember seeing … I didn't make very much comment in my log book, I just put 'recce [reconnaissance] over the forward bases' or something of that nature.

What was the … during your operation flights generally at Alamein, what was the main aim of the air force?

Mainly, we were very much used,

02:30 as were the other squadrons, as fighter cover for the bombers. Baltimores, Mitchells and Bostons, they were going up quite considerably there at the beginning, of course, to soften the way so that our ground forces could get through. And we would usually, there'd usually be maybe … there was always one but maybe two squadrons, and along side the bombers,

03:00 on each side, we'd have three. And then another six of that twelve would be above and then maybe we might have another twelve from another squadron up above. And even though the Germans claimed that they shot down bombers, we think their claims are excessive and as far as I know, if we lost any bombers it was very, very few. But they

03:30 used to just fly straight and level right through the ack-ack, you know. And of course, we would use

dive-bombing and a lot of fighter work because the Stukas were coming over onto our fellows as well. And it was just a mixed bag of what was required to get the Germans to begin to move back. I was reading in Rommel's book about that, and he

04:00 felt that the British General or the Australian General, I'm not quite sure, I can't quite remember, had attacked the Axis forces in the wrong area. But they recovered from it, otherwise that was an opening for Rommel to come through. But, as I mentioned before I think, they were so short of supplies, they couldn't

04:30 put up their aircraft as often as they wanted to because they were short of petrol. And their ammunition was short and yet the people back in Germany, Hitler and Goering and those people, they just didn't see … as you've read in that thing there, they accused the air force there of being cowards and giving the war away. But that wasn't the case. So generally, we were there just to soften up

05:00 and to try and stop their fighter from getting to our ground forces.

Were you aware of much co-ordination between infantry and air force?

Well, the 9th divvy called us their personal air force. And I'm sure there was … I couldn't say yes or no, but I'm quite sure that when any operations were on that there was very close co-operation between the two forces.

05:30 **Can you describe one of the ops … if you were involved in one of the ops where you were protecting the 9th Div?**

I'd have to go to my logbook for that, and you don't want to interrupt you thing. I might be able to give you more information about that then. But I can't just dredge something out of it. Well, I suppose, that was still happening when we were

06:00 helping them. We'd flown up to Daba and we were on a T intersection, a T aerodrome, T shaped aerodrome, and I was number six on a line of six and we staggered back, line abreast, staggered back. And the leader apparently didn't keep straight and by the time I got my tail

06:30 up so I could see where I was going … prior to that, you format on the other man, you don't look ahead, you just look at the other aircraft you're flying on. And suddenly there was petrol drums full of sand in front of me, we used to mark the corners of the T with petrol drums, forty four gallon drums filled with sand and painted. And I just hit everything and pulled my column back and

07:00 I just wiped my under cart right off and finished up out in the bondo, as we called it. And within about three minutes the fitter and rigger had the clock out and … of course, we all like to save the clocks, and luckily I didn't catch fire and luckily I didn't have a bomb on board. And I thought that I'd be sent back for further training or whatever, but by the grace of God, Bobby Gibbs said, "Okay, you're staying,

07:30 no worries." He just wanted to know how I was.

Are there particular operations you did during that time that stand out for you?

Well, it was still a period of learning and it took a bit of learning too, to find out that we just could not chase a 109 up. And with the weight, we were firing six

08:00 point five machine guns, and if you tried to go up … not absolutely vertical, but tried to go up and you fired your guns, you just lost speed too. And the only one I can bring to mind when I was operating there, was that … this would be … we'd be a bit further up I think, it was on the last day of December, 1942. It was the last

08:30 flight by the Kittyhawks. Bobby Gibbs was up with another six, about thirty miles to the south of us, and I was in a six lead by Danny Boardman, and I was number two to one of our better pilots who had to come back with engine trouble, that left five of us. And we were attacked by fifteen 109's, Danny reported twelve but there were actually fifteen.

09:00 Well somebody reported them to Danny and he told us to climb, so we got altitude as quickly as we could. And I was attacked by two of them, they came down right through the middle of us first, split us up. I was attacked by two of them and I managed to avoid them by [(UNCLEAR)], so I spun. And I spun down from about ten thousand feet to about fifteen hundred feet and I pulled out and I was very

09:30 fortunate because the normal thing was that they would have followed you down and picked you off. So I climbed back up and I was attacked by two more, virtually head on attacks, but they must have been new pilots too because they didn't seem to have very many clues. And I got a quick shot at one and I don't know that I got any strikes on him but I thought I may have. And anyway, they went,

10:00 they disappeared and I'm on my own and I noticed up above me, about a thousand feet up above me was a 109 just looking at me, just casing me up and probably trying to get into a position to attack me. And I was watching him and obviously we were both oblivious to anybody else, if a 109 had come behind me, I would have been in trouble. But he didn't see Randall Watt

10:30 coming in behind him and Randall Watt just shot him and he just exploded. And then Randall went off

west, he'd seen another couple and he got another probable, and I was on my own and I saw another aircraft to the east of me and I thought it was a 109, I made by way over and it was Danny Boardman coming home. So I thought, well if the boss is going home, I'm going with him. And that's it. But everything had dispersed by that time. That was a bit scary.

11:00 That was the last one of 1942. And early in January, I think it was about the thirteenth, we were very happy in the morning because mail had arrived from home. And that was the day that I mentioned before, and Bob Gibbs took twelve of them out on that one

11:30 where there were forty eight Kittyhawk and we lost one … I think there were five, as I said, lost on that one. And then later in the afternoon there was a bit of sand dust around, a bit of a dust storm around, and only seven of us got off. And then one had to … the bloke who was leading us, Garth Clement, had to come back. … It wasn't Garth Clement but I can't remember … Rex

12:00 Bailey took over from him and there were four 109's around and I saw one getting onto Nev Austin's tail and I was making my way over to try and help him and I wasn't … Rex got there before me and I think the 109 might have been keeping his eye on me as well as trying to tail Nev and Rex shot him down, but in the meantime the 109 had shot Nev Austin down. And that was one of the boys who had gone away with me

12:30 on the boat, on the boat trip from Australia, so that was two of them on the one day, Nev Austin and Bill Dean, shot down on the one day and killed. But there were hairy ones … percentage wise there wasn't … you didn't go out and have a dogfight every day. I think in the First World War you probably would have done that because they were so close to each other and so forth, but

13:00 it was a different war altogether. But there was always something to be done, some strafing or dive bombing. Dive bombing later on became the main job for 3 Squadron, when they were in Italy.

How close would you … I mean, in some of the dog fights you were describing, how close would you actually get to other planes?

As close as you could. The good

13:30 shooters, men who were really good, good shooters, they would harmonise their guns, probably at about a hundred and fifty yards or something like that. Whereas we'd harmonise ours at about two hundred and fifty. But one of the things about aerial combat I wasn't happy with, was I didn't really like tracer bullets. I seemed to think that they gave me a wrong impression of where my

14:00 bullets were going, but we used them. Except when I was strafing, I wouldn't use tracer, I got the armourer to put armour piecing in or something like that.

Can you describe for me, for the record, how the tracer bullets worked?

No. I only know that their trajectory seemed to be different to the others, or that's how it seemed to me.

14:30 And I might be absolutely wrong in my summation of it, people might say that – I reckon the tracer really helped me to shooting. But I would say that I wasn't a crash hot air to air gunman, shot. Although I got good reports from the school that I went through. But I would say, I could have been better. Air to ground I felt I was pretty good,

15:00 but air to air I would say I could have been better.

But in you experience with the tracers it was just that the trajectory would fall away?

Well, it seemed to give me a misconception and maybe I was aiming my bullets in the wrong position or something. But as I say, I couldn't be explicit on it because it was just something that seemed to me to be at the time.

15:30 As I say, other people … and that's something I could probably as Bobby Gibbs about, what he thought of them but other people now like Nicky Barr who was a terrific shot and Garth Neil was a very good shot, he didn't last long, Garth. But I think those fellows, they'd know where every bullet was going. And people like that, Hans-Joachim Marseilles, he shot down six aircraft … wait

16:00 there, he was supposed to have shot seventeen down on one day, but on one operation, I think it was either four or six, and he used about twenty rounds of cannon and thirty, forty rounds of machine gun for six aircraft. They say he was the most incredible shot. So it's either a gift or you've got to really work at it. And you wouldn't get too many people surging around letting you practise shooting them down, would you?

16:30 **You were talking before about how important it was for everyone in the squad to be together and remain together and think like a team. Were there any pilots that you saw or that you were working with that would sort of break**

17:00 **that or try and go out on their own a bit more?**

The only man, and I must say I probably only flew one operation when he was on it and I didn't see him do it then, but I believe, and I won't say his name, I believe that that was his problem, he was a brilliant

pilot, I believe, and he was …

17:30 no, he was still there for a while after I started, I'm sure I flew once with him … but he tended to leave the formation and make his own decision about going down to try to pick a 109 off rather than wait to be told by the CO or the commanding officer or the flight leader to tell him to go down. That's my understanding of it. I can't say that

18:00 I know of too many in the time that I flew that left the formation without authority and thought that they could do it on their own. Once the formation broke up you were entitled to … if there was still enemy aircraft in the area, well it was every man for himself, so you made your own decision then.

18:30 **Were there ever any incidents of … I mean, in a dogfight like that one where there's a lot of planes in the air, were there any incidents of collisions and things?**

Yes, one very upsetting one because I saw it. Johnny Upward was our pilot and he and a 109 made a head on attack on each other and neither of them broke off.

19:00 And that was very upsetting to me, he was a lovely bloke, and to see that happen, you know, it was a bit distressing. I mean, if a fellow gets shot down and he's doing that well you'd come back and the blokes would say, "Oh, Billy bought it." And you know, more or less joking, "He bought it." "Did he buy it?" "Oh, yeah, he bought it all right." But in a thing like that,

19:30 they become a bit more sombre about it because it was one of those things that should never have happened. We feel, we were taught in practice head-ons, we had to break off at a certain distance, and we'd break to the right. And some people might have broken to the left but we broke to the right and they didn't break. And you would think they'd had training enough to know … see, when two aircraft are coming

20:00 together at such a speed it doesn't take long to close the gap.

What would it be like, coming back to base after a fight like that when … I mean, would you always know ahead of time who had survived and who hadn't or would you have to wait.

Not always. Sometimes … now, in

20:30 that fight that I told you about, Bob Gibbs and the forty eight Kittyhawks … see, Bob had gone missing but Ted Hanky … I'm thinking whether it was on that flight or whether it was on the flight that I was on … but we thought Ted Hanky had gone missing, but he'd landed in another aerodrome and refuelled, apparently or what ever,

21:00 and then he came back from there. But usually you'd find the ground crew out waiting and counting the aircraft back and when there wasn't enough then they'd look around to find out who was missing I guess.

Did any of the pilots ever hang back with the ground crew to see who had come back or not?

The pilots who hadn't been on the operation or the ones that were coming down?

Both.

No, well the ones that were coming down normally

21:30 had to go straight to the intelligence officer's tent and make your report on anything you'd seen or whatever. So no, they weren't there first off, I think. And the word soon got around. I mean, if we were all coming back virtually together or … it wouldn't be that long distance of time before we were all back down on the ground. But it soon was shown. And then of course, you didn't know unless somebody

22:00 had actually seen him, unless he'd been hit while we were strafing or whatever, or got into a fight where nobody else saw him, there was always still the possibility that he'd come back. And there was so many tales or the pilots who were shot down … Nicky Barr came back dressed as an Arab and sitting on a donkey's back. And there's tales like that and so many tales.

22:30 They couldn't always get a message back to base to let them know, let us know they were all right. And suddenly, like Nicky, one day he just came into … came back into the aerodrome. I wasn't there then, he was before my time. But he became a POW, taken prisoner, and they had him on a train, I think, going up to Germany

23:00 [(UNCLEAR)] from Italy and he escaped and because he was fair … he lived in the top, in the Milan area for quite a while in that area and then he picked up, I think, with an American unit and he was telling us one night at one of our reunions about when he was getting back. He saw the CV aircraft, now this was in Italy after I'd left, and he got

23:30 back but all the way back he kept his eyes out and troop movements or whatever, and when he got back they gave him, the army gave him a Military Cross, which is unusual. I think there were only six awarded to airmen in the whole war.

You flew both Kittyhawks and Tomahawks?

Yeah well Tomahawks … the Tomahawks were virtually …

24:00 I don't think I flew a Tomahawk in action. But we were getting the early model Kittyhawks with the Alison engine, but I flew Tomahawks taking them back to a depot or to one of the South African squadrons, they were giving them over to them.

I was just wondering, as a pilot, how the two planes compared?

I couldn't tell you

24:30 that. Earlier pilots, in Peter Jeffery's day, they started on Tomahawks and then they went onto … they were on Hurricanes first then onto Tomahawks then onto Kittyhawks. They would be able to evaluate them I think.

That's fair enough. With the

25:00 **battles you were involved with, with the 109s, were there any particular tactics you came to learn that the Germans used on a regular basis that you had to watch out for?**

Well they always attacked out of the sun. Very, very rarely did they come in from not being in the sun. And of course, that's where the saying came from – beware of the Hun in the sun. And that was … and they usually flew in either two … if their …

25:30 now the day that Münchenberg was killed, he just took a fellow called Strassen with him. And they just went out for a bit of a dry … a fly around and in his words – to see if there's anything to shoot down. But normally they went in fours. And there was always the ace and the others were called his wing men. And from what

26:00 I read about it in different books about the Germans and that, they didn't care if they didn't shoot an aircraft down so long as their Ace shot it down. Their Ace was the top man, he was to be given every opportunity to do the destroying. But if … I mean, they wouldn't let him come down on his own if he was coming down to have a go at say six aircraft, he

26:30 knew he was there but if there was a straggler, he would come down and try and pick the straggler off. Maybe a straggler in a turn about that didn't turn quickly enough and was left a fair way behind, then they'd come down and they'd pick him off then.

Can you tell us about the … before you mentioned … actually it was

27:00 **probably in the fight with Münchenberg, where your Kittyhawk got shot up a little bit and you ended up with a bit of shrapnel in your shoulder, can you tell us about that?**

Yeah. I didn't actually fire a shot. My recollection of it is, and I differ a little bit from Alan Raggety in this, Alan only saw three aircraft, he reported three aircraft, I saw four. And

27:30 he called a turn about and we turned, Alan said that he was left on his own. Now memory's so … it's a long time ago and I'm not going to be pedantic about what happened. But I saw his aircraft get hit and flame, and the next thing I know, I got hit. So Münchenberg either

28:00 did it in the one attack or he was very quick, down again, for me. And maybe the others were a bit separated but it seemed to me they were all there because I immediately got help from … they all knew I was in trouble and I was probably giving off a little black smoke. I was very fortunate because he attacked me from the rear quarter and he shot my cockpit to bits and

28:30 he hit the perspex and the glass and the bullet shattered on the side, I think, of the window and that shrapnel went into my left arm. It wasn't a bad, bad wound. And I realised I had no RT, I had no … the aircraft hit me in the port main frame a little bit too. With luck, I think he hadn't used a cannon, I think he'd used …

29:00 if he had used a cannon and hit me in the cockpit, like he did, I think I would have just … it would have just fallen apart. But he probably used a cannon on Alan and then used his machine guns on me. And I found the aircraft handled very well but I had no radio and I had no instruments.

29:30 So David Ritchie who was leading our six and I think it was Murray Knox was the third one and another boy, I'll think of his name in a moment, Rod McKenzie. Rod formed on me first and I formatted on him, because you don't used your instruments, you don't need it, you just keep yourself there. And those three brought me back to base.

30:00 And the other fellow who had taken over as commanding officer at the time, Bobby Gibbs was shot down again and he got back later, and Randall Watt, and Randall had wanted us to turn around and chase these 109s westward. We were already and hour and forty minutes inside their territory. And I just said to myself, I'm going home. And the other two got around me and

30:30 when we got back to the aerodrome, Rod brought me in, and I formatted onto him, he didn't land but he just formatted on me or he let me format on him right down close to the ground and I just landed and he went around and came back and landed, went around again and came back and landed. So … a lot of

things. Unless you've got a document … see, Alan would have come back, well wouldn't have come back, but at the first opportunity he would have written it down

31:00 and that was his memory. But it happened so quickly it's not always easy to see and I sometimes think that the one that you don't see it the one that shoots you down, that's generally the case, if you don't see an aircraft. And Alan only reporting three might have been the problem. But Alan Raggety and I have been very, very

31:30 firm friends ever since we met. We never miss ringing each other for our birthdays, he lives up in Queensland and we shared an aircraft and we shared a tent and I wouldn't dare say that my version was correct and Alan's wasn't. But I think I'm entitled to my version and he's entitled to his. But, you know, there's no real big deal in it, what happened,

32:00 happened. And I think Alan felt that he was left on his own and it was also caused a bit by the fact that Münchenberg said that Alan was lagging. Now that might lend a bit of weight to the fact that he thought that we hadn't turned about with him. But, again, I don't know. So I think that got to him and one thing, it's in

32:30 Bobby Gibbs book. That Alan's always been cranky about the fact that he was said to be lagging and also maybe he felt we hadn't supported him as much as he did. But I can only report what I said before, I've never known any pilot with whom I flew, in any circumstances, that didn't pull his full weight and would never ever leave

33:00 his friends. But it happened in this case, with Alan, he feels and it's not going to make any difference, it's over and done. And I told him he went to the holiday camp which was a POW and he didn't think that was right either. Just a little skip about him there too, I asked him about the days of prisoner of war and about the great escape and did he take a part in it

33:30 and he said, well obviously he put his name down for it but he was balloted out, they only were going to take so many. But he … and I've got a diagram in there from the book that shows the lay out of the camp, and his job, apparently, was to stand near a garbage bin and when he saw somebody somewhere else do a signal, he had to lift the tin lid

34:00 and put something in it, and that was his part in the great escape. But, you know, they had to have a lot of them like that to keep the security of it going. Anyway …

Can you tell me what conditions were like back at base?

When you say – back at base?

Back at base for most of your ops.

When we came back? Just our own base?

Yeah, your own …

Not back in Cairo?

No,

34:30 **no, no, no.**

In what way do you mean? Conditions of living?

Yeah, conditions of living.

Well the ground crew always took our tents forward and they were erected for us, we would help if we were there. And they always knew whose gear was where and they always went into our tents. And the first thing they did was set up and … cooking there and there was always something there.

35:00 And I think of Jackie Morrison, one of our wonderful cooks. Early morning shows, as we were going up the desert particularly, we were going to take off at dawn or pre dawn, he'd always have the oil blower there and boiling up the billy and we'd either have some soup or a cup of tea. So I consider, I really consider that our conditions were very good for the way we were. They couldn't have

35:30 five star accommodation and the tents were good and everything was always clean and we had plenty of bed clothing and so forth. And the food was as good as the men, they could only deal with what they had to deal with, unless we happened to find a stray sheep or something, they'd get onto that but that was few and far between. But no, I think the conditions … and I think that would

36:00 apply on all the other stations. We weren't so much different to everybody else. We of course thought we were probably better, I guess, but so the other squadrons thought the same. But there were some very famous pilots on the other squadrons of the Wing. We had five very good squadrons at one stage. The Wing started with two squadrons, 112 and 3 and then we had 250, 260 and 450 came. 450,

36:30 I think, came before the others. But I think that by and large, if you're going to be in an area like that and live in an area like that, you've got to realise that it's not going to be a silver service. But I still feel that for our stewards and our cooks and our ground crew of all musterings, we couldn't have had a

better effort from anyone.

37:00 **I think … you mentioned that you'd all get together in tents or mess perhaps after an operation and sort of chat about it. What kind of stories would you swap or would you chat about?**

Well it all depends what happened on the operation. See, one thing … one operation in particular, we all had

37:30 a great laugh about and it was talked about for days and as a matter of fact it got Arthur Dawkins onto our web site. And I've got a feeling it was when the [(UNCLEAR)] was on and we were doing a fair bit of strafing and squadrons would go out one after another. It's strange too, on this particular day we'd gone out and done ours and I think it was 260 … we didn't get

38:00 any loses, and 260 went out and they lost two or three or four pilots or something. But strung out deep, they were bringing these supplies up and there was a lot of motor transport. I think from memory, we destroyed about twenty of them. And we'd get down fairly low to try and alter their line of fire and that … we wouldn't dare be down really

38:30 low but down enough to get over the top of the trucks and so forth. And Arthur hit this truck and it exploded and when he came back, he had some sort of a cloth, I think like a towel or something, on it Peeto head, that's the one of the side that tells you what you … how it didn't do it … it mustn't have been over the front of it because that's how you get your air speed, through that. And

39:00 the front of the … there's a big scoop in the front of a Kittyhawk and it had packets of razor blades in it. So it must have been a supply wagon going up with goods and chattels for the boys. So that's one, so we talked about that quite a bit. But generally, we'd always … it didn't matter what it was, and usually, and particularly in the first three months or so, before the older ones began to

39:30 drift off and be relieved from there … some of them stayed, one or two of them, three or four, stayed right up till I left. But they'd been away and come back, I think, some of them. But they'd come back and you'd just listen and say … and unless you had something to put in, I just wouldn't say … in the intelligence officer's tent, I didn't have much input at all because

40:00 if somebody else reported it, it was no good going over and saying it again. But occasionally I would say – well I saw four 109s there. And somebody else said, "Yes, but they didn't attack us, sort of thing, they were way over." And sometimes you didn't know whether they actually saw you or had some other job in mind they were going to. But yes, there was usually plenty of chatter about it. And you get characters like Keith Killroy …

40:30 another facet of it, Keith Killroy and Rex Bailey was out and apparently Keith had come back and they'd got separated and Rex had got left with two 109s, or they'd found him. And he was having a bit of a bad time. And this Keith Killroy, you know, he had a terrific sense of humour, he was a wonderful man in the air and a wonderful man on the ground, he and Danny, they kept our morale up so

41:00 much, they really did. He got on the blower and he called out – is that you Red Four or Red Two, he said, "Is that you Red Two, have you had it yet?" And I believe Bailey really let the expletives come out, no doubt about it. But it had to be … it couldn't be doom and gloom. You know, when we lost people,

41:30 we couldn't just sit around and talk. And as a matter of fact, the first thing that a lot of them did was go up and find out how many shirts he had spare that they could get because they knew that they weren't going to send his shorts and singlets and under cloths home, they could go up and renew their own supply. And that was a done thing. Personal things they didn't take, watches and things like that, were never ever taken.

Tape 6

00:32 **Tom, you've explained … you've mentioned a couple of times about claiming an aircraft that's been downed, I'm just wondering if you could tell me the process of how a pilot would claim that they had shot down an aircraft?**

Well, from our point of view, from the British point of view … I'm not sure about the Americans, I think they probably were a bit loose in their claims too. When I say 'too' I mean as well as

01:00 the Germans. We feel that the Germans … well Münchenberg had claimed a hundred and fifteen, I think, before he came from the theatre, the European theatre and so forth. But we've got to remember, those boys were flying and going for a long, long time before they came out of the desert and, you know, they probably started … when they began to invade the other countries and that, they counted

01:30 all those as well. So it was fairly strict, if you wanted … you could claim a probable and probably get it allocated to you. Or a damaged and maybe get it allocated to you. But to claim a confirmed aircraft, it had to be verified by one of your squad that was there with you or

02:00 by one of our ground forces or, as in the case of when that retreat was on, if the aircraft could be found at the spot where you say you shot it down, then they would allot it to you. If nobody in your squadron could verify it and nobody in our ground forces could verify it, you weren't allotted that one

02:30 unless they found the aircraft. Again, I've mentioned Bobby Gibbs quite a bit but Bobby Gibbs was a man who flew two tours of operations straight on and so he'd been in a lot of incidents and whatever, and he claimed ten and a quarter aircraft and I think Nicky Bailey was twelve and a half. And you probably know the reason for the halves and the quarters, when

03:00 three or four of you shoot at one aircraft and you don't know who actually shot it down. But he told me just recently that two of the aircraft he'd claimed as, I think, probable, a couple of fellows researching in England have said to him that they believe that he should claim them as destroyed. Now, I've spoken … when I was speaking to him I said, "Well Bobby,

03:30 are they an authoritative research or what?" He said, "I don't know, I don't think so." I said, "Well, if they feel that they've got that and they can claim that, they should be able to find somebody that they can verify it with, but otherwise you can't claim it." So that was about the only … that was the way of claiming in our one. Now, it's quite obviously that they were very different

04:00 because Münchenberg claimed me as his hundred and twenty sixth. Now, he must have thought he damaged my aircraft sufficiently that I wouldn't get home. But I can't recall that I was … I may have blown a little smoke, I don't think so. Unless the … if the aircraft was smoking very, very badly, you say, "Well he's got engine trouble, I've hit him in the engine, he's not going to get home." I don't think then you could claim

04:30 it as destroyed, you probably … unless you see it hit the ground, you can't claim it unless, again as I say, you find the aircraft later on. But I think the Germans, obviously, they were a little bit lax in their claims. There was not doubt about Alan Raggety, he shot the aircraft down. But with me, well he made a mistake, he just thought I wouldn't get back.

Can you tell me about that incident with Münchenberg

05:00 **and the … when he thought he'd hit …**

Well I just … on the last tape I thought I spoke a fair bit about that. Yeah, but there's not very much … see, we were being lead by Randal Watt and just a little aside on that too, he was the fourth pilot, he got killed later on after that day when three of the pilots were

05:30 killed. Nev Austin, Bill Dean and Alan Tonkin. And about some weeks later Randall Watt was killed and he was the fourth son of a mother to be killed in war, yeah. But he was a permanent air force bloke and he was apparently a very, very good pilot. But I don't think that he had the desert experience.

06:00 I'm not saying he didn't lead us okay but I think there would have been plenty of pilots on the squadron who would have had more experience than he had. But obviously we were so far inside their territory and he still felt like chasing them, well we would never have caught them for a start. They would only just had to go up in the air and they didn't even have to go distance, they only had to … we could never have caught them

06:30 going upwards. So … and that was all, it was just … it was so quick, we were giving top cover to 450 and after Alan was shot down … we couldn't go down … two German recovery vehicles were coming out, we couldn't go down and strafe them because Alan was in a parachute and we knew they'd just shoot him if anything did that. But one of the 450

07:00 fellows went down and dropped a water bottle for him. And Alan got a little bit injured in the landing I think, and he finished up in hospital, not for long. And then he went to Stalag Luft 3 [prisoner of war camp] for the rest of the war.

Can you tell me about the … you hear from people in New Guinea, there was a real hatred of the Japanese, I wonder, what was the feeling like toward the Germans within your

07:30 **squadron?**

No hatred. I can understand the feeling with the Japanese, I can understand, because they invaded our country or they'd attacked our country and I suppose that's hatred in knowing … they probably knew by then too that they were like kamikaze people, they didn't … it's just like the terrorists we're fighting now, they don't care about life, they don't have to live. But I only know

08:00 of one man who absolutely hated Germans, he was an Englishman. But I never ever … you might have a … you might hear of somebody if they shot somebody down or did something – oh you B die or something. But that's only showmanship I think, I don't think it was meant in any way … And I think the Germans fought an honourable war as far as I'm concerned. And again, from what I read and so forth

08:30 and their way, although I read that one of our blokes said he was strafed by a 109, I never knew that that would happen. And we certainly wouldn't strafe a man once he's been shot down and gets out of his aircraft. But as I say, they seemed so … to me, they seemed just like us, they were just ordinary

people. But we had a wing commander

09:00 came to us, took over our wing, Wing Commander Burton, he was from the RAF. And I think it was in the Crystal Palace Dance Hall in London, his wife was dancing with him and she was killed in his arms from an air attack, a bomb attack or something. And there was one other man, I can't remember, it was a very similar occasion, but he hated them. And when Alan Raggety,

09:30 on that time I told you about that … when the 109 was watching me and Randall Watt shot him down, Alan was with the other … no, Alan was with us, I'm sorry and Alan shot down one of those 109s, Danny Boardman shot one down and Randall Watt shot one down. And the pilot, the one that Alan shot down, parachuted

10:00 and he landed in our own lines and was taken POW. And Alan went over to visit him. Well he went to the wing commander as well and said he knew he was there, could he have him over to talk to him, have him over to our mess. And Burton absolutely roasted him and said, "Why didn't you shoot him?" So he really hated them. And I can understand that a bit there.

10:30 But I don't think that … I think the average Englishman would have had a vastly different feeling towards the Germans than we did because, I mean, their home had been destroyed. Neen had a pen pal from Coventry and her whole family … school time pen friend … and her whole family was absolutely wiped out. So, I mean, the hatred's got to be there.

11:00 But I can't say that … I don't know, I couldn't speak for the ground forces, I don't know, that's a question that they could be asked and they'd be able to answer. I think every one … I think I could say for absolute certainty that everyone, ground crew and ground people, our army people and everything, we all had great respect and admiration

11:30 for Rommel. And it's strange and that's been written too in a similar way that it's so strange that a General of the opposing team is so well respected by the ordinary person. But he fought according to the law too. But his job was to kill Australians and Englishmen and New Zealanders and Canadians and what ever, that was his job.

12:00 **While you were based in the Middle East, how often would you be flying operational flights and how often would you have time off?**

Well it all depends, sometimes you could go a week without flying but you'd still fly and do something. But once … we flew more often when we were advancing because we were chasing them. Sometimes we might do three trips a day and other times we might only do

12:30 one trip in two days. It all depended, you know, and it all depended on our pilot strength. When we lost seven aircraft in the one day in that time, well obviously the rest of us had to fly a bit more. So it's hard to tell, it wasn't a roster system. Sometime you might fly three times in one day and another day, as I say, the others all fly and you don't fly, so it all depends. And maybe …

13:00 I've never ever really thought of this or thought that it's absolutely not on, but there may well have been too, in the selection of pilots for different jobs, that the commanding officer might have felt that he wanted certain people, he might have felt they were better at that job. That's another thing I'll ask Bobby Gibbs because that would be an interesting thing. He might have thought that, for instance, ground

13:30 strafing, he might have thought that he had four pilots who were absolutely tops at that and he'd want them on the ground strafing run. So instead of using them on a fighter patrol he might put up there the people he thought were much, much better at air to air. Again I say that it might not have happened, but I certainly will ask Bobby Gibbs about that, about selection of people for jobs, that's quite an interesting point.

What was

14:00 **the majority of your operational flying?**

It was a mixture, I had a real mix, I did everything. I suppose Bobby thought, even if the pilots who weren't terribly good at air to air might get suddenly lucky. But no, we all more or less shared. As I say, that other thing I mentioned about selection of pilots for certain jobs, that might only be a supposition. I'm not saying

14:30 it happened but it's a question I will ask him. But as with mine, looking in my log book, I did whatever job was on. Sometimes we just had a fighter sweep over the front lines to make sure … to protect our troops. That was our … one of our main, main jobs was to protect the troops, protect the ground … And that's why we have invites to 9th divvy

15:00 reunions. They considered us their air force, their own personal air force. That's quite a compliment, I think.

It shows you obviously made quite a significant contribution to their ….

Well they must have thought that what we did … and again I say, I think that that might have been … I

think they probably should have extended that to the rest of the Wing because we all did the same work. I still think

15:30 3 Squadron was the best squadron there but I'm not going to knock the other squadrons because of that because they all did whatever work they had to do, they did. And they had some wonderful commanders, Clive Caldwell was commander of 112 Squadron. And you know, even the South African squadron, they did their job that they had to do. And then we had No. 6 Squadron, which was a Hurricane squadron, an Australian squadron.

16:00 Australian Squadron? I might be wrong, I'll just say a squadron. And we had fellows who flew in that and they were called Tank Busters or Hurry Busters they'd call them. And they'd go out … they lost a lot of pilots, they'd go out and fire cannon shells at tanks. And I mean, to do that and hit the tank you've got to be down on their level nearly, so it was a dicey, dicey game.

16:30 I'd rather have been doing what we were doing.

What was the casualty rate in your unit like?

We lost a few. Again, I have a casualty list of who was there and I suppose I could go through the book and say – well he went down in that time. But we actually lost … I think we …

17:00 and I'm not sure of this either. But by the time we got to Italy, the air opposition was very light, virtually nil. So the squadron was … and they stayed on Kittyhawks for quite a while and then they got onto the Mustang which was a much better equipped aircraft for strafing and dive bombing. And that was principally

17:30 their role. But going down into valleys to strafe, a lot of them were hit by anti aircraft fire, ground fire, and they lost quite a few pilots. That's another interesting thing I feel too, that to find out the loss per operations in the desert and in Italy.

How often

18:00 **would you be encountering anti aircraft fire?**

It was usually … anti aircraft fire was usually based, in the desert, was usually based near aerodromes or ammunition depots or maybe near roads where different protective areas or things. You wouldn't … see, we'd get too high for it anyway, but if we were

18:30 escorting bombers, we might only fly at about six or eight thousand feet, ten thousand feet at the top. But if we were up going out for a fighter sweep, we might finish up at about fifteen thousand feet for a while till we got near where we were going to go. Or dive-bombing, we'd get up a bit higher till we got where we were going, then come down. So you'd be out of range of it, I would think.

Can you … you've mentioned

19:00 **strafing operations a couple of times, I was just wondering if you could tell me about a couple of the operations you'd been on doing ground strafing?**

There's none that stick in my mind as … obviously, if I had have been injured … if my aircraft had been hit in one or something of that nature. The only thing I can say that happened in one stage, not to me,

19:30 but we were with 450 [Squadron] and we were both strafing this road going up towards the Mareth Line, and a young bloke from 450, an aircraft, I saw him attacked and hit by two 109s and of course we were all a bit over the place, all over the place at that time and I made my way over but they'd gone. And so I could see that he was in a bit of difficulties so

20:00 I let him format on me and brought him home. But whether … he seemed to be all right and he landed all right. But strafing operations were usually pretty straightforward. I mean, it was a bit dicey going across the aerodromes because they had pretty good aerodrome defence. But we did destroy a fair few aircraft on the ground. And again, the strafing the motorised columns,

20:30 the danger there was that they obviously would be hiding on the other side of the truck and they'd be able to fire on you as you went, and you had the danger of being hit from that source. They wouldn't be sitting firing towards you as you came in I wouldn't think because they would be a fairly sitting duck themselves.

How close would you be to the target when you were firing?

21:00 We'd probably pass over them at about forty feet above them maybe. We'd come in, we wouldn't come down in a vertical dive or an angular dive, what we'd do was get down on the deck a bit, down lower and get, you know, down as low as we possibly thought we could. And you were best to strafe coming in

21:30 at a bit of a level like that. That's not say that we didn't on occasions strafe with an angle dive, but it would never be a steep angle dive. That would obviously give them plenty of time to get a line up on you. You had to try and make their time of lining up, even for the ones that stayed in front to fire at you.

You described strafing operations before as the unpleasant jobs …

22:00 No, strafing of troops, yeah. That's the unpleasant job.

Were there times when you had to do that?

Yes, we were called on.

Can you describe one of those operations?

Well, I think you want to be in and out as quick as you can. I can't say I ever saw … and when I say guns … you'd be strafing gun emplacements knowing there're men in there

22:30 and obviously if there's gun emplacements and they're near the troops, the troops could be in the slip trench. But no, it wasn't a general thing but obviously if there was a gun emplacement down and troops there, they'd have a section of our ground forces tied up, well they had to either bomb them or strafe them, and probably

23:00 we did both at the time.

I've read that airmen generally, doing strafing operations, they do … I've heard it described that often all they can think about is the Australian lives they were protecting by destroying those placements or …

Well I can't say that that occurred to me but everything you did was

23:30 aimed at protecting our forces. I mean, we didn't just go out there … if our squadron went out and destroyed three 109s, well that was three 109s that couldn't fly. Or Stukas particularly … before I went into operations, our squadron had great success with Stukas. Now the Stukas were an absolutely incredible aircraft, they could dive almost vertically and

24:00 they were causing havoc. But if our blokes could get to them and stop them going, well obviously they're not going to be able to perform. And as I say again, at Alamein it was proved … obviously it became evident as we began to move forward, that the Germans just didn't have the air strength that they had. They managed …

24:30 of course, they had Macchi 202s, they had the Italians but when the Italians capitulated the Germans were on their own and by that time, of course, we were a fair way up the desert.

Did you ever come across any Italian airmen? Did you ever have any encounters with the Italians?

Only the steward waiting on me when I was at Abbots Weir. The Italians were

25:00 good stewards, good waiters and they had POW on their shoulder slash and they used to … out of old propeller blades, they used to make dog tag things or bracelets and they'd sell them to you and so forth. But on the day … I was there when Italy capitulated and the very next day they came out with Italy

25:30 on their shoulders, because then they'd become our allies.

You mentioned that after you left the Middle East you headed to Malta.

Yes. We flew across … we were … most people thought that the second front would be opening up through Sicily and 451 [Squadron] had gone over through Sardinia

26:00 and we were to go via Malta. They didn't take all of our ground crew, they only took half the crew to look after us. But all the aircraft went across to Malta. And then from there we did targets over in Sicily. And then when they'd moved forward, our ground crew went across straight from

26:30 Africa to Sicily. And we flew across to a place called Pachino, which was the first one.

You mentioned that you were doing … you did eight operational flights in nine days in Malta, I was just wondering what those were?

Well, they were mostly … we were dive bombing shipping in Catania Harbour and we were also attacking other targets up

27:00 around Mount Etna and various things but without my log book it's a bit hard to recall. I got trouble with my hydraulic system from one of the flights coming back and I actually ran off the end of the runway. They had five runways down that little island and it was very dicey coming in to land, you had to watch the other circuits

27:30 and each of them seemed to have a dip at the end of it. And there's actually a bomber aircraft went off the end of one of them there and I think the gunner was probably killed, the rear gunner. But that was our base to attack it but apparently they moved up more quickly from the bottom of Sicily. The Germans moved more quickly, so we were able to go over much more quickly

28:00 too.

The incident where you run off the runway, can you describe just what happened?

I just couldn't stop, I had no hydraulics and I had no brakes and I couldn't stop. And I just did what I could, I had plenty of flap down coming in to land and I left the flap down of course, and that helped a bit. But … it wasn't bad, I didn't go crashing over, but I went over

28:30 and I don't think I even wrote the aircraft off.

Well that's good.

I didn't get into trouble for it. Reggie Stevens, our … was CO at the time because … although Brian Eden … Bobby Gibbs would have absolutely raved at me I think, but Brian Eden was a different man too, he was a man that took over. I didn't actually fly under Brian Eden, but Reg Stevens

29:00 had taken over as commander of the station, of the squadron while Brian was back in hospital. So Reg didn't say anything and I think I was a bit friendly with him. He went from warrant officer to squadron leader within about four days when they needed somebody. But he was a very good pilot and a very good squadron member.

29:30 **Going back to going off the end of the runway, what would your closest call have been in an aircraft while you were flying to something very bad happening?**

Well I can't think of anything worse than the drum incident. Although, if we'd have been carrying a bomb I would have just disappeared.

30:00 And I was lucky enough to be high enough, I hit the booster with everything I could and pulled my control column back and it was just about … if I said it was doing a hundred and twenty miles an hour, that would be somewhere in that vicinity I think, but it was going fast enough and you had to be doing a fair rate of knots to … or miles per hour to get your tail up, so it just needed that extra bit to

30:30 try to get it off the ground and I was fortunate to do that, and I wiped the under cart off. But I do feel that the Münchenberg, that was the only time that I was hit by an enemy aircraft. And I was hit ack-ack two or three times but we were up fairly high and it was just little … not big damage, not great damage. But

31:00 Münchenberg, fortunately behind us we had very thick armour plating and I think that saved me. And I think if he'd used a cannon on me instead of a machine gun I'd have been gone, I don't think I would have been able to get out. And if he'd been a little bit more forward on the side, rather than a rear quarter one, I think he could have actually shot me,

31:30 he'd have got me in there. And so I guess that was a close one and I was so fortunate I survived it. Particularly … I mean, he must have thought that he … getting back and I won't repeat it, but he really must have thought that he'd hit me enough that the aircraft wouldn't get back.

You

32:00 **mentioned briefly in your overview and you have told us a few times or mentioned it a few times during the break about when you managed to score a car for yourself. I was just wondering if you would like to tell us in a little bit more detail about that incident?**

Well as I said, Tunis had fallen. And it was strange in the desert, we had

32:30 quite a few German vehicles in the Wing and they would have had quite a few of ours because way back before Alamein began we'd been pushed back, but prior to that it was up and back and up and back, I don't know how many times. The Germans would advance then the allies would advance and they would get each other's vehicles, so there were vehicles on either side. And

33:00 Bobby Gibbs in particular, he got himself an Alfa Romeo. Now I shouldn't tell you the story about this because if you ever come to … although he wouldn't know about this being on here, would he? I was going to say he might like to tell you. But he went up and he's such a stocky little bloke, but he had his gun, we were issued with a .38 Smith and Wesson, which we always wore, and he

33:30 got to where there was a general who was, I think, he was an Italian general, surrendering his troops … no, that can't be right either because I think the Italians had surrendered before then. But it was a general surrendering his troops and he had given his word or honour that he would take them to the POW camp where they'd set it up. And he was in an Alfa Romeo with two or three of his staff. So Bobby stopped

34:00 him and told him – get out of the car. And I thought he made him get out there but Bobby, I think, made the driver get out and he drove him in and then told him to get out and then he took off. Now I don't know all the details of it but he arrived back with this beautiful Alfa Romeo and in my diary I write that it must be worth about sixteen thousand pounds.

34:30 So we all got the idea that we wanted to have a motor vehicle. Some got Jeeps, some got trucks. And on the first day I went up with a fellow called Brian Harris and we couldn't see much around and we saw this big black sedan, a beautiful sedan car and there was an Arab sitting on a step nearby

35:00 and I got in underneath trying to hot wire it, the door was unlocked. And suddenly the Arab started to yell like hell so we made off. And then Brian didn't want to go the next time, I told him I was going up again. And Bobby Gibbs, by that time, had been posted to England and our engineering officer … not the engineering officer, our equipment officer, Ted Tonbridge, had

35:30 said he'd drive Bobby to Casablanca where he had to go to and that he would try to get the car back to Australia. I don't really know what happened to it eventually but I asked Bobby would he give me a lift up to Tunis and that and they did, I had a drive up there in his Alfa Romeo and I got up to Tunis and I was wandering around the streets and

36:00 I saw this Chevrolet, Continental Chev, no central pillar, the doors close on one another I believe and it had the key in it and it was opposite this headquarters across the way, the American headquarters and they had flags out and two guards out the front who weren't taking too much notice of anything. And it was parked the wrong way because in Tunis

36:30 in those countries you drive on the right hand side. The American had parked on the left hand side nose to nose with a Renault a little Renault. So I'll repeat the story, and I thought I'd have a walk around the block and think about it and I walked around, I met some of the ground crew and offered them a life back and they said that they would meet me out on the road because I didn't have a car.

37:00 And when I got around again the Renault had a fellow sitting in the driving side, a Frenchman sitting in the driving side. And I thought, oh goodness that's terrible, what am I going to do. I thought, here we go, so I got in and the steering … do you know what a manual motor vehicle's like in the olden days, the control column went down to, the gearshift stick went down

37:30 to the floor of course, and at the bottom there was a leather grommet on it to keep it … so it moved in a certain area, and it was missing. And it went around like stirring the pudding and I was trying to find reverse. It started perfectly, no worry with the starting. Anyway, by the grace of God I eventually found reverse and I backed out and then I took off. I picked the fellows

38:00 up along the way and then I got it back to the squadron. And that's when Jimmy Kemp and Jackie Ray, and Jackie Ray was the one who helped me too, he got me some brand new tyres out of the store, and they worked on it for about a day and a half, and it was absolutely changed. It had gone to the desert sand colour of the Eighth Army and it had a CV on the door, that was our squadron letters,

38:30 and it had a number on the door. And that's what we had our trip to Algiers in. And we had a wonderful trip, we went across the Atlas Mountains, and the greenery of that place was just like our south coast, it was absolutely beautiful, so much different to the desert. And we stopped at different places and we got to Algiers and

39:00 in Algiers I bought Neen a black blouse, lace blouse. And you should have had clothing coupons but he let me off, or said it didn't matter, whatever. And on the way, we'd called at one particular place and I've gone into what they call the NAAFI [Navy, Army, Air Force Institute] and that was the supply depot where you could get stuff and so forth, and English, an RAF

39:30 one. And I told him I was the advance officer for squadron with so and so many men and so many officers, I'd like to place an order. Which I did for tea and cigarettes and chocolate and whatever, because we all had plenty of money. And then we went on to Algiers and I told them we'd pick it up the next day. So we picked it up the next day and loaded the car with it, the boot was absolutely loaded with it,

40:00 I don't know how we got it in. There was a few bottles of whiskey and so forth as well, as much as we could afford. Anyway, we were coming back from a place called Constantine and the road between Constantine and [(UNCLEAR)] is like a straight, straight road. It's like that on our Nullarbor, where it goes straight for so many hundreds of miles, kilometres. And Johnny Howell-Price told me …

40:30 I didn't put his name in my report of it as being the driver, but he admits it in his report of it. And he said, "Tom you've been driving a lot, I'll give it a drive on this." And we were going along and then we saw a sulky going up ahead of us and coming down the other way was a truck and Johnny made a miscalculation in the passing of the sulky and clipped the sulky and put it

41:00 into the ditch. And as he did, the way he swerved and did that, the car went round two complete circuits, like that, didn't tumble, just stayed the way it was and went round and blew out both back tyres. So we pulled up, first of all I went back to see … there was a grandfather and a little grandson in it and the little grandson had hurt his

41:30 hand, not badly but enough. And the truck came back, saw the accident and came back … I'm sorry, he didn't come back, another truck came along afterwards. But John, we told Johnny Howell-Price that he had to go and get some tyres, he had to walk. Anyway, he got a lift with the truck and I got a lift with the truck back the other way.

Tape 7

00:31 **You were just getting a lift back on the truck.**

Yes. And I went back into Bone and I just told them we were in trouble and I went to one of their supply depots, was given two tyres and was given a lift back and we fixed them up, Jimmy Kemp being a ground crew bloke, he was very good and we put the tyres onto the rims and we put

01:00 them back on and we started on our way and met Johnny Howell-Price coming back with another tyre. One or two anyway, but he was successful too. So … and then on the way back we called into a few of the Arab villages and we sold some of the tea off to them and made a good profit on that, sort of thing. Paid a bit for our trip,

01:30 although it didn't cost us anything for our petrol because I signed for the petrol, we had petrol dumps all the way. And we got back to the squadron. And then it wasn't long after that that we were told that we were going to fly to Malta and Jackie Ray and Frank Saymas, two of the ground crew, they were going back to Alexandria and maybe to Cairo to, I think, they

02:00 were posted back to Australia. So when we were in Amiriya in Alexandria there was a bar called Penny's Bar and that was 3 Squadrons bar. And he, you know, he was a wonderful bloke, wonderful old bloke that had it, and he'd let our fellows tick things up. Of course, they were at Amiriya for a long time … what, they got back in June, July, August, September, October, November, they were there. So

02:30 they could tick it up and he was terrific, so I said to them, "Well leave it at Penny's Bar and any of our fellows going through can use it." But in the meantime, after we'd gone up the desert and got right up to Tunis, Egypt had become a little bit more bossy about themselves, they felt now they could do their own thing again whereas before they were frightened to say anything, they were virtually

03:00 under occupation. And I believe that they had thousands and thousands of deutchmarks ready for the occupation by Germany. They thought Germany was going to get there which they darn near did. Anyway, I didn't know what happened to the car and of course, I went over to Malta and into Sicily. But when I came down and was stationed, posted to RAF

03:30 at Abbot's Weir, I didn't find out that the sulky owner had made a claim against the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] because of the damage to the sulky and possibly damage to his grandson. And Reg Stevens who was … so it must have been pretty quick, Reg Stevens was still CO, Brian

04:00 hadn't come over yet, and Reg Stevens wrote back and said … and they quoted the number of the car, CV88 or whatever it was and the type of car and Reg Stevens said no such car exists on our strength. So that apparently didn't put them off, they kept going and when I was at this Abbot's Weir station, I was there for quite a while and I fitted in pretty well

04:30 and the CO was a very good bloke and he called me up one day and he said, "Russell, what have you been up to?" and I said, "I don't understand you, sir. What do you mean?" And he said, "Well something about a car in Tunis?" And I looked at him and I thought, "Well it's not much use trying to fool him or whatever," and I told him the whole story.

05:00 But he had this foolscap sheet of questions that I had to answer. And he said, "Well the first question here is where did you get the car?" And I told him what I'd done, that I'd found it left by an American colonel unattended and what I'd done and so forth and what had happened to it. "Oh," he said, "well we better do something about these

05:30 questions." And the question there, the first one was where did you get the car. He said, "Did you tell me that you found it abandoned, Russell? Was that where you found it?" "Yes sir, yes that was it." "Was any work done by the squadron on it? Did you do all the work on this yourself, Russell?" I said, "Yes I did, I did the lot," you know. Oh yeah. And he went through the whole lot of those questions and he said, "Okay." I thanked him and I walked out

06:00 and I didn't hear another word about it. And he was … that's in my report at the end, a little bit about my story about it and a little bit about him. And I can't even remember the man's name. But I was on good terms with him because I feel I was doing my job that he wanted me to do down there and I'd asked him twice to be sent back to squadron and he said, "Well, Russell. We're very short of instructors there and I'm afraid

06:30 that I've asked that you stay here for the time." And then from there I came home. But that's what happened to the car.

Tom, I'm just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the work you were doing at the OTU training school as a teacher, yourself having been in action?

Well, principally, everybody that came there was an experienced pilot

07:00 or a pilot. And we then had to give them their conversion onto Kittyhawks. There were similar ones doing Spitfires as well. And we'd give them their conversion onto Kittyhawks firstly, by teaching them on Harvards and we had to teach them that to land a Kittyhawk you must wheel

07:30 land it because … you might have seen where a Kittyhawk is taxing and there's a ground crew sitting on the main plane, sitting on the end of the main plane, that's to direct the pilot. But that was principally the one and then to also take them up as a group and put them into formation, battle formation as our squadron was flying at the time, which was a

08:00 six, three pairs. And also the rudiments of dive bombing and strafing. And we also had a section where we showed them air firing and that was done by dragging a drogue behind a [(UNCLEAR)]. Unfortunately, I couldn't always

08:30 get another pilot to fly the [(UNCLEAR)] and we used to tell these young blokes, they had to break off the attack at least twenty degrees below, before they reached dead set behind. And they didn't always do it and they'd make it a bit ropey and so I mostly flew the [(UNCLEAR)] myself. And the trouble with that

09:00 too, was that we were on different radio frequencies. I had to issue instruction down to the ground, it was a little bit unwieldy but we got them through it, you know. But that's basically what it was and they weren't there for that long, it didn't take … I'd only be guessing at the moment, maybe three to four weeks they'd be there and then they'd be posted off to a squadron.

What were

09:30 **the things that you … I mean, as a pilot who had seen some action and had been there, what sort of training were you giving … I guess, what sort of things, specific things, do you think you were teaching that you weren't taught yourself at the OTU in Sale?**

Basically everything I think. But there was no … nothing about what happened on the squadrons or no dive-bombing. Maybe we did some dive-bombing

10:00 but not as it was done, it would have only been as we all learned it at SFTS. So it was just, to my mind, that they hadn't given enough thought to it but that was corrected when we all went overseas. On the squadron and on the Wing Base, they corrected that.

10:30 **I'll just check my notes for a second. Your … the teaching you were doing in the OTU, that was in Australia, wasn't it?**

No, that was at Abbot's Weir.

Oh, sorry.

Yeah. In Egypt just near the Bitter Lakes, near the end of the Suez Canal at a place called Ismailiyah. And no, I did my own OTU here at Sale, that's after we

11:00 finished at Wagga. And that was very basic and the people that gave it to us weren't experienced.

Looking back on it, would it have made a huge difference, do you think, to the pilots you were training to have those experienced officers taking them through their paces before sending them off into the field?

I think it's absolutely essential that they have some … because

11:30 the squadrons don't always have time to train … to go through the basic training, they're busy doing their own operational things. But I think when a pilot, when he … he would never be absolutely skilled in the … in dive bombing and strafing, he have to lead … each squadron probably may have had their own idea, but he should have been taught by somebody who's done it before.

12:00 I really believe that OTU instructors … and that's what happened here, our fellows came back from overseas and they went to Mildura and they formed the instructor's staff there and they were doing OTU there.

The fellows that you were teaching, where were they coming from into the OTU?

Well, from all over. Some of them came out from England. We even gave

12:30 OTU training to, mostly conversions only in this one, to Egyptian pilots. And we found out … Gustendarg was one, and we found out they'd also been to Germany and had conversions onto 109s. So that was a bit surprising and, you know, again that they weren't one of the other ones, they were just

13:00 captive, to land if you like, for some to use. Maybe there was some governmental things between the government of Britain and America and Egypt. I don't know how that works or whether they just say – well we're here, we're going to stay here and fight a war from here. But the … I do feel, and in every facet of it, you should, when you get to that stage, that

13:30 you should have experienced teachers.

Did you have much to do with any other crews from other parts of the world, not just the Australians?

Not a lot. We had an American group along side us at Alamein but we thought they were a lot of … well we thought they were all right but at the same time we thought they weren't. And that sounds silly but they'd do stupid things. We were still close

14:00 enough … the front line hadn't moved and on odd occasions a 109 would stay high and come back and sit over the top of the drome waiting for somebody to come back to land. And these Americans, you could hear them come in and they'd sit up about five thousand feet and pull their engine back and do a gliding approach and land and the engine pop, pop, popping. And on odd occasions I just

14:30 wouldn't restart. I don't know how … whether they got any injuries or what but, you know, that didn't seem to be the sort of thing to be doing in a war zone. You want to get back to your aerodrome and down quickly and safely as you can.

So what was the point of doing what they were doing?

I think it was just to show off and … I'm not going to say anything about Americans.

A bit of bad feeling?

Well, I mean

15:00 You wouldn't be alone.

I met very many very nice Americans. When I was waiting to come home I met one fellow who I had a ride in a Beaufighter with him. We had to go up to Alexandria and pick it up and he brought it back to what they call the RSU, the Repair and Salvage Unit. And he was a beautiful pilot and he had … he'd been flying

15:30 over the Aegean Sea and he had movie, camera movie, camera film attached to his guns, synchronised with his guns and as he attacked shipping he would take the camera and it was very interesting.

I know a lot of the infantry fellows we've spoken to have talked a lot about the differences between the Oz forces

16:00 **and the Americans and just how well supplied and resourced they were. Was it the same with the air crew?**

Well I guess it was but it never ever interfered with us. They had it and … well I suppose … before the Americans came there, just in the desert, even just outside of Alexandria and Cairo, you'd come across … or a bit further

16:30 up maybe, you'd come across a Bedouin camp and you never ever saw any chickens but they always had eggs. And we were issued with a cigarette called V for Victory Cigarette made in India. And they must have had a lot of saltpetre in them because they used to crack like firecrackers when you smoked them. But for a packet of those we'd get a couple of eggs. But then the Americans arrived and they were giving them Camels and Peter Jackson's and whatever and

17:00 getting one egg for a couple of packets of cigarettes, so we didn't get very many eggs after that. So I suppose they were using it in the same way, they … They were very well … and of course, the English had that saying – They're over dressed, they're over fed and they're over here. And that seemed to be what the Englishmen thought about them when they went to England. But you can pick upon Americans as a nation but as individuals, they're very nice people.

17:30 **How did some of the English crews and Indian crews shape up that you experienced, either in …**

Well on our wing we had two RAF squadrons and there was always good feelings between us, we didn't … there was no great mingling because, I mean, everybody was too busy. You just went … we'd go

18:00 across to 450, of course, that was our sister squadron and maybe visit them on occasions but not a lot, not a lot. But one of the men, one of the times I went across was, we were way up the desert and I was hoping that on my relief from ops and having my break, I'd go down to Rhodesia because

18:30 it was a beautiful, beautiful country and everybody talked about it. But two fellows came back, I think one was Davidson and the other one was a fellow called Rusty Keirith, Ken, I think his name was Ken, I only ever knew him as Rusty. And I'd met the Keiriths when we trained at Narromine because they were substantial people in the town and they owned the big store. And I

19:00 remember one of the chaps there, he was Rusty's brother, I didn't know Rusty at the time. But he said, "If you ever get over there, he's over in the Middle East somewhere, if you see him tell him to write home would you, keep in touch," or something like that. And then I heard about this Rusty Keirith coming back to 450. So I went over and I was on the job the next day and I met him and I told him who I was and

19:30 I said, you know, I want to come across and talk to you. And he said, "Nice to meet you anyway." And he said, "I'm on the job in the morning." And I said, "Yes, I'm on too. I'll be giving you the top cover." And he said, "Oh yes, that's right." So I said, "Well what about we get together tomorrow night and have a

drink or two and talk about it?" And he said, "Okay." The next day he was shot down, taken

20:00 POW. Over the water he was shot down, I think and taken POW and he was one of the ones that Hitler murdered in the great escape, he was one of the ones … if you've seen the Great Escape film, which is terrible, the poor old author, he regrets ever selling the rights for them to make a film. And there were no Americans in with the Australian compound. And that fellow that plays the Australian, that

20:30 was supposedly Rusty Keirith. But that was his … and I don't know how long … how much he'd flown since he'd come back from his rest period.

When you were teaching at the OTU did you find that particular roles were sort of

21:00 **natural to particular groups of people, i.e.**

You mean, were they good instructors?

No, were … say the Indians, the Indian fellows that you were instructing, were they …

No, not Indian. Two Egyptians.

Oh sorry, the Egyptians. I mean, this might sound like a bit of a bland question but whether … I mean, the Egyptians, did they have particular skills that were dedicated …

21:30 Well they were good pilots. I can only talk about that and one thing I found out, because I'd learnt a bit of Arabic, but I could hardly converse with them because they spoke a different Arabic, they spoke an educated Arabic. And it's funny that you … in a place like that, you get different … I suppose it's just like in Ireland, you get different dialects … or round in India you get different ones. But no, they were just

22:00 ordinary people, I didn't find anything much different. We just told them what they had to do and that's what they did. And they passed out and went on with it and what they did after that I don't know. Of course, I suppose, naturally, they had their own air force but they weren't at war with anyone. So what they were doing, coming over and having a conversion onto Kittyhawks, well I just don't know. Maybe it's something to do

22:30 with, again, government things where you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, or something. If they give them this that they'd get better accommodation within their land. But I thought you were going to ask me about the instructors, how they felt of what they felt like. All the ones … I've got a group of them there taken near an aircraft there. I found most of them were

23:00 pretty tolerant blokes. Of course, they'd been through the squadron, they'd have done their tour of ops. A couple of them had been decorated and I think that they were tolerant. I found that … I got the best markings of my air force career from the instructing place. I got above average, I think, on all of the three or four listings and that was the reason,

23:30 apparently, that I wasn't being sent off. But I felt that I was very comfortable with … I didn't want to stay an instructor but I'd known poor fellows back here who were made instructors and they just hated it and they had to spend years doing it. And that's when it became a chore. I knew that sometime further on I was going to be posted out of there, I wasn't going to be there forever. But I didn't mind and I think …

24:00 if I'd have had my wish and there'd be no Depression I think I'd probably may have been a good school teacher. And I'm not saying I'm a patient man, Neen will tell you the absolute opposite, but for some way or another I felt I slotted in there all right. Funny thing, one day I had one bloke in a Harvard and I used to …

24:30 I knew it was boring to some of them and it does get boring when you're being told to do this and do that and do the other. And occasionally I'd take five other Kittyhawks up and do a bit of formation flying and then I'd put them into line astern and we'd do a line astern chase through the clouds, up and down, or whatever. And then I'd feel like, a little bit, going down to a bit of low flying and I'd tell them to stay where they are, I'm just going down to investigate.

25:00 I'd look behind and they'd all come down with me. And then one day I had a young bloke in a Harvard and sometimes it's not always easy to hear when you're speaking one to the other. And I'd handed the … I'd said very clearly – handing over. And we were down low, I said, "We'll do a little bit of low flying." We weren't supposed to, but I thought he'd enjoy it and we were only about twenty or thirty feet up. And

25:30 I said, "Handing over." And then … I'd trimmed the aircraft pretty well, and then it started to dip its nose and come up again and I said to him, "What are you doing?" And he said, "What do you mean, sir?" "What are you flying it like that for?" He said, "I'm not flying it, sir." And that was a bit frightening. He didn't hear me,

26:00 and he must have been wondering what I was doing. So you have a few bits of levity and a few bits of lightness like that that makes the day a bit more enjoyable. And we used to have a bit of fun doing the weather check of a morning. We'd borrow a Spitfire and make the weather check last for about twenty five minutes or something, you know. And of course, they had to have a weather check not only right at

the base but out around a bit before any pupils could be sent off.

26:30 You had to know what it was like.

So what would you actually do on the weather check with the Spitfire?

Just go and see that there's nothing building up, no cloud, no low cloud or whatever. We got some of that at certain times of the year. And just to make sure it was safe for them to fly. Of course, out back in our place, you can see for miles so you'd know that it'd be all right. But being there, the way they were with

27:00 cities around, places around and things, towns around.

Can you talk me through, I think it was a line to stern, chasing through the clouds exercise. Can you talk me through what that is?

Yeah. That's just simply all it is. You go in and out and you follow the other bloke in and out.

So it's two planes?

No. It'd be six in line astern. Only one at a time because it could be dangerous if two entered together,

27:30 if one deviated. And we didn't want danger and I made sure they stayed, you know, two or three plane lengths behind the other. They weren't right up tight. Maybe four plane lengths. And just give them a bit of that and then flying around under the cloud and wheeling and turning and throwing the aircraft around. I think that's one of the best teachers for flying an aircraft, to be able to throw it around the sky and

28:00 know how it reacts to what you want it to do. If you want it to go left you put your left rudder and you put your left stick over and around you go. And I think, as I say, it's … gives you that more … a greater knowledge of the aircraft. If you just flew it straight and level all the time, how would you know how it would react in any circumstances. Like when they get on … maybe involved in a dog fight for instance.

28:30 **As a pilot yourself and also teaching, what do you feel are the best things about the Kittyhawk as a plane?**

Well it was strong, strongly built. It could take a lot of punishment. For a heavy aircraft and a bit aircraft, it had a terrifically good

29:00 turning circle which is a great advantage. And its weight allowed it to dive away from trouble very quickly. And it seemed to be a fairly reliable aircraft too. But of course, I put a lot of that down to the workmanship of the ground crew. And early in the piece when we were flying with those

29:30 early American engines, they were most unreliable, they'd chew their ball bearings up and we lost a lot of aircraft like that. Couldn't think of the name now, I will in a minute. Alison.

What would happen

30:00 **with the engines, would they just seize?**

Well the bearings would go and they reckon that the South Africans lost more pilots, just about, from engine failure because they were getting the pushed over aircraft, the ones that were handed down at one stage. Whether that improved or not I don't know. But we were

30:30 very lucky and then we got a Rolls Royce Merlin engine, made by the Merlin factory … no, that's they Rolls Royce Merlin … but made by … it was called a Packard Merlin, made by the Packard company and it was a Rolls Royce Merlin engine, and that was beautiful, that was a lovely engine, very reliable.

31:00 **Just check my notes for a second. It's a question we didn't really get to ask before, just about becoming a fighter pilot versus any other pilot, piloting you could have done, was that in any way your choice or was it something you were just ascribed to?**

No, you

31:30 never had the choice for it. I wanted to be responsible for myself. Maybe I … I don't know that I would have wanted to be responsible for eight or nine or ten other people's lives. Now, I'm not saying that occurred to me but maybe that was somewhere deep within my feeling and I felt … and I suppose a bit of the glory of being a fighter pilot,

32:00 that did exist in some cases. People thought it existed more than it did and the pilots always seemed to get the glamour and the media and so forth. But they're getting a bit around to realising that, as again, Bobby Gibbs said about being a family, that the pilot couldn't, wouldn't have existed without the people who looked after him. But when you did that

32:30 ITS training, I think it started there. And I think then they knew otherwise, I think, bomber pilots still did the … still did Narromine on Tiger Moths, they had to do the Tiger Moth training and then they went onto Hudsons or Ansons or something like that. I probably think Ansons were the most they went

onto first

33:00 for their multi … twin engines and so forth.

Would you say that pilots in your squad were a superstitious lot at all, were there any kind of …

I couldn't tell you that. I didn't bless myself or anything like that but no, I can't remember anybody. There could well have been.

33:30 Some people liked their own … I didn't like to go and fly without my scarf around my neck, I had a silken scarf. And that was twofold, mainly it was because when I had that battle dress jacket on, it could chafe your neck, you had to be turning your head quite a lot. But also it seemed to become the thing that I'd go … a funny thing, local flying I wouldn't bother with it.

34:00 But you know, it wasn't a conscious thing. I think it was a part of the dress I wore for that day. So many of the others could well have been of the same idea. They might have had something like that. I never heard anyone talk about flying with a rabbit's foot in their pocket though. That's an interesting thing but I think there's no doubt in my mind that you're probably quite right, that that happened, that people would do

34:30 things like that, a good luck charm or something.

I've spoken to a few bomber command people that had certain things they'd take with them or not take with them.

What they wanted to take were a couple of buckets of luck I thing. You know, to go over Germany as they did and go over that way … and read about the exploits of them, it's incredible. And the wall down at the War Memorial tells that, doesn't it? Was that 360

35:00 Squadron or what? I forget the number of the squadron. Yeah, column after column of men they lost. Anyway.

A couple of pilots I've spoken to have suggested, I guess, sometimes after an operation on their way back was the time when

35:30 **they … was perhaps the only time they'd actually get to stop and think about things. It was all over and they were on their way back, it was I guess, a reflective time. Did you find that as a pilot at all?**

Think about what had happened? Oh, think about other things? Well, I couldn't say I did because if you went out on a job and you finished up …

36:00 if they mean flying on their own back, if you finished up on your own you'd have to be much more on the look out because of any possible enemy aircraft. Or you had to be careful of what was coming up from the ground, if anything was down there or whatever. And I can't say I ever thought about it and most of us, all we wanted to do was get back to the base and land and then you'd probably think about what happened then. But there

36:30 was ample time for reflection particularly if you were on the next … the early morning show. You'd go to bed early and I'd think about my Mum, my Mum and things like that. Think about home and think about Neen. And you know, you'd get right away from it … and not only that, writing your letters helped you get away from it that way. But you would have to have

37:00 something because, as I said earlier in the thing, you couldn't be doom and gloom because you'd never take it, you wouldn't be able to take it. And that's why I reckon that if you see any of those bomber pilots and their crew going out to their aircraft, they'd be laughing and joking and they wouldn't be going out with glum faces or what's going to happen. They'd be going out as though they were going on a picnic even though they'd know it was a very, very dicey job.

37:30 **So sense of humour was a very important thing?**

Whether it's a sense of humour or an awareness of that … I'm not sure about the sense of humour, I think it's to keep up morale. Now, the day we lost seven aircraft, one of our chaps there, and I can't put a name to it now, he went on like a

38:00 real comedian. He had us laughing and whatever, he was absolutely incredible. And you know, we came in and everybody's a bit quiet and so forth and suddenly we're all laughing and going on. It didn't mean we'd forgotten but it'd been relegated a bit for the moment, you know. I do believe in the fact that … I just said it

38:30 once again, I do believe that once you became serious I think your life would have been hell because you wouldn't have wanted to get in your aircraft. You had that little bit of fear … I'll use that instead of another word that maybe would be better to use. But it was just that, for that moment of time, when you walk to your aircraft.

39:00 You knew it was going to be on, but if it was going to be a particularly … if they thought it was going to be a dicey do, you do it but once you got into your aircraft and started the engine, it evaporated. So I think they're entitled to that bit. But you're only on your own so what you were thinking nobody would know. But you couldn't imagine that those wonderful blokes who captained the bombers going out with a great gloomy face and letting it transpose

39:30 to their men. He'd be showing a real happy face and getting them to joke and whatever, as I've said.

You mentioned that every now and again you'd think about your mum. I remember you mentioning in your overview that she wasn't keen on you signing up at all. Did she ever … like, did she give you a solid reason?

No, the only time … she didn't hammer the point,

40:00 was the night I came home from Neen's parents home. And as I got to the door she was waiting for me and she just said those words, "Don't go to the war, son. If they come here I'll fight them with you." She didn't get up the next day and get to me again, that was it, she'd said her piece. And as I say, I don't know the reason for it. My Mum seemed to be well and

40:30 she'd been a hard worker in her lifetime, and she'd been a great helper of other people. All of her nieces and all of her family absolutely adored her. She would help anybody. And maybe some of that had taken the toll on her. She'd worry about her brothers, if they were in a little bit of trouble, or whatever. And she had these two strokes. We brought her home from the first one and we thought that

41:00 she was all right. She had the second one and she went. But no, she didn't push me and as I think I mentioned earlier, I didn't feel that … I know she said don't go to war and so forth like that, but I felt that I was entitled to make my own decisions now that we were in the situation we were. And I'm glad I did. I could have stayed home I think, I was in

41:30 a protected industry. But there was no thought in my mind like that, to stay home and I went.

Tape 8

00:36 **Tom, you mentioned earlier today that you did some work as a censor, reading the mail and censoring it. I was just wondering if you could tell me a bit about that work?**

Well it was just … you were supposed to look at the fellows letters going out and if you felt … they were not supposed to give any indication of where we were or what work we were doing.

01:00 And by and large, I never had any trouble. I was probably censor officer for about four months. And the only one I had was with one of the ground crew, only bit of trouble I had was with one of the ground crew. And he was quite a happy fellow but we were at a place and we'd … on the aerodrome we were getting shelled and he wrote and he was telling them all about the

01:30 shelling and one of our aircraft got knocked about and he was virtually giving it away, where we were. So I just called him, I went to see him, I didn't call him over to me, but he was there with another fellow so I asked him to come outside and talk to me, I didn't want to speak in front of the other bloke. And I just told him that I'm not sending his letter. I said, "You're breaking the rules." Jack, his name was,

02:00 I said, "You're breaking the rules, Jack. You don't have to tell them that." I said, "You're going to worry the people at home." I said, "That's not what we're here for." I said … and Neen will tell you that, I don't think I sent any worrying thoughts in my letters. We'd tell her we were having a good time and that, and I think a lot of people back there thought we were. But, you know, we weren't in danger of getting killed everyday. And I think that

02:30 was the only time that I really had to stop anybody's letter. He wrote another one but he was a funny bloke too, he used to write all in capital and he had a couple of little phrases he'd put in, like he'd cut his finger. If you can imagine what that … that was supposedly a meaning for something else.

03:00 I won't put it on tape, but it was just one of those things. But I didn't mind that, that was all right, he could have sworn, it doesn't matter, you don't censor swearing if that's the way the family that received his letters, with swear words in it, well that's up to them.

Was it an uncomfortable job, reading other people's mail?

I didn't like it particularly. And I didn't particularly always feel like I'd like anyone reading Neen's letters

03:30 to me or mine to her. But I still felt … as I feel about her now and as I feel about that poem I've written, I don't care and I didn't care then, I didn't care about what people thought about what expressions I used or the romantic or loving … I used to write to an aunty of mine and I liked her very much. Actually she was my mother's aunt and to her

04:00 daughters. If I wanted to express myself that way, I didn't mind. But I never ever broke the rule and told them, "Oh, we're in a town near this," or … where they could get it because that was the rule of the game, you're not supposed to tell them that.

One story you did mention briefly in your overview was the fire where you were injured. I was just wondering if you could

04:30 **talk a little bit more about that?**

Yes. It was so simple and it happened so easily that … What happened over there was that all of the homes in Sicily and that were usually marble floors and slate floors and whatever. And this home had been evacuated, no furniture and they'd found it, somebody

05:00 found it and apparently told the CO, Reg Stevens, that this was there and might make a good pilot's mess. Because we had a pilot's mess where sergeant pilots messed with the officer pilots. We had a ground staff sergeants mess but the pilots all messed together regardless of rank. And Reg … I'd flown and Reg said to me, "You won't be flying again today, Tom. Would you

05:30 go down and have a look and see what it's like for a pilots' mess?" So we were forced to fly in protective clothing such as long sleeve shirts and long pants and I had my cap with me. But the boys always … and you could see in pictures of them, they had very skimpy

06:00 shorts on, pair of boots and a hat when they wore it but no shirt, usually they went around bare-chested. And this house had something similar to this one here where our kitchen is, that was like the kitchen there and the rest of it was like a big family room. And apparently they'd done the family room, or a part of it, and

06:30 then they went off to the other end, to the kitchen. And all they did was, they throw petrol in out of a drum, out of a jerry can, sweep it around and then they get outside safely a bit away from it, light a match or a piece of paper and throw it in and up it goes and it burns all the vermin off or whatever that's in there. And when he went … when he put the petrol down,

07:00 he came back and I was standing near a fellow who was probably supervising it or whatever, or one of the ones doing it. And the fellow put the drum down and there must have been a spark left in the crack of the tile and it went up. And he was very badly burned. I was burned on my hands and

07:30 my face and I was protected everywhere else. So they raced us outside and got a truck and they raced us all around the aerodrome trying to find a doctor. But all the squadrons hadn't arrived yet and finished up, they found a regimental aid post, an army one. And they did what they could for us but it was more distressing because there were a couple of blokes in there that had stood on a mine and I think that upset him too.

08:00 And then the next thing, they took us across to Malta in the Australian Air Ambulance and he died there. And I was taken down to Cairo, I was down there for about three weeks. And his sister wrote to me, maybe two, three years ago

08:30 because the chap over there had told her that I had been involved in it. I was actually only an onlooker and stood there. And she wrote to me and I told her how it had happened and she just wanted to know how it had happened. And I know his name as well as anything but at the moment I think … I just can't recall it.

09:00 Maybe that's a bit of the sadness I feel at the moment about it. Yeah.

Just going … talking about the air force generally, how important was mateship amongst the flight crews or just generally in the air force?

Well, I think in the air force as much as any other service,

09:30 if you don't have it you've got nothing. If you can't get into an aircraft and start the engine and fly it off not having faith in the men that's worked on it for you … if there was any differences of opinion or anything like that, you couldn't possibly do it. We absolutely trusted our ground crew and the friendships were there, no risk in the world. It was just … and our fellows were …

10:00 they would never have done to be serving under a rigid English squadron leader because they were too free and easy. And I think the mateship and the, and as I say, Bobby Gibbs has got that article on our web sight. And we still now … and you know, I was not too well before Christmas and I had call

10:30 after call from blokes who were the ground crew and so forth and, you know, as much as from the pilots. Of course, the pilots … now, of course, there's not that many around either. Because percentage wise we weren't a big part of the squadron. There were about three hundred ground crew plus all the replacements who went through. But no, I think mateship's … mateship's the most important thing in your ordinary every day life. It's like working …

11:00 I had a fellow come to me in our business and tell me that he couldn't work with another fellow, we had an annex and we had a machine up there and he said he couldn't work with him. And I said, "Well let's have a talk about it." And I got them together and I said, "Well what's your problem?" Neither could

give me an answer and I said, “Well maybe you both should leave.” And they looked surprised and I said, “Now how about having another go?”

11:30 That’s it, and if you can’t work together in an ordinary job then if you can’t be together in your home life, there’s nothing and that transposes to almost anything. And you just imagine the men in submarines, if they didn’t have absolute confidence in their commander, particularly their commander and in the people that worked on that machine for them, well it’s nothing. And I’m putting confidence now

12:00 but I’m acquainting that absolutely with mateship because if you don’t have mateship you’ll never do your perfect job that you should do on anything. I’ve probably rambled a little bit there but … I might have taken a long time to get the point across but I think it’s a fact of life, in all life and unfortunately the people of the world at the moment are not able to carry that and put it in. It’s just

12:30 not happening.

You’ve mentioned several times that even reciting some of your poetry, I was just wondering when you began writing poetry?

I don’t know. I began to fiddle about a bit with little ones for Fred McKay’s birthday and Meg McKay’s birthday,

13:00 one’s in April and one was in May. And for our seventy fifth anniversary reunion I put one together. But I couldn’t put a time frame on that. But I do believe that my best poem that I’ve ever written was the one I wrote for Neen. But I think the one that I got some compliment for … we had a reunion up in Williamtown in 2001

13:30 and that was the eighty fifth anniversary of the squadron formation. And I put … we had sixty eight people there, names and I put all their names into a poem. It didn’t always necessarily have to rhyme but they all got a mention in it and we put it in the news letter and they were all very tickled by it. It was just that little bit of fun,

14:00 you know. But no, I’ve never always been a … I can’t remember, in my early life, writing poetry. As I say, I loved to read it. But when I say poetry, mine probably wouldn’t be classed as poetry.

Did you ever jot down verses while you were in service?

I don’t think so. I can’t remember

14:30 writing anything in that period, no. I think it was all post war. And I did one for my grandchildren at one of our Christmas parties. It just came up out there and I think Neen’s got it, I’ll have to ask her later on. But it was just a little thing I drifted up and it took them all in and gave them all a mention. And I feel that was …

15:00 I liked that very much. I like being able to write something that I think is all right and nice, you know.

You mentioned that you had a poem about the No. 3 Squadron. I was wondering if you, maybe, could give us a verse or two?

I couldn’t but I’d have to … can we break for a moment?

15:30 There’ll always be a squadron that’s known as number three, who’ll fly or fight with anyone, wherever they may be, we fought on Egypt’s desert sand, in Europe’s mud and snow, beside young men whose lives were lost, men we were very proud to know. The squadron then later served in a distant Asian land, not in the heat of battle, but for a hopeful

16:00 world, peace planned. And now that we are growing old, we treasure friendships that remain, with memories of squadron days, of hope and some that brought us pain. Our lives are in their twilight years, but of one thing we are certain, our love for number three will stand, beyond the final curtain.

16:30 **Thanks very much for that Tom. When did you write that one?**

Oh, about three or four years ago. Oh no, what am I talking about, no. Longer than that, I wrote it just prior to the twenty five year time capsule came down and that was 1992, so about … I think I wrote it for our … I was president of the association in 1990, 1991 and I think I probably

17:00 wrote it for when I was president then.

How did all the boys from the squadron respond when you read it?

Oh, they all think I’m … I don’t know, they accepted it and sometimes the quietness when something’s read like that tells you that they approve. They know I dabble a bit and they liked the one about the … I

17:30 joined the squadron in the middle of ’42 and I think they all liked the one with the sixty eight names, that’s not really … it was just a bit difficult to put the names in at the right time to get the … a bit of poetic sound to it. But I think, again, in peacetime as in war, I think we were all supportive of each other. I have … there’s one pilot who

18:00 didn't come till very late in the war. He insisted … in Italy and obviously I didn't know him in the squadron. But he's the most abrasive man. But he's got a heart like a cabbage and he likes to have a little bit of a shot at me and yet he's the first one to ring and see how I am if whatever, you know. And he sticks up for you if there was … We had a little bit of trouble in the squadron association, that

18:30 a couple of people thought that … two of us run the association and we have some help from a few fellows who we loosely call the committee. But they didn't seem to think we were sticking to the constitution. I don't think anyone had read the constitution for forty eight years. And our main concern is for the people and for the enjoyment of the people. And we had a meeting about it and

19:00 this fellow really tore into them, he told them off completely. And that's how I say, you know, he's abrasive in some way but he's so supportive as they all are.

That's great. Thank you so much for reading that. Were there any … you mentioned that you really enjoyed poetry, were there any verses that you carried with you and thought of during your time away?

19:30 No. I used to be able to recite a lot of Banjo Patterson's and Henry Lawson's and so forth. No I don't think there was any particular verse. No, I can't bring one to mind anyway. We were in a different clime then too. And I think that … I was pretty … I liked to write to Neen

20:00 a heck of a lot and she wrote back to me quite frequently, we were lucky … and I don't think we ever found out that any letters went astray. But no, I'd like to say there was. Well My Country, obviously we all loved that one. And if I was going to remember anything I think Dorothea McKellar would be right up on the top.

20:30 **Do you … you were married during the war, I was wondering if you could describe your wartime wedding for us?**

Wonderful. I think in my poem there's a verse there that tells a bit. But when Neen decided finally

21:00 I couldn't get her to say yes straight away, she'd agreed to be engaged but when I came back she was not … I didn't think she was madly in love with me, if that's how it's supposed to be. But I felt that I had to have an answer eventually and when I went out to her home one night … we hadn't had words but I threw my hat in first

21:30 and anyway we kept going and then one night we were in town and we went into a little coffee shop in the Piccadilly Arcade I think it was, on the corner there. And I said to her – you have to make you mind up. I said, "I've got to know whether you're going to marry me or not." And she said, "Yes, I'll marry you." Well I jumped up

22:00 in the air and startled everybody in the coffee shop by yelling out, and that was that. I'm trying to think of the commencement of the verse that I wrote in that poem. We were married in St. Phillip's Church, a lovely church. And it was a very nice night, quite a nice reception. We stayed at the Hotel Australia and

22:30 the head waiter was a friend of mine, he lived next door to my parent's home. And he arranged for a bottle of champagne and chicken sandwiches to be left in the room. I tell a terrible story about those but I'm not going to tell it on this. And then we went up to Meadlow Baths to the Hydro Majestic for our honeymoon. But I know the last two lines of the verse that I can't …

23:00 Then came the day that we were wed, that day in early December, I saw you walking down the aisle to me, what a moment to remember. That's it. Yeah, well that's how our wedding went and we had a very, very happy

23:30 honeymoon and about thirty years ago the Blue Mountains authority put on a day for people to renew their vows. And they came from everywhere, with old receipts. One fellow had one where he'd paid one and six for dinner that night or something. And we went up and we renewed our vows before a marriage celebrant in a most beautiful garden. There must have been eighty or

24:00 ninety people there, and that was quite a moment for us. But we renew our vows every day. We don't have to we just … no, I've been very fortunate. Been fortunate with my family who are a lovely family. Our grandchildren are all performing as well as we could hope for them to do. My son and my daughter, or our son and

24:30 our daughter are wonderful people and … they have their faults, my son smokes too much. My daughter in law, as I told you this morning, is a very bossy person but she's all heart. So I think my life has been very, very comfortable and fortunate and I wouldn't change it for anybody else's.

25:00 **That's great. We've just got a few, you know, closing questions. Coming home from the Middle East and especially after discharge at the end of the war, was it difficult to fit back in to civilian life?**

No. Because I had to drive … we were married and I had to find a home. It was very difficult to get

25:30 building materials. We managed to get a block of land at Jannali, that was through a fellow who I found

came from Sutherland and he'd got a block of land in a ballot, it was under the Sutherland Estates and it was on lease hold, we paid lease for it, a lease fee for it. And he said he didn't want it, he was going away to the country to further his plan to become a Shire Clerk.

26:00 So we had to try and build something on it, but you couldn't get building materials. So I built a … we got permission from the council to build a garage on it. You could build your garage and live in it while … so long as you had plans into the council to build a home on it. And I built a fairly big one, thirty feet by ten foot six. And we had our two children in there for quite a while until we built

26:30 the home. And it just … we were just sort of lucky then to get a builder who could build the cottage and built it very nicely and we enjoyed where we were. So we were lucky in that way. But after the war … but I think with all that on my mind … I just went back to work for the railways and the only reason I got out of the railways, I guess,

27:00 was that … well probably two reasons. I picked a fellow pen up one day and he more or less said, "That's my pen." And I told him that I'd been eating bully beef with better buggers than him. And that was one thing and then my Dad had told me that if I got a truck he could give me some work and that. So I asked Neen if I could spend my deferred pay on it. And I think we had four hundred pounds deferred pay and most of that was

27:30 taken up buying an ex navy utility. And I pulled the body off that and built a flat top body on it. And I went to work, not for my father but with my father. And he paid me quite well and then I got another truck and … not two trucks at once, I put that one in and got another truck. And from there we built ourselves up to have enough money to go into a newsagency because I realised I

28:00 still … even though I had an insurance policy taken out for Neen and the children, I knew I hadn't secured their future and I wanted something more solid. And that's why … I thought, "If anything happens to me they've got no … They have an income while that's there but it'll never increase," and that's why I thought we'd go into business. We went into the newsagency and we worked together very well for a long time.

When you came

28:30 **home, did you talk much about the war and what had happened in the Middle East?**

No. I think … and I couldn't be very much involved in anything with the squadron because in those days a newsagency opened every day as it does now, didn't close early on the Sunday. But on the Saturday we had to open

29:00 up again. I know they're open now but it's … it was a full time occupation. And I could very seldom go to Anzac Day reunion because papers came out on Anzac Day and I had to do the deliveries and then we had to stay there till midday, so I couldn't go in. But I think, in later years, once we became active in the squadron … in the squadron association after we got out of the newsagency, I think then,

29:30 when you're mingling with a fellow, that's when the memories come coming back and talking about it. And you become interested in things you hadn't even thought about and, you know, you try to find things out about what happened to so and so. And one of the fellows that went away with me, Joe Wetherburn, he was shot down and became a prisoner of war. And I met Joe in the city one day, he'd come back, he was still in uniform

30:00 and I was in civilian cloths. And he died. Bobby Gibbs told me he'd seen him, but he came from Queensland. And I just missed getting in touch with him and he … I found out he'd died. But I think … some people say they've never spoken about the war and I don't think you can hide it. And there were horrible things in the war

30:30 but there were so many good things too. The friendship that we talk about and it's grown in the peacetime. And we consider ourselves a family, squadron family, squadron association family as we were a squadron family. Neen got to know many, many people and she's very, very friendly with the ladies and we all get on pretty well together, you know. We have wonderful reunions.

31:00 **Would you say, looking back, that your experience in the air force was a positive one? A positive or negative?**

I think the only positive that you could get from going to war is to be absolutely positive in your mind that there should never be another one. And we know that's not going to happen, we know there's going to be wars while ever there's human beings. I don't see how anyone

31:30 can get anything positive out of a war, again, unless you class friendship as a positive. But … I had to do the ode one Anzac Day and I'd heard through the week about a fellow called Ernie Morton. He was ion the army in the First World

32:00 War. And he was being interviewed and he was saying that he'd had nothing to do with Anzac Day before because it glorified war. And he told the story that in the Battle of Mons in the advance he came upon a young German officer who was mortally wounded and begged Ernie Morton to shoot him. And Ernie said

32:30 I couldn't, but from that moment I had an absolute abhorrence of war and I won't have anything to do with it. And as I told the fellows, I completely disagree with him. We all have an abhorrence of war and I feel that his attitude was wrong in that way, that he was forgetting the friendships that had come from it. And I think the point was that

33:00 I related him to Lawrence Bingham. Lawrence Bingham was a man who wrote Ode for the Fallen of which one verse is the ode we read at our reunion. Lawrence Bingham was a scholar and he was the son of a minister, a church minister and yet an absolute pacifist, in everything

33:30 he did he was a pacifist. But he wanted to serve his country, England and he joined as a stretcher-bearer. He got mentioned in dispatches and he received the Legion De Honour from the French. Now that man to me, he could have turned his back on the war and said it was abhorrent and I really cannot think of any more dangerous position or

34:00 job for anyone to do than to be a stretcher bearer. Obviously there are for the men who are going up ahead of him, probably, but, I mean, it would take some courage to do that. But Ernie Morton was entitled to his opinion but I didn't agree with it. I didn't agree then and I don't agree now.

How did your time in the air force change you, or did it change you as a man and

34:30 **how did it shape your …**

Well I think Neen will tell you, quite clearly it changed me. I think it did. I hope it wasn't tremendously for the worse but I went away a very, very quite person and I came back a must more outgoing person. But I'd seen men die.

35:00 And I suppose you couldn't go into that circumstance and not be changed. I don't say it … it most certainly didn't change me morally in any way but possibly in my outlook and my behaviour it did. But I can't see how men … when I think of the men in the First World War in those trenches,

35:30 how their whole lives would have to change. Our men in this last war, the foot soldiers, the infantry, how they must change. Those men … there must be lots and lots of men, those men who didn't want to go and get up and run forward and do what they had to do. There's got to be a change. I only hope that the change I went through was, as I say, not

36:00 for the worse. And most certainly didn't affect my principals which I've tried to adhere to or my morals.

Is there a moment that stands out through your experiences, possibly the proudest moment, is there a moment?

In my wartime experiences?

In your wartime experiences.

In peacetime one would be very easy, I could say 14th December, 1944.

36:30 I guess a proud moment was when I had my wings pinned on me. That I'd accomplished that, that I was now able to fly an aircraft. And I guess that was a proud moment. As far as proud moments in the wartime in my fighter work, I guess

37:00 I feel I had reason to be proud of the fact that I've been part of a team and I'd pulled my weight. I was not outstanding, I was average but I feel that you must have a team and they can't all be stars. And I do feel that that would be one moment that I think … I think I could look at anyone I flew with in the eye and say that

37:30 I always did my job.

If a young man was to come to you and tell you that he wanted to join the air force to go to war, would you have any advice you could give him on air force life or that you learned?

It's very different now. Air force life is completely and totally different.

38:00 It's … see, with fast and high flying and aircraft the bases are nowhere near … they could be in one country and fight somebody in another country. It's quite different. I could only give him the principals that we tried to adhere to, that was look after your mate and do your job. I don't think there's much else you could say. But I hope that it never comes to me to have that opportunity of telling somebody going to war.

38:30 I hope that this Iraq thing that we had and didn't really need to have, I hope that's the last thing that we have to worry about for a while but I'm not holding out a lot of hope because while ever, as I say, there are human beings and the grabs for power and whatever, we'll have wars, unfortunately.

39:00 **Before we finish Tom, is there anything else that you'd like to say, anything that we haven't … any final words?**

No. I'd like to … I don't know … Greg Barlow told me that somebody from the squadron had mentioned my name to him. I'd like to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to be on this program. I only

hope that what I've said

39:30 is of benefit to somebody in the future if they read it or study it. I can only say that I've tried to tell the truth. My memory may not be … I might have mentioned a different name that I should have. But it's a long time ago and as I say, as I've said about Alan and my own interpretation of that operation we were on,

40:00 it's so long ago and even if you had things documented, the interpretation of them might be different today. I'd just like to say I'm very, very pleased to be a part of this. I hope the way I've been told it's going to be used will be of benefit. And I remember your remark saying it will be a wonderful thing. I think it will and I think that anything that helps the history of our squadron, be

40:30 passed onto our children, the better I think it will be.

Thank you very much for that Tom.