Australians at War Film Archive

Leonard Cleary - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 18th August 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/500

Tape 1

00:31 **With this first tape…**

I am a little bit hard of hearing so I'll just with this up. Is that whistling?

No that's fine. We'll just get you to give us a general overview of your life – where you were born,

01:00 **growing up years through the war and then postwar. Just a general idea of what your life has entailed so far.**

Right well I was born in Mildura – that's the northern part of Victoria, that's the Mallee district – the 19th of February 1924. We lived there,

01:30 from memory until I was around about eight or nine and then we moved progressively to a place called Irymple which was five miles south of Mildura. From Irymple to a place called Charlton, central Victoria. And then from

02:00 Charlton to Bendigo, where, let me think, be about eleven I think by that time. And from then until I joined up we stayed on in Bendigo.

02:30 Joined up in 1942. May. Went through the four years to June 1946, discharged in 1946. Had a bit of a problem settling down as a

03:00 lot of compatriots did so I joined two other lads – another ex-serviceman who was a school friend of mine, and a farmer, young farmer. And we came up to Cairns to buy some war surplus equipment, some trucks, to load them up with plywood, which was very scarce in Victoria at the time. And

03:30 that trip took us about five or six weeks I suppose. Had a few adventures on the way down, one accident. And finally got the trucks back to Bendigo, sold the plywood, sold the trucks. Made a few bob but nothing. It was a good trip, it was an ideal experience to have while we were trying to do with ourselves.

04:00 I then took a job in what was known as a magazine area outside Bendigo, build a whole lot of explosives out there. And I worked there in a fairly menial sort of job for fourteen or fifteen months, and during that time I met a chap who I had been at school with.

04:30 Didn't have all that much rapport with him, but I met him in the street in Bendigo one day and I said, "Well what have you been up to?" And he said, "Well I've just come back from America." And I thought, "Well that's interesting. A peanut like you off to America, how did you manage that?" I didn't say that to him, I thought it though.

05:00 He said, "Well I'm a metallurgist and I went to America to Mexico to look at some copper refining." Well I went home that afternoon, I was sitting home having dinner. And I told her about this and I said, "I wonder what a metallurgist does?" And from there I went to night school until I decided that I could study. I think I was twenty-three or twenty-four at the

05:30 time and you're always a little unsure as to whether you will be able to do it. So I did engineering drawing and one other subject and manage to pass those so I knew that I would be able to stick it. So I then started a four year course. And well Lenore comes into the picture at this time,

06:00 and then remains a very important part of my life from those days right through until the present time. We met just as I started the four year course, and we married three days after I did my final examination. I got fifty percent for the last subject. So we were that close to not getting our diploma.

06:30 I had been looking around Australia at that time to see what I was going to do. You see, a metallurgist

can do what is known as primary metallurgy or secondary. Primary is the mining side of it, where you get involved in the, what is known as the beneficiation of the

07:00 ores. In other words if they mine a complex a metallurgist has got to be on tap to be able to separate the zinc and the copper and the silver and the gold from that one complex piece of ore. So I went to Kalgoorlie and had a look at what they were doing there. I went to Broken Hill and worked underground in the

07:30 lead mines during the vacation to earn money and also to see what they were doing there. And I also came to Port Kembla where the steel works were. Now the secondary metallurgical side of it is you get involved in making steel, you get involved in rolling steel and you then get involved in heat processing and

08:00 straightening of it. And it was at that stage that I realised we were going to get married and for Lenore to go to a place like Kalgoorlie or Broken Hill, I don't know if you have visited either of those places. But I mean taking a brand new bride up there would be pretty rough. I mean the temperatures, particularly in Broken Hill are unbelievable

08:30 in the summer. In fact they cut the night shift out up there because the workers couldn't sleep at night because it was so hot. So they work day and afternoon shift. So I thought, "Well it looks to me as though it would be a good idea to go to Port Kembla," the steel industry. It's a modern area, just near the beach, which we both liked.

09:00 So I applied for a cadetship with BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary Company LTD], and I managed to get a cadetship and soon after we were married we moved to Port Kembla, and had a little flat there at a place called Lake Heights. And I started my cadetship which involved me in,

09:30 normally day shift. You went through all of the departments of the steelworks. You then went to South Australia to the iron ore deposits. Where else did we go? I think probably that was about it. Well during that circuit of the steel works at Port Kembla,

10:00 I decided that the rolling mills was the place for me to go. I can't remember why I made that decision. But I think it had something to do with I became interested in the way they processed the steel from the ingots, the steel ingots, through the soaking pits, through the rolling mills and then you ended up with a finished product.

10:30 So I applied for a permanent position in the rolling mills. They took me on. And I spent thirteen, a total of thirteen years there, and I went through the ropes from a cadet, worked three years of shift work. Shift superintendent,

11:00 assistant manager, or assistant superintendent they used to call us. And then I made superintendent after about eleven years I think. Must have been around about eleven years. And that was good, but it was a very old mill, and what concerned me

11:30 was that what the future held. In an old mill you're not going to progress very far because that's it. The rolling mill is not going to be modernised. And we went to a dinner one evening, and they were sending all people of my age, my present age, off with a golden handshake, a gold watch and giving them a pat on the head

12:00 and telling them, "Well you've done a good job for the company. Here's your gold watch. Have a good retirement." And Lenore and I were walking back to the car and she said, "You know, I don't think that is for us." And I said, "You know, I can't see it either." I said, "I really don't think I want to stay here until that happens to me." And she said, "Well let's have a look around."

12:30 So we then began looking around the world – looking at advertisements, talking to people – to see if we could find something a bit more adventurous. Something which gave us a future more interesting then the one we saw ahead of us at BHP. I was also, I was a bit at loggerheads with my boss, which is not unusual.

13:00 I can be aggressive, I can be opinionated, and I think that combined with the incident at the send off triggered it. So out of the blue a metallurgist out of the laboratory came down. He was a South African. Came down to my office in the rolling mill and he handed me a slip of paper and he said, "You ought to apply for this job."

13:30 He said, "I think you could probably get it." I had a look at it, and it was a group called Hi-feld Steel, owned by Anglo-American in South Africa. And they were starting a steelworks in South Africa and they wanted a rolling mill manager. So I said to Nornie – that's Lenore's family name, "How about we apply for that?" We had applied

14:00 for one in South America, and hadn't heard anything on that. And then was another aspect – my younger brother was in South Africa. He'd gone there some six or eight years beforehand. So we did have family there, so I applied for the job. And they flew me out to South Africa for two weeks, and then said, "Ok, you've got the job. When can you join us?" So then of course this really put the cat among the pigeons.

14:30 I mean it happened, within three weeks we'd gone from working as a mill manager for BHP, to being a mill manager for Anglo-American in South Africa. So I flew back to Australia and they then got in touch with me and said, "Right

15:00 we want you to go to Japan and then we want you to come to England. Then we want you to come back to Australia and move your family to South Africa." All in, that was another three weeks added. So it was six weeks, you had complete turmoil. Unfortunately I had to leave Lenore on her own to do the packing up, but she managed it quite well.

15:30 And in 1966, yeah 1966 Christmas we moved to England where we stayed for about fourteen or fifteen months. The reason for that was that an English company got the contract to build the rolling mill which I was going to manage. And my managing director at Hi-feld Steel felt it was much

16:00 better for me to be in Sheffield where all of the equipment was being put together, all the drawings were being correlated. Far better for me to be there than just sitting in South Africa. And we had a marvelous time, had three little boys by that time. They'd be eleven, nine and seven or thereabouts.

16:30 So we set up outside Sheffield at a place called Great Longsden. And we lived there for the major period of our stay in England. I travelled all over the world looking at machinery – looking at rolling mills, looking at furnaces, talking to people. And in 1967 we left England and

17:00 moved to South Africa. We had a holiday on the way and visited Germany, Spain and then went on to South Africa and arrived there, from memory it would be early 1967 I would say. Right, at that stage they had only just bought the ground to build a steelworks.

17:30 So we moved to a place called Witbank which was some five or six kilometres from where the steelworks was to be built. And we set up there, they built us a lovely home. And from there I attended the site on a daily basis, assisting with anything I could with respect to building the rolling mill.

18:00 That was commissioned, now these dates I'm a bit hazy on, probably late 1968. Commissioned the mill, or the steelworks was commissioned progressively. They commissioned the iron plant, the steel plant and then they commissioned the rolling mill.

18:30 Here I had some problems. We had a very modern mill, we had a whole lot of very complex electrical and mechanical equipment which gave us a lot of trouble. I finally moved out of the steelworks,

19:00 about eighteen months after the steelworks opened. The departure was mutual. I then set up as a consultant for about eight or nine months. I then took a job as the manager of a Bright Bar manufacturing company in a place called Mayerton. I ran that for about three years.

19:30 I then bought a transport contract, which was available in the local town of Mayerton, and I built then, with Lenore's assistance, I built up a transport business from that period until we left the country in 1988. The transport business was very successful.

20:00 We ended up with seven heavy vehicles, quite a large number of trailers, and a number of quite useful contracts. Which gave us movement from Mayerton to Johannesburg and Pretoria, and then on the way back we picked up loads of steel for the Bright Bar plant which was also

20:30 in Mayerton which I used to manage. So I had a lot of double carrying, and inside six years we probably made more money than I had made in my whole working career. It was that sort of a job. There was a bit of luck involved, but there was also some hard work and some

21:00 thought going into, the double loading was the key to the whole thing. But in 1986 we realised that if we were coming back to Australia which we intended to do we had to start and make a move. See the problem with South Africa is and was that you have difficulty getting your money out. They won't

21:30 permit you to move large sums of money. And you're obliged if you want to do that to take the risk and smuggle it out. Now if you get caught you're in real trouble because they will confiscate the amounts of money involved. And we had another problem – my eldest son and his family were going to stay on in South Africa. They weren't going to come with us back to Australia.

22:00 And we said, "Well hell, if we do something naughty and we get caught Peter and his wife are going to be in trouble." Because the South Africans can be very unforgiving if an outsider starts to do something like that. So we began planning in 1978 and it took us almost ten years to quietly move

22:30 legitimate sums of money every time we came on holidays. We used to go to England and we would take our holiday allowance and we would leave it there. We'd come to Australia and we'd bring our holiday allowance and any balance we'd leave that. We invested quite heavily in antiques, we invested quite heavily in stamps – that was one

23:00 of the big areas. I become an avid stamp collector and quite enjoyed it actually, although we knew it was a means to an end, not a really honest to goodness stamp collecting for a hobby. But I did enjoy it, and the auctions. We went all over South Africa to the various auctions. And when we came back here we finally sold the stamp collection

23:30 to a dealer, a local dealer. And that helped us. So during that period from ‘78 to ‘88 we got sufficient funds together to purchase a home in Australia and we came back in 1987. We purchased a house, we went back to South Africa, wound up our affairs.

24:00 There was a situation there. I had ideas of spending six months in South Africa and six months here. And with that in view I invested quite heavily in a drilling business with an Afrikaans acquaintance of mine. Unfortunately that didn’t come off - he closed the company down about

24:30 four or five months after we left South Africa and a whole lot of that went west, or couple hundred thousand odd, or thereabouts. Which in those days was quite a reasonable sum of money. However with hindsight I should probably have consolidated and not dreamed of going back there for six

25:00 months. I should have consolidated and moved the balance of the money that we could do legitimately. Incidentally they allowed us to take legitimately twenty-nine thousand… was it rand or dollars they let us take out? Let me think. I think it was equivalent to twenty-nine thousand Australian dollars was the maximum.

25:30 Now you can imagine with seven trucks and business, the contracts for sale, the trailers for sale it was considerably more than that. So we had to do something, and that’s where I really made the mistake of going into business instead of doing something else with that money. So what happened, we got back here we had the house, but we had not a lot of

26:00 cash. So I just said, “Well, I’ll have to face up to it. I’ll go and see Veterans Affairs and see what they have to say.” So I went and saw them and explained the position, and it took them quite a long time to decide that I wasn’t fiddling the books, because all of a sudden there is a lot of money in South Africa, and then there is no money. Well when I say no money there wasn’t near

26:30 as much as there should have been. And took them about six or seven months to decide that I was eligible for Veterans Pension. Then they gave me the pension and Lenore also had the pension. That was our major pension. To augment that and help us with a little pocket money, we started a little

27:00 hobby business. Lenore is a very talented potter and an artist. This sort of thing, her work. That’s a photo, most of the watercolours you see here are her work, and for fourteen years we attended that. I made pots and I grew cactus plants, and we never ever,

27:30 after the first four years, we never worried greatly about the profitability or otherwise. We knew there was pocket money in it. We knew that we would never be able to live on it if we lost our pension, but it was handy to have. And it also involved us both. It involved us on a personal basis with our customers,

28:00 and we both like selling. It involved me making pots and growing things, and it involved Lenore in her painting and her pottery. We finally pulled out about Christmas last year. After fourteen years. That’s brings us to the situation here. And then a strange thing happened.

28:30 There was a housing boom in Brisbane, and we knew it was booming. We didn’t really take much notice of it, until a friend of mine called me from Rockhampton and he said to me, “Do you want to sell your home?” I said, “Oh had been thinking about it, but not really.” And he said, “Well I can get you,” what was it? “a hundred and

29:00 sixty thousand dollars for it.” So after I put the phone down Lenore and I had a talk about that and I said, “I wonder what we could get for that less the costs of selling it and the cost of purchasing a new place.” Long story short a developer came along about three months later

29:30 and he gave us a ridiculous price for the house. Never even came and looked at it. So we said right, and we began hunting and we found this little home which was about six years old which a young couple had, which was too small for them. And we thought, “Hey this looks alright. We can put new carpets in, re-paint it and do other things.” And that’s what we did, and that was last Christmas.

30:00 Very briefly that’s from then until now.

Great, we might just take you back a little bit to when you were growing up. What are some of the strangest memories you have from childhood? I understand that you were involved in the scouts quite a bit?

You’ve asked me a question.

30:30 Fighting, I always seemed to be fighting. Every school I went to I got into a fight. I think I hated being bullied, and the moment someone tried to bully me or make me do something I didn’t want to do, I’d end up fighting somebody. I can remember fights in Irymple, I can remember fights in Redcliffe,

31:00 I can remember fights in Charlton, I can remember fights in Bendigo. And this went on right through the war unfortunately too. I don’t know if that’s relevant. What else do I remember about those days? My eldest brother was a marvelous sportsman, he was good at any sport. I was not in the same category, but

31:30 he definitely was a role model. And I looked forward very much to playing football with him. He used to be the captain, and the ruckman and I used to be involved. Australian Rules [football] it was. I don't think I liked school all that much. I wasn't a good student. Although I qualified as a metallurgist I still wouldn't

32:00 regard myself or rate myself as an intellectual. That's not quite the right word. I'm just not a good student. I'm a battler. I observe and I watch and I think, but I used to be pretty weak on concentration. It was very difficult for me to sit still in a classroom

32:30 for an hour. And I don't know if that's what we were looking for.

So what about your time in scouts? What was that like growing up?

That was good, that introduced us to the bush. And I have been interested in fishing, camping, hunting,

33:00 shooting, tracking ever since, and I still regularly hunt deer. I regularly fish on Macleay River at Ebor, that's near Armidale. I look after farms for farmers from time to time. When they want to go on holidays, I'll go down and look after the farm. I can't do much physical work anymore,

33:30 but I'm like a caretaker. I'm there I'm in the house and I can go around the cattle or the sheep and check up on things. And I've done that for a number of years. But I'm reaching the stage now where I'm having to cut that back a little bit too, because physically I'm not able to perform them duties all that well. And for that reason there's one farm I don't go down and do that for anymore.

34:00 That's at a place called Walgett, that's a long way down. That's around about two and half thousand kilos [kilometres] round trip, by the time I get down there and get back.

Were most boys in the scouts when you were growing up? Was that sort of the thing to do in those days?

34:30 I'm not sure about that. My friends and acquaintances were in the scouts. I can still remember some of their names because a number of them joined the air force and unfortunately they didn't come back. There was one Roy Emerson, Malcolm Taylor – he was in first Bendigo troop. I think there was a bit of kudos

35:00 involved in being a member of the First Bendigo Scout Troop. That just impinges on my mind a little bit. That again there was a fair amount of sport involved as well as the trips out in the bush camping and path finding. Do they call it path finding? No it wouldn't be

35:30 path finding. It was…

Orienteering or something like that?

What they used to do, they'd take you out into the bush and say, "Right you're here, you've got to get back to Bendigo." It's like path finding.

36:00 But see path finder that comes to mind there is an aircraft, path finders during the war. Sporting activities and camping activities, and your schoolboy friends were in it yep.

And did you enjoy those sort of more practical challenges in the scouts?

I like the bush

36:30 and I like the sporting side. I did go for a number of badges they have for various degrees of competency in the scouts. I don't remember what they used to call those badges. There was about six or eight. And you get one for the

37:00 star that's right. You'd get one for knowing about navigation by the stars. You'd get one for ambulance work, you'd get one for map reading. Master, masters? I've lost that one. But you got badges for proficiency in those various

37:30 areas. And I was interested in that. I liked to, I still am interested in stars. And that was first generated in the scout troop.

Tape 2

00:30 **Can you tell us more about what life was like in Bendigo when you were a kid? What were the sort of jobs people did and what was the general attitude at the time?**

There wasn't a lot of money available. And one of my memories

01:00 was when I was made a prefect at the Bendigo High School I had one pair of trousers, what was known as the school trousers. They had to be cleaned every weekend. I had to clean them and press them in

order to be ready to go to school the following Monday.

01:30 Food was plentiful but pretty plain. A bit of a family joke – I remember saying, “When I get old enough and get enough money to buy a steak I’m going to buy a number of steak and have a real good feast of steak,” because we had things like sausage meat and mincemeat and

02:00 lots of things called, you ever heard of toad in the hole? Well toad in the hole was made from sausage meat and vegetables and then there is like a, almost a cake mix you put over the top of it and it is baked in the oven. And that was called toad in the hole, and I can remember it was a pretty popular sort of a meal.

02:30 Bendigo was cold, I do remember that. We used to sleep in what was called a sleep out. I don’t know whether you, it’s a veranda along the back of the house, and it’s got fly wire around it, for insects. And then blinds that come down during the summer. And we used to sleep out there and

03:00 I’ll tell you it was cold, really cold. What else do I remember of Bendigo? Wonderful place for exploring. We were up and down old mine shafts and tunnels. Find all sorts of strange things. We had a real bonanza one time. Somehow or other

03:30 we got into a tunnel out in the bush and we managed to go… memory is a bit hazy, but maybe fifty or sixty metres into the side of the hill. And we came to the bottom of the shaft, and apparently this had been a dumping place for bicycle parts. A bicycle shop had

04:00 dumped all of its unwanted parts into this shaft. I can remember we ferreted around there for months, digging this out and that out, and probably flogging them to our friends if I know anything. A lot of swimming. We did a lot of swimming. Bendigo didn’t have Olympic pools

04:30 in those days – they had a ladies pool where all the girls went for a swim. And they had this huge old dam which was just a little bit away from the Bendigo High School, and that’s what it was. It didn’t have lime, and it had the dressing sheds, and it had a thirty foot tower, and a three metre board. And I quite liked diving.

05:00 I used to do a bit of fancy diving. One and a half and all that sort of thing, and we also used to dive off the tower, but that was a bit risky because you only had to make small mistake on that one and you got a pair of the most magnificent black eyes. Because you’d hit the water, if you were spinning and you hit the water you’d get it right in the head.

05:30 Did a fair amount of rabbit hunting out of Bendigo. My uncle, favourite uncle gave me a twenty-two [.22 rifle] which you could break into two pieces and put it in a sugar. And we used to break it into two pieces and put it in a sugar bag and then we used to walk out to a place called Leichhardt which I think was about fourteen miles. Which sounds a hell

06:00 of a long way now but I am pretty sure that was the distance. We used to walk out there, shoot rabbits, dig them out, load them up and bring them back. We used to sell them for about sixpence a pair or sixpence a rabbit I think. Anyway it was a bit of pocket money. They are a few of the things I recall.

06:30 **What sort of work was your dad doing?**

Dad was an insurance inspector. He was very seldom at home. Mum ran the family and actually I have to give mother credit for raising the family. Dad was home one weekend in two or one weekend in three. And he’d be away selling insurance in the bush most of the time.

07:00 **And as a kid what did you think about dad being away so often?**

Well you got to rely on your mother. Dad wasn’t there so whatever problems you had had to be dealt with by your mother. Mother was a Scot. And pretty tough and capable. She used to get five pound a week, and from

07:30 that she had to pay the rent, pay all of our schooling, and clothing, and feed us. On five pound a week. That’s why there wasn’t a lot of money around. But Dad wasn’t making a lot of money. The other thing was that if he made twenty pounds a week he used to come home. Once he got to twenty pounds he used to say that’s it, come home and have a rest.

08:00 **So did you have to pick up the slack? What sort of jobs did you used to have to do around the house?**

Dad used to buy mallee roots, by the truckload. That’s railway truck and he used to ship them to Bendigo and my job was to break them up. I used to caddy. I caddied from the age of around about twelve, must have been

08:30 four years I suppose, about until I was sixteen. And caddying you got reasonably well paid by the standards of the day. I mean you got two shillings for a round of golf. And if you went out on Sunday morning you could do a round in the morning and a round in the afternoon, so that was six shillings in a weekend you could make,

09:00 and that was pretty good money. I bought a brand new push bike from the money I earned from

caddying. My brother helped me, and the idea was that once I got my new bike he would get his. My mother could see a bit of a nigger in the woodpile so she bought him a second hand one.

So what was your first paid job then?

09:30 Well obviously caddying was the first time I earned any money of a reasonable amount. My first paid job was, I took a job as a clerk with McCullough Carrying Company, which was a company that delivered from the railways throughout the Bendigo area. To give you an idea, it's quite strange really –

10:00 it was horse and cart. Can you believe that? Horse and cart. And they had these magnificent draught animals. They had a huge stable somewhere in Bendigo, can't quite remember where it was, and these magnificent groups of two and four horse would be brought to the railway station and they'd be loaded and delivered to various areas. I didn't last very

10:30 long there. I hated the office and I used to spend a lot of time out helping them load and unload the truck. That was more my idea of what you should do. But of course the boss took a dim view of this because the books were not being done. And again by mutual agreement John Cleary departed from there. Then what did I do? I joined

11:00 Lever Brothers as a junior traveller. That was centred in Melbourne. So I moved from Bendigo, I was probably about seventeen at the time. I moved from Bendigo to Melbourne, and that was a marvelous job for a young man. What we used to do, we were responsible for

11:30 assisting the traveller in doing the display work in the shops that he took the orders in. And we travelled all around Victoria. You know, you'd be away for a fortnight living in hotels, and then you'd stay out one fortnight and then the next week you'd be in Melbourne. And I stayed there from seventeen until I joined up eighteen years of age.

12:00 That was a marvelous job for a young man I enjoyed that.

Can you tell us what was the usual thing you got up to on the weekend in Bendigo?

Well most of my weekends for four years were involved with caddying. So

12:30 the scouts were at night so we did attend the scout hall for the meetings there, and we used to play basketball there as well. No apart from the caddying, and the exploration, but as I recall

13:00 that was when we were somewhat younger.

Was there anything like dances or the pictures?

Yes but I didn't learn to dance until I went to Melbourne. I then went to an instructress, gosh I can still remember her name too – Norma Perrugio.

13:30 Lovely blonde lady and she taught me the rudiments of foxtrot and quick step and modern waltz. That was funny – I would never go back to the same dancehall the following weekend, because I used to feel that I trampled all over my partners there, so I would go to,

14:00 I'd go to St Kilda and then I'd go to Moonee Ponds, and every now and then I would run into Norma Perrugio at these dances and she would dance with me because she could lead. And in the navy there was a sequel about this – fellow named Bill Marney was a marvelous ballroom dancer and we actually practiced dancing together on the HMAS Manoora.

14:30 You can imagine what a furore that started. But he taught me quite a few good moves, and then later on every time we, in the time I was in the navy, every time we went ashore we had a regular routine. My mate and I, whoever I was with

15:00 at the time would head straight to a snooker saloon and we'd have two or three games of snooker. Then we'd go and have a nice meal and a couple of beers, and then we'd head to the local dancehall and we'd find someone we could dance with. Some people are difficult to dance with, but some partners your rhythm was right and you could go through these various steps. And I enjoyed that.

15:30 In fact Lenore and I danced for years and years. It's only in the last ten years that the knees have got a bit wonky and we had to stop that. Oh there was some super dances. Come to think of it now I can remember, St Killians dance hall in Bendigo, very popular.

16:00 View Street there was a dance hall. That was very popular. And it wasn't unusual, after the war a chap named Ken Exelby, he was a bomber pilot, marvelous driver. We got a team together and he used to borrow his father's big old automobile and we would drive sometimes as much as thirty, forty miles to a particular

16:30 town where we had heard there was a good local dance on. Like from Bendigo we'd drive to Castlemaine which is about thirty odd miles. And we'd go to the local dance there. Then there were quite a few villages around Bendigo where they'd put on a country dance. You know, there'd just be a piano, an accordion and a violin and we would go out to these.

17:00 Lenore and I did a lot of that. That was again after the war though.

Going back to when you were a kid you must have got up to a bit of mischief. Like can you remember Guy Fawkes day [fireworks night] or getting up to any mischief in that regard?

Guy Fawkes day was more in my memory from the

17:30 time we were in Mildura – that was pre-Bendigo. Don't remember much of Guy Fawkes. But in the local community in and around Mildura Guy Fawkes day was quite a big day and some of the local farmers they had these dry fruit blocks. They seemed to go to a particular

18:00 trouble to have a big night on Guy Fawkes night. Yeah one chap Johnson I can remember he used to have one of the best Guy Fawkes affairs. What else used I do? I told you about the exploring the old mine shafts. That's a

18:30 fairly regular thing.

Can you tell us maybe more about the Guy Fawkes because we've never had anything like that up here?

Well you see on a dry fruit property there are a lot of cuttings, and when you prune you get these huge piles of the off cuts. And that burns,

19:00 once it's dry that burns. So Mr Johnson used to collect this into a huge pile, and other things – bits of timber, cardboard, whatever. And he would make a pile from memory

19:30 I can envisage it being as big as that room and higher than that room. And then you had the fireworks, and each individual brought his own collection. And Mr Johnson he had a pretty big collection. And one of the highlights was the rockets. They were usually put in, and we had pipes

20:00 stuck in the ground. And these rockets had a wooden stem so long, and then the rocket section of it, lit by a wick. And I suppose they'd go, they'd probably go seventy or eighty metres in the air. I know there were some problems occasionally with them landing on houses which wasn't all that good.

20:30 Then you had, one of the favourites was a jumping jack, which was a curly thing I remember and when you set that going it went all over the place. And you had absolutely no control over that. And then you had big ones – some of the characters would put a bucket over them, and they were big enough to blow the bucket right off. Yeah quite big.

21:00 Dangerous really I think when you come to think of it. That's about, and I think the Cleary's also, Uncle Leo, I'm pretty sure he also used to have a Guy Fawkes night. But Mr Johnson because he was only up the road. We had a shop, my mother had a shop there in Bendigo, and he was only up the road from Mum's shop and his wife

21:30 used to spend a lot of time with my mother at the shop. And that's how we sort of got involved with them.

Can you tell us about the shop?

A bit of a disappointment. Mum was a good organiser and of course with Dad selling insurance, there is no fortune to be made there. We kept the family together, but

22:00 she decided she would have a go at this. But unfortunately she got robbed twice in a fairly short space of time, and I don't think she was insured – I never did know about that. The shop backed onto the railway line, and they came down the railway line, came through the fence, punched a hole through the brickwork,

22:30 which was remote from the street, nobody could see them. So they punched through there with a hammer and chisel and just got in and cleaned out all of the… They caught up with them once… cigarettes of course were a readily saleable commodity. One group they caught. I don't know that they ever caught the other. But of course if Mum wasn't insured, and that sounds funny because if Dad was an insurance salesman,

23:00 but I'm pretty sure she wasn't insured, and eventually she had to give it up. We didn't help much in the shop. We were living about, I think it was about three miles plus from where we lived in Irymple to the Irymple State school, so by the time we walked to school and then walked home it was pretty much the day gone.

23:30 **Can you tell us what you remember about leaving school?**

I didn't like school ever I don't think. Because I was involved with so many punch ups, I don't know

24:00 whether that made me aggressive. I think there is aggression in me. There had always been aggression in me. And I tend, because I wasn't all that good in argument, that is words, I tended to settle the argument with my fists rather than talk my way out of it. That was my memory of why I got involved. And I hated bullies

24:30 if they bullied someone else. In fact skipping ahead twelve years I got into a fight in Cairns over exactly the same thing. My mate and I went into town, we were at a place called Trinity Beach which is where we were camped, and there were a lot of Americans in

25:00 Cairns at that time. And these two Americans – a big bloke, bigger than you, and a bloke about my size – were standing on the side of the street and as the Aussies went past with their girlfriends, they'd make some snide remark. Like they'd comment about the girl or comment about the bloke. Well the blokes couldn't leave the girls. They had to grin and bear it.

25:30 And I, Frank Conlen was his name, the bloke that was with me. And I said, "Frank that's not fair is it?" He said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well the Aussies can't stop and argue with the Yanks [Americans], and this Yank is having a ball making snide remarks." I said, "I think I'll have a word with him." So I went over to him and I said, "Look, I don't agree with what you're doing. I think you should put a stop to it." Which was probably a silly thing to do

26:00 but that seemed to be the way I was. And the big bloke said to me to buzz off, and I said, "No. Either you stop or I'll take that little mate of yours and give him a good hiding." And he said, "Oh no, if you're going to fight anybody you're going to fight me." And I looked him up and down and I thought, "Hell no, you're too big for me." So I said, "Well, no, I'm not going to tackle you, but if you don't stop I'm going to tackle the little fellow here. He's my size."

26:30 And the next minute I'm flat on my back. I remember hitting the grill in front of the picture theatre. And I got up, bleeding nicely. So I said, "Right." I circled him, went in low. I knew if I tried to box him I was going to be in trouble. So I hit him about three or four times in the bread basket. Down he went. Really wasn't much of a fighter. Now that's what I mean –

27:00 all my life I seemed to get involved in these sorts of situations. I have mellowed a bit. I don't fight anymore now, because I got a shock in South Africa – one of my partners took to me and I realised then that I had lost all of the

27:30 necessary expertise and the strength as well. But there again I didn't back off, I got a handle on him. Sounds very aggressive, and it has worried me I must say. But then again you can't change the essential nature of the human being. If he's going to be like that…

28:00 But as I said I have mellowed. I now talk more, and less of the idea that if you do this or do that I'm going to attack you.

So when did the actual boxing thing happen to you?

Well that happened at Bendigo High School. A chap called Lou Noonan. Well Dad taught me to box. When I say all there were three boys. He taught all of us to box.

28:30 That's one thing I do remember doing clearly. He had a funny way of teaching you to box. He taught us the basics of how to box, and then when I went to high school Lou Noonan the sports master was rather keen on boxing, so I joined the boxing troupe. And we used to box amongst ourselves, and went down to Castlemaine and we

29:00 boxed down there. My big brother did very well down there. I got a hiding. And then when I joined the navy I taught my friends to box, because some of them had no idea. They didn't even know how to hold their hands. So it's a very easy thing to show them how to hold their hands and how to use their left hand and how to use their right hand, and protect themselves.

29:30 And I actually taught boxing to my mates on the [HMAS] Manoora for probably six months off and on. I had other fights in the navy, but I think I've said enough about that. The lady wouldn't approve of the boxing business. What do you think about boxing Michelle [interviewer]?

30:00 Or fighting?

(UNCLEAR)

I dodged the Americans up there – they used to put on boxing shows but a lot of them were Negroes, and boy they were good. Very good, so I didn't take my chances with them – I stayed with my own people.

30:30 **So how did you look at boxing? Did you think of it as a sport of just a life skill that you needed to learn?**

I wasn't a big build of a lad and I felt it was necessary to be a reasonably good boxer to protect myself. And I think maybe there was more aggression in our era at school. We settled more arguments with a fight than we did

31:00 with words. Maybe. I can't be categorical about that. Well my big brother got into a number of fights protecting me on some occasions. But it may have been an era where there was inclined to more of that. It would be frowned upon now

31:30 I'm sure, and they would stop it immediately. But I can remember at Bendigo it got around – "There's a fight tonight. Cleary's going to take on Jackson," or, "Jackson is going to take on McCarthy." And we'd gather after school and see the fight. Ring around them and gloves on, and there would be somebody to call the time.

32:00 It just didn't go on until one got knocked out – they'd have like a chap timing them to give them a bit of a break. It's an interesting thought that. Never really given much thought to that before.

Can you go back to the leaving school thing? Can you remember how that all transpired?

32:30 I did my leaving certificate, which was the certificate that you had to have to qualify to go on to university. And I got the subject, a maths subject

33:00 and I decided then obviously I was going to end up if the war kept going I was going to end up in the forces. So I'm seventeen years of age so I decided then to take this job in the McCullough Carrying job, and after that job I went to Melbourne and it was a fill in until I went into the services.

33:30 I always intended to join up. The situation then was, your school friends were going, all of those who were slightly older than me, they're gradually being taken into the forces so, there was never any talk that I wouldn't go.

34:00 No 'King and Country' type motivation – just the fact that my friends were there. I can remember one in particular – Roy Cowie. Very close friend of mine. Lovely young man. We both applied for the air force because we thought we'd probably get into the air force quicker then we would get into the navy.

34:30 Although he always wanted to go into the air force, he got in, and I got my call up papers for the navy and then a fortnight later I got the call up papers for the air force. Roy got killed. Which was a great sadness. He got commissioned, he didn't make it as pilot. I thought he should have

35:00 and I thought he would have. But he didn't, but he made it as commissioned air gunner. And with his pilot at the time I think they were flying Ansons and they were doing a flight over Bass Strait. And the pilot's name from memory was a chap named Peter Hendrickson. He was also a Bendigo High School lad, and they believe they flew into

35:30 the sea. And I understand that, flying close to the sea, the horizon is very difficult to pick out. And if you're not careful you can lose the horizon and you can go in and I think that's what happened. Where were we?

36:00 **Talking about enlistment and everything.**

Oh leaving school and going to work. No it was a fill in until you went into the service.

So can you recall where you were and how you heard that the war had broken out?

Yes I do. Friday night we were playing basketball at the First Bendigo Scouts Group. And the question we all asked…

36:30 what would we be then? Sixteen going on seventeen… was whether we would ever be old enough to go to war or whether the war would last long enough for us to go. But there was never any question that we would go. That always interested me. But I think, obviously peer pressure too to some extent. You do what your mates do.

37:00 **How was the news broken? Did you hear the broadcast?**

I think so. I think it was announced. I think the scout master called us together and announced that war had broken out between Germany and Great Britain, and obviously then, we wouldn't do it now but we would then.

And was there ever any thought of joining the army or had you already squared your options down?

37:30 For me no. All of my uncles on Mum's side they went into the first AIF [Australian Imperial Force], four of them. But I tried to join the navy when I was thirteen years of age. Midshipman, and I almost made it but I didn't. It was fairly stringent in those days. They had the pick of whoever they wanted they

38:00 could take. I then made another attempt to join as a paymaster midshipman at a later date, and that eventually when I joined the navy as a wireless operator and went to Flinders, that led to me being put in an officer training group and given an examination. But they were very silly about this –

38:30 they waited until I qualified as a wireless operator and all my mates were going off to various ships and they said, "Now right we're going to give you a test and put you in the officers' training group." And I said, "No bloody way. I'm not going to sit around here now – all of my mates are off." So I just went through the exam paper very smartly and made a few crosses

39:00 and a few x's and walked out. Well twenty-four hours later I was off. I was sent to a place called Port Stephens in the beach group. And that was the start of what they call Naval Beach Commando.

Interesting at Port Stephens, did

39:30 you ever hear the story of a group of Australian and British servicemen had got into Singapore, the Krait? Well they were there at the time that we were in Port Stephens. They went there to do some training. I remember, I remember the leading hand wireless operator. The others I don't remember. Wells

40:00 was one of them. I'm just trying to think what the leading hand, what his name was. He was lucky he went on the first one and he got back. And he didn't go on the second one which was an absolute debacle and most of them were taken and executed on that one.

Did you know at the time what these fellows were up to?

Not really no.

40:30 There were rumours but I had no idea until after the war and I actually read about their exploits, and then suddenly I remembered them going through Port Stephens.

You said earlier that your uncles had served in the first AIF. Did they ever tell you stories?

No. They would tell stories of their personal exploits. A bit like

41:00 I've told you about having a fight with somebody or pinching something off the Egyptians. But as far as combat was concerned, well Uncle Mal who I loved dearly, and Lenore loved him as well. He was a really super person. He got knocked about pretty badly. And he died of

41:30 heart failure after I joined Anglo-American. So he still wasn't an old person. Uncle Clarry I think he had had a serious illness before he went in and he only lasted until sort of mid-thirties. Uncle Neil he got gassed, he wasn't too brilliant,

42:00 he lasted quite a while.

Tape 3

00:31 **Did you just want to continue?**

Uncle Neil very straight backed. I remember him particularly he walked almost as though he had a broom up his back. But heavy drinker, very heavy drinker. Four girls in the family, no boys. Very disappointing

01:00 for him, and I think eventually his medical, or his health plus his drinking problem broke his marriage up and he split up from the family. He ended up as a ganger on the rail line right out the west, north western part of Victoria

01:30 in the Mallee district. Very arrogant tough piece of country. I know Mum went to see him once, but that was the last contact we had with him. We've spoken of Uncle Mal, my favourite and Lenore's who died fairly young. Uncle Clarry,

02:00 who also died very young from what we believe was a heart condition prior to him going into the army. And Uncle Cyril the oldest of the brothers – he disappeared. We don't really know what happened to him. The marriage broke up, as a number of them did. I don't know if you are aware of this, you probably are having spoken to people like myself,

02:30 that marriages, or veteran's marriages often ran into trouble after First World War, the Second World War and also the Vietnamese War. But I think we understood and do understand now what happens to servicemen now than we ever did before. I know the First World War they used to just say it was shell shock or lack of

03:00 moral fibre or whatever, but it wasn't. It was a definite neurosis brought on by whatever they were subjected to. If it was a gas attack I mean it doesn't take much imagination to realise you are stuck there in the trenches and the gas is descending upon you. And you can't go back – you go back you leave your mates behind. And of course

03:30 many thousand of, particularly the First World War veterans ended up in hospital and they were in hospitals. Some of them well I suppose we're getting towards the end of it now, died in hospital as a result of what happened to them. Less of this happened in the Second World War, certainly in the areas that I was involved in, because we weren't subjected to the type of shelling

04:00 which was involved in the First World War. Which was absolutely horrific. I mean some of the bombardments before the attacks in France went on for several days and you just had to stay in a slip trench with a minimum of cover. So those uncles, I think all of them, all four of them were affected to some

04:30 extent by what happened to them. And this affected their life after they came home. But then again, how many families sent four sons and they all came back? So grandpa and grandma were thankful that they just came back and tended to disregard little problems that were associated with what happened to them.

Were the brothers close? Do you recall them talking about their traumas to

05:00 **each other or was it something that men kept to themselves?**

They would never talk to us about it. Whether they talked amongst themselves I don't know. But I mean I was only ten or eleven years of age and I would ask Uncle Neil what was it like to be shooting at somebody? And he just wouldn't comment – he would just

05:30 change the subject. Because at that age you were interested in whether he shot the Germans. That's what you were supposed to do. But I can't recall any of them ever talking to me in detail about what happened.

So was there a sort of mystery associated with those men who had come back from war? As a boy you were obviously curious about it?

06:00 I think all boys are interested in what it is like to be involved in war. I think it's because they want to know how, or they wonder how they will react when their time comes.

06:30 I think boys are a bit like that. They I mean there is nothing in life ever like being under shell fire. There is nothing in life being shot at. I mean there just isn't anything like that. I mean occasionally you might be involved, we did at Mayerton actually. There was a bank robbery and there were bullets flying down. Lock Street in Mayerton.

07:00 And Lenore was absolutely horrified that the hairdresser actually went out into the street to see what was going on. She could hear these shots going off, and Lenore grabbed her and pulled her down under the table. There is a curiosity, a man thing. "How will I react if that happened to me?"

Can we go to, say the day you enlisted now? You say that you and your mates were

07:30 **all a tight unit. Did you go together to do that?**

No. No you see I left Bendigo and I went to Melbourne. I was working for Lever Brothers. Most of my friends as I recall, it was a bit like a hive of bees. After we left school we all went our own way and did our own thing. And most of us had to leave Bendigo because there wasn't much in the way of commerce in Bendigo.

08:00 Don't think there were too many secondary industries, a few small ones but... No, no I got my call up papers, I was in Melbourne. I probably came in from the trip. I was travelling as I mentioned. I just came in, the papers were there, and I just reported. And that was a funny thing – I stayed up all night beforehand, had a bit

08:30 of a party. And when I arrived at the recruiting depot unbeknownst to me I had to undergo another sight test. See in the signals branch, either then wireless operator or in the signals you had to be able to do the flags as well as do the Morse. And they failed me. Obviously the eyes were pretty gritty not having had much sleep,

09:00 and unbeknownst to me the left eye was pretty weak anyway, and they failed me. And here I was I had left my job, had the farewell party from my job, now the navy didn't want me because my eyes weren't right. And I thought, "This is a nice kettle of fish." Well there is no way I was going to go back. I said to them, "Well right is there anyway I can go into anything else?" I said, "There is no way I can go back to my job,

09:30 and there is no way I can go back to Bendigo. I've told them I'm joining up so I'm going to join up." So they said, "Well let's have a look." So they came back and they said, "Yes you can go in as a stoker," and I mean that's the last thing I wanted to do – down in the hole with a bucket of coal. I mean a stoker is down there, not a nice place to be if you get torpedoed. So I said, "Ok,"

10:00 but as soon as I got down to Flinders Naval Base I shot straight down to the sick bay and I asked the doctor would he give me an eye test, and I made bloody sure I knew the chart, because he wasn't in the room with me I had a good look at the chart. And when he tested me I tested A1 A1 both eyes. I said, "Now,

10:30 I would like to ask you to see if you would mind giving me a chip to say that you have tested my eyes on this particular date and that you have tested them and found them to be AI." So he just wrote out the chip. Well of course the stoker's pay was somewhat higher than the signalman's pay. And the navy caught up with me about six months later. They said, "Hey what's this all about?

11:00 You're being paid as a stoker and you're trained as wireless operator." I said, "Yeah well that's right." I said as little as possible. I just said, "Well there was a misunderstanding about my eyes, but here's the chip to say that on the date that I came to Flinders Naval Base my eyes were tested and they were a hundred percent." So they couldn't take me out of the signallers' branch because the eyes

11:30 were ok, and I had already done six or seven month's training. But they couldn't get their money back. So they did eventually – as I progressed I went from signalman, to WT2 [Weapons Technician Second Class], WT3, and then to what they call leading hand. Well each one is a rise in pay and they took the money off me for back pay until they got their

12:00 money back. They don't miss anything.

Can you tell me a little bit about your basic training, what that entailed?

The thing that one remembers about the basic training was the sentry duty that you had to do. And why they did that was because wireless operators had to keep watches. There is day shift, and then there is two what they call gold watches. Two,

12:30 two hourly periods between four and six and six and eight I think they were. And then you went from eight to twelve and then from twelve until four in the morning. And in order to break you in you had to do sentry duty in Flinders Naval Base. They'd give you a rifle and a bayonet,

13:00 you had to go and do sentry duty from midnight until four am, say at the wireless station or at the control tower. Not really that they ever expected the Japanese to get that far, but it was all part of your training. And it was difficult because you were all young men.

13:30 You're not used to, except when you go to parties, you're not used to broken sleep. And it is quite difficult. In actual fact I went to sleep on sentry duty on one occasion and got caught. And to his great, what's the word I'm looking for? Well master at arms could have

14:00 put me under arrest and I would have gone to gaol for sure. I mean sleep on sentry duty is one of the worst things you can do isn't it? I mean there is all the equipment and then there is the lives of your compatriots. And to his eternal credit he got me into his office and he gave me such a bullocking over it that I never forgot. And of course I was petrified. I didn't want to go to gaol.

14:30 And he didn't report it and it was passed over. But I never ever went to sleep on duty again. Ever. Maybe that had something to do with it. You know so there is wisdom, even where there is not supposed to be any allowance made. There are some people who will use their head.

15:00 **Do you remember any kinds of misdemeanours you saw the other blokes have in basic training and what some of the punishments were?**

The navy was a great one for doubling you. What I mean by that, you didn't walk you trotted everywhere.

15:30 I can only speak of my own misdemeanours – the one with sleeping on watch as I mentioned. One, should I, I mean are you interested in what I saw of other misdemeanours, or my own misdemeanours?

You can talk about either.

16:00 **Just to get a general sense of perhaps what were common mistakes men made.**

There were a couple of things I remember. We used to have a high powered torch when you went on sentry duty and somebody stole the batteries out of it, which were obviously live batteries and put dead ones in. And the navy had an absolute witch-hunt over this.

16:30 And I recall the incident because I never met a man that had such an effect upon me that this lieutenant commander did. He was doing the investigation. And he had the absolute coldest, bluest eyes you could ever imagine. And they stood me up in front of him, and what the navy do,

17:00 bit medieval – you've got to take your cap off and you put it down to your right side and you stand there at attention and he questions you. And he looked at me and he said to me, "Telegraphist Cleary, did you or did you not take those batteries?" And I looked into these blue, blue eyes and I said to myself, "There is no way

17:30 you're going to get me to admit to something I haven't done." And I said, "No sir I did not." And he just dismissed me, just said, "Dismissed." Boom. But I've never forgotten that man. I don't remember his name, but I thought to myself if ever I got into a tight spot, he'd be the sort of man I would like to have around to say do this or do that. That was one incident.

18:00 I got bored to tears one night when I was on sentry duty and I wouldn't lie down anymore. So I got stuck into the sand bags and did a bit of bayonet practice. I broke the bayonet off the end of the rifle, snapped it clean off. Now I'm in real trouble, money-wise and of course having done that. So I thought very heavily about this for an hour or so, and before I handed the rifle in

18:30 I threw it down the stairs, got well and truly bumped and scratched. Then I dug the bayonet into the concrete and jammed the end of it. So at the end of the enquiry I said it happened like this. I was going up the stairs, there are about thirty stairs from one level to the wireless office at the top, I said I got half way up the rifle slipped off my shoulder, speared into the concrete and broke the bayonet off.

19:00 And the officer of the day had a good look at me, “Oh dismissed.” But again one doesn’t want to necessarily be punished for little misdemeanours like that. I mean they are silly little things but they are things that you remember.

19:30 There were a few others – you weren’t supposed to gamble but everyone did. Had a crown and anchor game at Flinders Naval Base which was being run by what they call the three badge AB [Able Seaman]. He’d been in for twelve years. You get a badge for three years, you get a badge for six years and the third one makes you

20:00 look like a sergeant, but they are just service badges, length of service. And these blokes used to run that crown and anchor game and I don’t know whether any of the controllers, the officers were involved, but somebody was doing very well out of it, someone was making a lot of money out of it.

Do you recall men having problems with gambling at all? Or

20:30 **whether someone couldn’t pay and there was conflict or anything like that?**

There again see you don’t really know much about other people. I lost three months pay playing a single badge AB. He’d been in the navy God knows how many years and he had a pretty good deck of cards. And I lost three months of pay before I woke up the cards were pretty well worn and he knew what was what. That was a

21:00 lesson, but in the end I became a pretty good gambler. My biggest win, which was a lot of money in those days – We were going from Morotai to a place called Tarakan in a landing ship tank. We were on that for about two and a half, three days. I won fifty-three pounds Australian during that time. And I sent every penny of it home to Mum. And bless her heart

21:30 you know. When I got home she’d put every, I’d sent a lot of my deferred pay to her as well. I lived on about a pound a fortnight and the rest of my pay I sent to my mother. And when I got home she had banked every penny of it. I was fairly well off when I got out of the navy – I had around about three hundred and sixty, three hundred and seventy pounds. Now in 1946 that would buy a house.

22:00 And that was Mum’s doing. Scotch, never wasted a penny.

Were you like that as well because of your upbringing? You said you wanted to save up for a steak when you could, did that carry on throughout your life?

I think I had been careful with money. But I don’t really

22:30 want money for money’s sake. I’ve never been ambitious to be tremendously wealthy. I’ve always wanted to provide well for the family so that we could live well, have good meals, have nice holidays, have a reasonable car. That was it, I still feel the same way. When we sold the house, the weatherboard house.

23:00 There was a considerable amount of money over once we had redecorated this place . We just put it on a deposit for the time being, and I don’t think there’ll be much of it left by the time we kick off.

Can you tell me what it was like as a young man, and other men around you , getting used to the discipline

23:30 **of the navy? Was it something that was easy to get used to or was it something that young men struggled with?**

Not for me. I had considerable difficulty with it. I hated being ordered around the place. I hated being told to run when I felt walking would get the job done.

24:00 But when the war was over, a surprising thing happened. We were at Balikpapan and obviously we started talking about what we were going to do when we got out of uniform, and I was surprised to find a high percentage of the youngsters, oh when I say youngsters, the men that I was with at Balikpapan, probably twenty-one

24:30 to twenty-four years of age, were going to stay in the navy. And I said, “I can’t believe this,” I said to one in particular, “Why would you want to stay in the navy? I mean you’ve spent X years now, everything you do is controlled – your food is controlled, clothes controlled.” I said, “I can’t

25:00 get out quick enough. I want to get out and start making a new life.” And the answer was illuminating; “Oh to hell with that. Here we’ve got a bed, we’ve got clothes, we’ve got food,” that I’ve just mentioned, “we’ve got a regular pay, nothing to worry about. We’ll stay on.” I’ve never forgotten that.

Had you spent much time on the water before going into the navy or was

25:30 **that something you had to get used to?**

I was not a good sailor. I was regularly seasick. I didn’t sail much prior to going into the navy and anything under, well any of the small boats – like the minesweeper I was on in 1946 – I was constantly seasick.

26:00 Anything about ten thousand tons that seemed alright – the motion wasn't as quick or as savage. They tended to glide a bit more over the waves, but the small ones they corkscrewed and they pitched. I was always sick, every day.

Can you describe what that is like? I mean having to work and you would have been so sick, I and you wouldn't have been the only one.

26:30 Damn miserable until you reach the stage where, you do have control over it to the extent that you know you have to eat because if you vomit and you don't have something in your stomach it will hurt your stomach, it will end up rupturing your stomach because you're vomiting and you've got these spasms and it is definitely going to

27:00 do some damage to your muscles. So what I used to do, I'd go downstairs, well go down into the mess deck. I'd have something to eat and as soon as I was finished I would shoot straight up onto the bridge. Now I could do that because I was in charge of the signals on that particular vessel. By the time I got up there, within thirty minutes I'd have lost it. But you did get some value out of the food that

27:30 you got down. You had to eat something. I recall a young wireless operator who joined us out of Melbourne, might have been Sydney or Melbourne. Sydney that's right. And he was so chronically seasick that he was actually passing up green bile because there was nothing in his stomach and in the end they just had to take him off the ship, they couldn't leave him there. He was

28:00 in the wireless cabin on the floor. That's where he was for days sometimes. Couldn't get up, couldn't eat, and every time he stood up he got sick again and heaved. So he'd up permanent land base. He wouldn't be sent to sea.

Was there specific kinds of food they fed you that were better for you in terms of getting energy out of it because so many men were sick?

No.

28:30 You get food into your stomach and your stomach starts to process it pretty quickly so you absorb some of the nutriment if it's in your stomach for ten minutes or twenty minutes or whatever. Obviously you won't get the best out of it but you'll get something. And that's what I used to do. I lost, I reckon, well I was only ten and a half stone. I lost close on

29:00 a stone in weight in the six months that I was on board the minesweeper. And I mean for a ten stone youngster to lose a stone is pretty skinny by the time you finish that. But it never permanently affected me – it just was irritable. And you do get used to it strangely enough. You know you are going to be sick so as soon as you feel it coming on you just go over the side.

29:30 **Do you recall the quality of the food and what they actually served you?**

Navy food was generally pretty good. There was a sameness about it. And when they fry eggs they're pretty glutinous by the time they reach the mess. But generally speaking I had no complaints with navy food.

And the cooks were they Australians?

Yes.

30:00 **What was the first ship that you were on and can you describe it for me, like just take us on a tour of it?**

First ship I was on would be the HMAS Manoora. Now HMAS Manoora was a private passenger vessel of about ten thousand ton capacity and it had been modified and turned into what, I think they called it landing ship infantry. In other words it was capable of carrying say

30:30 a thousand troops. Not very comfortable for them but it could carry a thousand troops plus the crew. We did a lot of training for landings using that vessel. What they would do they would take, for instance I think we trained some of the 9th Division, or the 7th,

31:00 I'm not sure which. And what they would do, we'd take them on board, sail to a spot opposite a beach which they could land on, drop the cargo nets down the side. And then the soldiers would go over the side down into the landing craft. Landing craft would go ashore. Drop the ramp and they would step onto the beach. Which was a practice

31:30 for what you do when you're actually landing. That's exactly what happened. You go down the cargo nets into the boat, circle until you are ready then you go and they drop the ramp, and hopefully there is not ten feet of water in front of it. Generally speaking, well Tarakan I got my boots wet, that was about it.

So in those landing drills if you like, how many

32:00 **times a day would they actually do that – practice a landing?**

How many times would they…?

Go through that process?

Oh well we would land, I think we used to land in the second or the third wave. So there would be the first wave which would go in and land. And they would make their way

32:30 inland from the beach. Then there would be the second wave. Now I don't recall whether we landed with the second or the third, but in any case all we did was land with the soldiers run up the beach, dig a hole as quickly as possible and get the wireless set up. And the batteries and then make contact with the ship. Now what you did then, once they

33:00 contacted you they would ask for information about the conditions, what was happening there. And then you would call in the next wave, either of troops, well it would be troops for the first five or six waves anyway so you could get as many ashore as you could,

33:30 to set up a beach head. And then you start calling in supplies, you might start calling in artillery, you might start calling in transport. And then food and ammunition and so on. And you could be on the beach for, I wonder about that, two or three days I suppose you would be there doing that, depending on what happened.

34:00 And then you'd go to a holding camp and then you'd go back to Morotai and re-equip and then go and do another landing. That was the routine.

And was that done in all kinds of conditions or usually just good conditions?

All kinds of conditions – stormy weather, rain.

34:30 I mean if you're going to do a landing you can't stop the landing because it's going to rain, you can't stop the landing because it's a bit bumpy. I have to say of the five or six landings I took part in I only went ashore on two – that was Balikpapan and Tarakan, and on both occasions the weather was reasonable

35:00 for the landing. It wasn't rough. It wasn't wet. And it was unopposed which has led me to say when I have talked about war experiences that I had a lucky war. Had I gone to a place called Tarawa, when the American marines went, they lost nearly two and a half, three thousand men, killed,

35:30 on that horrible bloody place because it, actually it was very heavily defended. And they also didn't have the information on the tides and they got stuck on the reef on the way in and they had to wade in for five hundred, six hundred metres. Under fire. But as I say I was lucky. Hardly got my feet wet.

36:00 **Even just say go back to the training landings, what sort of things would go wrong?**

Well you could fall off the net. I mean you're going down a net for twenty feet, twenty-five feet above the boat, which is, it's got a move, it's got a roll and it's got a pitch. You could fall off

36:30 the net. I used to carry a wireless set nearly as big as your esky there. And a rifle and a bayonet, a kit bag of personal equipment. Well if you lost your grip on that net on the way down and you fell into the water, well it's not a nice experience. You'd probably go straight to the bottom. I don't think you'd be able to get to the surface because you have all

37:00 of that weight on you. But that never ever happened to me. Well there'd be seasickness. And that really can be bad for soldiers, I mean its bad for sailors. But if the boat, I mean the landing craft is doing this sort of thing on the way in it's quite possible that the soldiers would get sick and they wouldn't be interested in anything except getting off the boat.

37:30 I didn't ever see anybody refuse to go. Once we were called, your group was called, you went to the embarkation point and you just went down the net. I do recall one chap having a premonition that he was going to get knocked off, and

38:00 he didn't want to go but that was before we were actually called to disembark. And what did they do with him? I can't quite recall now. I think he had to go anyway. The fact that he had this premonition that he was going to get killed. No rule about that. I mean plenty of people get that, not that I ever did. As far I was concerned I was

38:30 at an age where nothing was going to happen to me. I never ever felt that I was going to get hurt or killed. I have a theory about that, and the theory goes like this – if you've got a premonition that you're going to get killed, when the time comes that something happens that you can see you're going to get hurt, you're going to freeze. You're going to

39:00 say to yourself, "This is what I dreamt about. This is what I had the premonition about." Now if you allow yourself to get into that frame of mind for a split second you don't do what you should do and take action to protect yourself. You might just freeze and stand there, or for instance if somebody is going to shoot you it makes you a standing target. So I always used to argue with anyone that was cared don't let that get to you because it may

39:30 affect your judgement at the time you don't want it to and it may lead to your death. That was my

theory.

Great.

Tape 4

00:30 **So you've told us about basic training and your first ship was the Manoora?**

HMAS Manoora yes.

So what was it like the first time you sailed out to sea?

It was good.

01:00 I'm almost sure that this was when I caught up with my uncle by the name of Bill Skinner. He was a sergeant in the 9th Division. And I'm almost sure the first trip we did on the Manoora we took a portion of the 9th Division to New Guinea. I think we landed them at Milne Bay. I'm

01:30 not a hundred percent sure, either that or a place called Oro Bay. The interesting thing about this was that I didn't know Bill was on board and I was going through the soldiers' area soon after we left Sydney or Brisbane wherever we left. And lo and behold here's Bill and I said, "Hey, hey we can't leave you

02:00 here." And he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Up to the wireless operator's set up. We'll let you in there and we'll look after you on the trip." And he said, "Fair enough." So we took him out of there. He couldn't sleep in our area because there wasn't enough room, but we fed him like a fighting cock, from the time I found him until the time he got off the boat. Unfortunately he got wounded – pretty bad head wound

02:30 wherever he went to and he was invalided back to Australia. He lived for quite some time. He's dead now. But that's just one of those little coincidences. I think he enjoyed his trip much better because he was involved with us and we looked after him pretty well.

Can you tell us about the type of conditions that existed on board the Manoora?

They were

03:00 pretty good. Wireless operators conditions generally speaking were a little bit better than the seamen and the stokers'. And the reason for that was that we were watch keepers, and we had to be prepared to go on watch any time of day or night. So we had to have reasonable sleeping accommodation and a certain amount of privacy,

03:30 not large groups of men. Because on the Manoora you'd have several hundred sailors, you'd have several hundred stokers, but wireless operators there would only be six or eight. And your accommodation accordingly would be a bit smaller. Your meals would be the same, but there was that little bit of

04:00 privacy. And the other thing, which was quite good from our point of view, was signals branch didn't have to work part of ship. Now part of ship is when you have to load stores or unload. The seamen and stokers would have to do that. But wireless operators and signallers didn't have to. Not very popular amongst the

04:30 other lads because of that.

Can you tell us then about the conditions in comparison to what the troops had to live with?

Well the navy in those days still used hammocks. We didn't use bunks. From memory the troops had a very cramped situation where they had layers of bunks, and that's all they had.

05:00 They had no other common area other than if they could come up on to the open decks, up above their accommodation. Ours, we'd have a, this would be the size of our mess. We'd have a table, bench, lockers, and we'd have a

05:30 bin where our hammocks were stowed. And we'd just put them up each night, and rope them up again each morning and put them in the stowage. So you had a bit more elbow room.

How did you find living in those conditions?

I, it never worried me. Never worried me at all. I don't have any bad feelings

06:00 about that sort of accommodation. And I was only thinking about being on the beach I can't even remember, except at Tarakan, well you had no coverage for the first two or three days anyway because there was no point in putting up a tent on the beach. At least I don't think so. I remember at Tarakan I

got lucky. I,

06:30 just about where we came ashore I found the foundations of some sort of a building. And there was a gap about half a metre wide and a metre deep between two solid pieces of concrete, so I said, “Oh suits me.” Put the bed roll down the bottom of that. I didn’t have any head protection,

07:00 but I was protected underneath and both sides by solid concrete. That was a beaut. I enjoyed that. I must have stayed there for, well I was loathe to leave. It was a safe place.

So how long would the trip take by sea from Sydney to Milne Bay?

Well again it’s a matter of which the speed at which the ship is travelling.

07:30 I really couldn’t say how long, I really couldn’t say.

Would the ship sail in convoy? Can you tell us about the convoy?

Oh yes, yes. Troop ships in particular would always have a convoy and you’d be protected by corvettes and destroyers. The convoy that went to a place called Hollandia – Hollandia was my first

08:00 landing. I didn’t go ashore. I was on the bridge and controlling through the radio the movement of the landing craft between… that was the Manoora, she went there… between there and the beach. At that time that was one of the biggest convoys that had ever sailed. I mean there were hundreds of vessels that sailed. It was dwarfed later

08:30 by the European landings, but at that time I can recall getting up one morning and I was up on the bridge and as far as you could see were these ships and you’d think, “Holy mackerel, if the Japanese found us what a picnic they would have.” But they didn’t. They surprised them actually.

So what would that do to your spirits to see such a large force? Would that buoy your spirits or would that frighten you?

09:00 I actually started a diary because of that. And it lasted for probably six or eight months. But then it became dangerous – you weren’t supposed to keep diaries as you know. But I remember I was so impressed that I actually wrote down, I actually had that diary for some years but I think. Our house burnt down in South Africa

09:30 with a lightning strike there and I think a lot of that stuff went up. I know my papers went up in that particular fire so I think that’s where that went.

So I imagine it was a fairly slow, long journey travelling up the coast. What were the normal daily tasks?

Well see if you were a watch keeper you don’t have a lot of time to yourself. Depending on how many wireless operators there

10:00 are available you could be four on four off, you could be four on six off, or you could be four on two off if you were short. In other words you would be on duty for four hours and have two hours sleep. That’d be the worst possible conditions, but you see a wireless operator, I would imagine we’d be working four and six. Four on six off.

10:30 So we’d have that six hours off where we would sleep, have a meal and cards. We were always playing cards. Poker or bridge or something like that. And always gambling.

Can you tell us then about the pressures? Obviously if you’re getting six hours off between a four hour shift the four hours must have been fairly high pressure were they?

You mean when you are on duty?

11:00 What used to happen on the Manoora; you were on what they called a… there is a place called Belconnen in Canberra. And they used to encode and send out the messages to each individual commander of a ship, or to the commander of the landing.

11:30 And you had a call sign, and as soon as you heard your call sign coming through, say for HMAS Manoora, you immediately wrote down that message. It would be your call sign, south west Pacific area, attention so and so. And the moment you got that down you sent that to the decoders. They decoded it

12:00 and then it went to the skipper or whoever it was addressed to.

Do you remember your call sign?

No, no.

And can you tell us about the decoders?

Yes that’s interesting. Decoders were failed wireless operators. It was a bit of a no no. One thing you didn’t want to do was fail your examination at Flinders Naval Depot and be re-mustered as a coder.

12:30 It was considered, well your rate of pay was lower for a start, and everyone knew that you weren't a very good wireless operator. I just made it.

So what were considered the good jobs and the worst jobs on board the ship?

Stoker's the worst job in my humble opinion. The reason for that is, if the ship goes down

13:00 you're right at the bottom of the ship. And your chances accordingly are reduced. If a torpedo hits it, in many cases it is going to explode in the area of the engine room. It's going to be flooded, it's going to be damaged, so I never like the idea of being a stoker. Gunners, well you're a seaman, you're on deck and if the ship

13:30 goes down you've got a fighting chance. You've got a better chance of getting off than if you're down below. That'd be about all I could say about that.

Were there jobs that were particularly good on the ship that people wanted to do?

I think the wireless operator job was the best job on the

14:00 ship. I really do. I think we had more privacy, we had our own mess deck. And nobody interfered with us much. I mean the officer of the days couldn't say, "Cleary, up top start loading or off loading." You'd say, "Sorry sir." You didn't do that, I mean that was asking for trouble, but everybody knew.

14:30 And the executive branch I think were a bit inclined to watch the wireless staff. If they got out of line they were quite prepared to let them know who was the boss. Seamen were the executives, they were the ones that controlled the vessel, and you can imagine that they weren't all that impressed with having a group of men that they couldn't say "do this" or "do that" to.

So can you tell us about the rivalries on the boat, on the ship?

15:00 Seamen and stokers tended to give us a bit of a hard time because of that. But not in a serious manner – just that they let us know they thought we were a bunch of wimps and we let them know we enjoyed being wimps.

15:30 **Were there any kinds of initiation into the navy at that time?**

I'm not one for initiations. I didn't like it at university. And I still don't like it. I think it's a load of codswallop. I think it's childish. No I don't know anything about that.

What about general hi-jinks? People letting off steam and having a bit of fun on the ship?

16:00 You had to be very wary. The captain took a very dim view of anything that was liable to endanger his ship. So no you behaved yourself. We weren't allowed to drink. You know that the Australian navy was officers only. They had liquor in their ward room, but the sailors were not allowed to bring it

16:30 on board and they were not allowed to drink on board the ship. I suppose a few of them smuggled a bottle of scotch on in Sydney, but it would only last a couple of days anyway. So, and I'm a regular drinker now, and I enjoy it. Lenore and I have had a drink together for fifty years. It just became part of our system, but I didn't bother too much about it.

17:00 I'd have a drink when I went ashore, but I never bothered about trying to take booze [alcohol] on board the ship.

So what was the relationship like between the officers and the other ranks?

Distant. Them and us. The officers didn't mix at all. What the officers,

17:30 well the orders were given and that was it. You didn't argue. Didn't matter what the order was that was given – you did it. I never had any situation where I would have argued with an officer, an order. But I know a few of them that once we got ashore I wouldn't have liked to have them on my right hand. I had a few blokes that I trusted more than some of them blokes,

18:00 with our immediate group.

Can you ever recall any incidences happening where there were clashes in that regard between officers and other ranks?

Well again it's an individual thing. I got in all sorts of strife because I ended up getting a hold of an American carbine. Because of the weight involved of the stuff I used to take ashore

18:30 one day I went aboard an American LST they used to call them. Landing ship tank. And I had a Japanese bayonet and a Japanese flag and I was going to swap them for some American clothes and whatever else I could get. And I think I got a couple of sets of jeans and then this bloke came along and he got an eye on this bayonet, he wanted this bayonet.

19:00 So I said, "Well have you got one of those little carbines?" Yes man, he had one of those carbines. So I swapped that and then I put in a request to the skipper, I said, "Look I reckon I must have about forty or fifty kilos of weight when I go ashore with this radio and my personal kit." And sometimes there was the

battery. The battery was the same as a car battery. And I got permission

19:30 to carry this carbine, which was a lovely little gun. And of course I was keen to shoot well with it. So I used to get ammunition from the Americans and I'd knock coconuts out of trees, or I'd put up a target and eventually I got nailed one day discharging a firearm in the confines of the camp.

20:00 Well that didn't worry me so much but as usual I didn't want to pay the penalty unless I had to. And I was paraded, and I ended up getting seven days stoppage of leave and pay. I mean that didn't matter so much because we were in the islands. There was plenty of that sort of thing happening. People, they had to keep discipline.

20:30 And of course we were bored to tears sitting around a place like Balikpapan for weeks on end after the landing was over. What do you do with a whole group of high spirited men? I mean you're going to get problems with them. We found a big magazine full of little boxes of black powder. They were about that round about that deep.

21:00 And they also had bags of quartite, like spaghetti, about that long. Just like spaghetti it was. So we hit upon an idea; at the back of our camp there was a valley. The valley was about three or four hundred feet deep, and it was probably, let's say five to six

21:30 metres from the ridge that we were camped on to the other ridge. So my mate and I hit upon the idea – "I wonder if we could take that pipe," there was this big pipeline there. "I wonder if we could get half a brick from here on this ridge across to the other ridge?" Oh it was worth trying.

22:00 So we drilled a hole in this pipe and we put one of these boxes in, and we put a thread of quartite in and we lit it, put half a brick in. Half a brick just went out of the pipe and went about a couple of hundred feet, down into the valley. So that wasn't much good. So we upped the ante a bit until eventually we got a half a brick to fly from our ridge across to the other side.

22:30 Now how we didn't blow ourselves up I don't know. So about this time the officer of the watch obviously had been a bit annoyed by this. And he came down, and you probably read about this and it happened. He came down and there is still smoke and God knows what and dust everywhere. But everyone is lying on their bed with a book and the officer of the watch said, "Telegraphist Cleary, what was that noise I just heard?"

23:00 "Noise sir?" And everyone did exactly the same thing. He got absolutely no information out of anybody. He just had to go back to the top office and forget about it. We stopped doing it after that though because the next thing would have been, we would have put too much in there. But I mean you wonder don't you? You wonder.

23:30 I wasn't destined to be killed I'm sure of that. Not there anyway.

Can you remember the captain from the Manoora?

No, I remember the captain of the beach group. He was a reserve officer and, not really impressed with him.

Why was that?

I think

24:00 he was a stuffed shirt. He wasn't a man's man. Not in my view, and I fronted him enough times to know I didn't like him. He didn't like me either. I was always getting in trouble so naturally he wouldn't like me. But I had no respect for the man. He got decorated too, because they had to hand out the decorations.

24:30 Well I mean there was nothing happened that was worthwhile anyway. Can't even remember what his name was.

So what sort of things did the troops do when you were on your way from Australia to New Guinea? What did they do to bide their time?

Gambling mostly. Two up amongst the soldiers, but poker,

25:00 sailors played a lot of poker. And quite a few of us learnt to play bridge. There was a game called five hundred, which was similar in some respects to bridge but not near as complicated. You started off learning to play five hundred, and then you got to, it wasn't contract bridge it was auction. Contract you bid, you only get

25:30 if you get your contract you get credited for that. But if you don't bid it you don't get the same points, same number of points. I enjoyed bridge and played a lot of it as well as a lot of poker.

What sort of training did they do on board the ship?

26:00 Well there again you see, a wireless operator is either eating, sleeping or on duty. What the sailors did – that is the seamen – and what the stokers did I don't know. You really are a separate little entity. You've got your own offices, and you've got your own mess, so you really don't mix

26:30 with the rest of the ship. It does make a little bit for a privileged group doesn't it?

Was there any thought at any stage of you joining the merchant navy?

No.

What was the relationship like between the merchant navy and the Australian navy?

Well I personally have a lot of respect for the merchant navy. That has probably come from reading of

27:00 their exploits and realising that many of them went to sea with a little pop gun at the front, or the stern, or up forward. And if they were caught they seldom had time to get enough boats down to get away. My personal feelings are that the merchant navy were

27:30 not given the recognition that they should have been.

Can you tell me about the feeling on the ship when you are getting close to landing?

Well here again,

28:00 I don't think we tended to swap feelings or experiences so I can only speak for myself, and I might have said in the previous interview – at that age you are immortal. Unless you are a moron who is intent on getting yourself killed you're not going to get hurt. I mean at nineteen years of age, who is going to

28:30 be good enough to get you? It just doesn't seem to enter your head. I think you did worry a little bit about being wounded. I would have hated to lose my sight for instance. I've got a pretty good pain threshold. I think I'd have taken being wounded ok. But I do remember being a little bit concerned about the possibility that I might lose my sight.

29:00 And to me that was a bit of a no no. Apart from that we weren't going to get hurt. Feelings – I think I'd be safe in saying I didn't want it to be rough because I didn't want to get seasick before I went ashore.

29:30 Because if you're badly seasick, honest to goodness you don't give a damn whether you live or die. You'd rather die because you are so bloody miserable, until you get used to it. So I didn't want to get seasick going in. Some of the poor old soldiers of course going in, as soon as the thing started to go they'd get sick. But you didn't worry about them, you just kept your eye on the job. In any case we didn't have soldiers on our landing craft – it was just sailors.

30:00 **What other sailors went ashore in that landing?**

Well you'd have, there would be an officer go with you. And there'd be a petty officer, and then there'd be a leading hand. Like leading hand would be equivalent to corporal or sergeant.

30:30 The petty officer would be a warrant officer in the army and the lieutenant would be a lieutenant in the army. They would go ashore with you and help you get set up and be responsible for receiving and enacting on messages. There was one sad incident at Tarakan; this one young bloke, I can't remember whether he was a subby or a lieutenant.

31:00 Anyway he pulled, they were always armed with a thirty eight pistol, a pretty innocuous sort of thing, but for some reason or other it got wet, I think he might have fallen over when we came ashore. And once we settled down he pulled it out of the webbing and he cocked it and he shot himself just through below the knee and came out down here.

31:30 And I heard the shot go off and I went over and the astonishment of the pressure of the blood. It actually fountained, seemed to go for feet out of this wound in his leg. And of course he's hanging on to his leg, dropped his pistol. I picked it up, stuck it in my pocket and I carried that for about six months

32:00 until suddenly somebody woke up that it was gone and I had to give it back. But this poor bastard then had the horrible situation of being suspected of a self inflicted wound. Can you imagine what that must have been like? I don't think it was. I think he just the pistol was wet and he decided to clean it but instead of opening it and

32:30 emptying it out he cocked it. And then somehow or another it went off. I never thought he shot himself. We never saw anything of him afterwards, but I always a bit sorry for him. Wasn't a bad sort of a joker.

Was there ever instances on the boat where people would injure themselves to get out of duty?

Not to my knowledge. The only one I know of is the

33:00 one I mentioned earlier where this youngster got this premonition he was going to be killed and he asked not be sent ashore on that particular beach. Actually what he saw was a tremendous explosion and he got the premonition that he was right in the middle of it. Well there was in fact at one end of the beach a tremendous explosion and I remember I was on duty at the time.

33:30 And the skipper on the landing ship called in, "What the hell was that?" And we think it was probably a land mine that the Japs [Japanese] had set off for some reason or another. Or a vehicle might have gone

over a land mine. It was too far away and we could never leave our area. Once we were set on the beach that's where we stayed for the two or three days.

Apart from that, what other superstitions

34:00 **existed in the navy?**

Well I don't know. I mean I'm not superstitious myself. I'm pretty much a realist – what you see is what you get. What you're looking at is what you're seeing, that's what it is. Well there is the old one –

34:30 sailors are always interested in albatrosses. But I don't think the albatross spends much time in the tropics. Not to my knowledge anyway. No I don't have any knowledge of that.

So in the landing craft the majority of sailors are operators such as yourself?

In our landing craft yes. There'd be the beach group personnel, there'd be

35:00 non-commissioned officers, there'd be I don't know, six or eight wireless operators, so that you'd be able to cover two wireless sets, or you'd have double cover for one wireless set. I can't quite remember the numbers there. I think there used to be some seamen sent ashore with us to act as a bit of a guard, but I'm not a hundred percent sure about that.

35:30 **Do you think the attitude from other sailors, as opposed to when you are on board where you are a bit of a protected species, once you're over the side and going to where the action really is, I mean did the feeling change?**

Oh yes. If there had been a scrap everyone would have pitched in. We again were lucky. We got shelled at odd times, but

36:00 we were never attacked by the Japanese because by the time we started our landings in '44 and then in '45 their doctrine had changed. They used to meet us on the beach and try to stop us getting ashore. But they found they couldn't stop us, because there was too many of us and there was too much equipment.

36:30 So by the time we landed at Balikpapan and Tarakan they were withdrawing, and fortifying a line say half a mile inland. Now the soldiers got involved with them and we were fortunate. I recall at Tarakan I went down to the beach when I got off watch,

37:00 and about three or four hundred metres from where we landed there was a bunker as big as this room with the most magnificent twin, they must have been, bigger than half inch – they'd be about three quarter inch calibre, covering the whole of the beach. From that point straight down parallel with where we had landed.

37:30 Now if they had done there what they did in say Buna or Gona and stayed there it would have been a different story. Because that was an absolute superb position. I mean the only way you'd ever knock it out would be to creep up close enough to throw grenades through the front or

38:00 get a twenty-five pounder close enough to put a shell in the slip. But why they never stopped there, I'm blowed if I know. I'm not unhappy that they didn't.

Can you recall any of the other seamen on the ship volunteering to go ashore?

No. No beach group was a particular group that were trained

38:30 and had trained a lot of soldiers to go ashore. I think some of us the middies [midshipmen] were keen to have a go, but those poor little buggers they didn't really know anyway. I mean what age? Some of them midshipmen could be sixteen or seventeen years of age. Whether or not at

39:00 that age they allowed them to be the boson of the landing craft I don't know, but I… just brought it back to me at Hollandia – I remember looking down there and seeing these young buggers down there. And I though not bad for a kid to be responsible for taking a landing craft from the Manoora into the beach, drop the front and get all of his soldiers off

39:30 and then pull it away from the beach. That was the job, one of the jobs that they had.

Ok we'll stop it there. The tape is about to…

Tape 5

00:31 **Can I just take you back to when you were first joining up? Your brother – he didn't enlist?**

My eldest brother didn't enlist, my younger brother did. Desmond is two years younger than I. He joined the navy. My eldest brother was on a five hundred pound bond with the forestry department.

01:00 My family were not wealthy and Val was recently married so for him to have absconded and joined – which he came very close to doing, particularly after I joined – would have cost the family five hundred pound. Now in 1941 five hundred pound, you could buy two quite useful homes.

01:30 About two hundred and fifty, two hundred and eighty pounds a house. So it represented quite a lot of money. And Val is and was a very conscientious family-aware person and he just wouldn't do it. He went through a lot of grief. We don't discuss it because I know it hurts him a lot but I believe he got a white feather [white feathers were given to people avoiding conscription or perceived as being cowards], and he got

02:00 ribbed quite a bit because he is a nice looking man. He's six foot one, broad, very good sportsman. Australian rules, cricket, tennis, anything. And I think during the war some of the folk who had family in the services gave him a pretty hard time. But as I say he was a pretty private individual and

02:30 I've never raised the matter with him.

So in your town was it more, I mean you said that you felt a peer pressure to join up, being with your mates and that sort of thing. Was that the general feeling in your town?

I wouldn't use the terminology 'peer pressure'. What people say and what people do doesn't interest me. What they think of me doesn't interest me

03:00 because I know who I am. I've never been under any misapprehension. I'm John Cleary, reasonable sportsman, reasonable scholar. Married person, a reasonable father – not the best in the world, but we raised the three boys, and none of them got into any real difficulties. The eldest son was killed in a motor accident

03:30 in South Africa in 1976. But that was, well I think looking back the car ran into the back of a trailer which had been abandoned on the side of the freeway. There was no warning triangles. So my second son was actually driving the car, and I don't think they even saw the bloody trailer. Just ran straight into the back of it.

04:00 Johnny was sitting in the passenger seat and he was killed instantly. The lad in the back was pretty badly injured and Peter was all right, he wasn't hurt. That was a nasty one. Where were we? Oh peer pressure, that's not quite true,

04:30 because I did raise the question of my being militant at the golf course. If people don't obey the rules, I have to admit in recent years I'm not quite as militant about that as I was. Because I'm sick of people not wanting to be involved with me

05:00 because I've got a name for being a bit of a… well I'm a real man, and if you don't play by the rules John Cleary is going to go after you. And of course when people know that they don't want to play in your four ball. They want a more relaxed four ball. I can understand that but I have played golf since I was twelve and I think it is one of the most marvelous games

05:30 there is. But I believe if you're going to play it you've got to stick as close as you possibly can to the rules of the game.

Did you become a rule man after, because of your time in the navy, or were you always a rule man?

Well I caddied as I told you from the age of twelve. And the golfers of that period are different or work different to the golfers of this period.

06:00 Golf in those days was generally considered to be a wealthy person's game. Because of the costs of clubs and the cost of joining a golf club. Consequently, you got businessmen and you got fairly well-to-do people playing golf and their attention to etiquette and to the rules was severe.

06:30 And as a caddy you couldn't help but notice this, and if somebody that you caddied for or played in your fore ball and they cheated you were quite… I won't say upset. But it made you think very much about that man – because he cheats at golf, I wouldn't like

07:00 to do business with him maybe. And that's what I grew up with. Now I then gave up golf for a few years because it is a selfish game. You disappear from the house at seven o'clock on Saturday morning and if you have a few beers you get home at two o'clock in the afternoon. Your wife's had the children for the whole of the week and then you just wander in. You wouldn't be drunk but you'd be smelling of beer at two o'clock in the afternoon.

07:30 Now when you think about that it's not a real good thing, so I gave it up for about twelve years while the bambinos grew up, and that gave me more time with the family. And took a bit of the weight off Lenore. But I have to say this – I grew up in a pretty chauvinistic society and there is no doubt in my mind

08:00 in the early ten or fifteen years of our marriage I was a pretty chauvinistic person. I didn't, I wasn't a bad father, but I wasn't an interested parent as my sons are in their children today. I was interested in

getting on in the BHP. I was working shift work. And whatever time I could get I used to

08:30 tend not to spend as much of it with the family in the early days as I should have. That all changed when I gave up golf. So I was working seven days a week. I only had Saturday afternoons, Sunday afternoon off, and we got into the habit then of taking the children spear fishing, swimming, picnicking.

09:00 And so on, that changed. But the underlying chauvinism was still there and that didn't get shaken off until I started giving Lenore her own income when we went to South Africa. Because we had a transport business there and we could afford then to give her a cheque book and give her so much a month for herself, which I didn't have nay interest in what she did with it. There was plenty of money to run the family and to keep the business going nicely.

09:30 So she had that and I think that was a good move. I digressed a bit there. No peer pressure, the desire to be with my compatriots and be in uniform more than anything else.

What were the greens like when you were growing up and twelve working as a caddy?

10:00 **The course?**

Sand greens. By greens do you mean the green society?

No the golf course.

Well the greens were sand greens in those days. They hadn't gone to grass greens at the course I caddied for.

Could you describe that a bit for me? Because I don't really know what that means.

Is that right? Well your fairways

10:30 are still the same as they are now. Like a mown section of grass. Your greens were a clay base about as big as this room, covered with three quarters of an inch of fairly fine, well no, gritty sand that didn't bind. And what you had to do there was what they call bump and run. You couldn't pitch your ball on the green because

11:00 it would piece the sand, hit the clay base and bounce twenty feet in the air and be off. So what you had to do was play a shot just short of the green which would bump, and then jump onto the green and then run through the sand towards the hole. Now what they used to do, they had bagmen, and bagmen had a big long stick with a length of hessian on it and two

11:30 ropes, one to each end of the stick. And they would trail that behind them. They'd start at the centre of the green and they'd walk around in concentric circles and they'd wipe all of the marks out of the previous players. And then you'd come to play and if you came just after the bagman had gone around you'd have a nice clean green to play on. If he hadn't been around you had to put over the marks of the previous players.

12:00 **Sounds like it was a harder game in those days?**

Well it was. You wouldn't get the scores that you are capable of getting on conventional greens now. Because what you do now, you pitch the ball high enough and you stop it on the green, it doesn't bounce right through. And you haven't got the tracks or the marks of the previous player to contend with. You did have a rake,

12:30 which was on the end of the pole which you could take from the position of your ball, you were permitted to rake it towards the hole to iron out some of the worst of the marks. You were permitted to do that.

I'm wondering if we can just jump forward to your time on the ship. Could you just tell me a bit more about the middies – the young men on the ship. How they were generally regarded?

13:00 Well midshipmen are dogsbodies. They are the officers' errand boys. I mean the officers want something done whatever – "Go and get me some envelopes, get me a cup of coffee, go up to the chief signallers officer." All of the odds and

13:30 sods jobs that the officers want done are generally handled by the midshipmen. I don't have intimate knowledge of their conditions on board ships because I have never been one and I have only read about it. You don't see a lot of them aboard the ship. Now there weren't midshipmen on the minesweepers – they were

14:00 nearly all reserve officers. Most of the midshipmen would be on like cruiser or aircraft carriers, battleships. You know, bigger ships.

Could you talk me through a time maybe after you had done a landing and you were shelled? Could you describe perhaps any particular incident that stands out?

14:30 I'd say the saddest incident for me was the loss of two of the youngest of our signalmen. They were only eighteen year old kids. And they were up the beach several hundred metres from where I was. I was in

the crack between the concrete foundation, so I was

15:00 safe as a house except if a shell landed directly on top of me which, I don't know what the odds would be. But what happened, the Japanese had obviously ranged the beach from where their weapons were, and all they used to do was land a number of shells onto a section of the beach and then stop firing and move their cannon. It seemed to me they

15:30 didn't keep firing from the same spot. That's understandable that they'd want to move them fairly quickly because the Allies had a number of aircraft and if they kept firing it wouldn't be long before they'd be spotted and then they'd be in trouble. But the sadness of it was that of all the people to be killed, the two youngest of the group. They'd only been with us a short while. They both

16:00 got killed on a particular night. Could have been me I suppose but it wasn't?

Where was that at?

That was at Tarakan. Tarakan was more an island type spot. I think they were after an airfield, but I think they might have been after oil.

16:30 The other thing that I learned about many, many years after and this is something that has had quite a bearing on my thinking about what happens to you in life – MacArthur [General Douglas MacArthur] did not want Australian troops involved in the invasion of the Philippines. Or he did not want Australian troops involved in the invasion of Japan.

17:00 So he ended up giving us jobs which really weren't necessary to keep us from being under his feet, and continually being badgered by Sir Thomas Blamey [General Thomas Blamey] to give the Australian troops some situation which would keep Australia in the forefront. Because generals don't get promotion

17:30 and don't get decoration if their troops are not involved in war. All they get is, well I don't know, they don't get anything. And he wanted then to be involved because that meant further promotion. He ended up getting to be field marshal anyway. Anyway he sent us into these places and I think two hundred and seventy odd were killed in either

18:00 Balikpapan or Tarakan and it was unnecessary. Those Japanese forces were cut off, they could not be supplied. They would have died of starvation or they would have had to capitulate at the end of the war. But Mr MacArthur decreed to keep us out of his hair so he sent us in there. And I've always felt pretty let down about that because you're proud of what you've done and what you've endured

18:30 and you don't complain about it, and you don't bother blowing your trumpet about it. But when you find out that a lot of your countrymen were killed doing that and it wasn't necessary you don't feel very good about it. Believe you me. I don't. I mean I've read a lot about the First World War and the Second World War and I don't feel very good about what happened to Australian soldiers in the First World War,

19:00 in Gallipoli, and France. And then to find myself being involved in a landing which was unnecessary was a bit of a shock. You feel… the word isn't let down. You feel that what you've done is not legitimate because it wasn't necessary.

So were there things at the time that made you feel like that even then

19:30 **or is this in hindsight?**

We didn't know, we didn't know. I didn't know until a long time after the war that this was so. We had an inkling because MacArthur was one of the most egotistical generals ever to walk the face of the earth. I mean General Montgomery wasn't bad but I think MacArthur was way ahead of him. And we needed him – he was the only one that was left.

20:00 He came to Australia and they used him as a focal point to build up the forces here. And then he came up with the concept of island hopping. Which was good – he just went to places and landed, like we did, unopposed landings. Ok I've explained that they weren't necessary but a lot of the other landings that he engineered were very low in casualty rates because of the way that he did it.

20:30 But I don't suppose a foot soldier really would ever have a great deal of regard for a general unless he knew him personally and met him and could form a man-to-man opinion of him. I never met MacArthur, I never met General Blamey, but I know of him, his reputation.

21:00 **So I imagine that the loss of those two young men would have had a huge effect on morale at the time. Do you recall that how it affected you?**

Not so much morale if you mean morale in terms of doing the job. We just carried on. You still worked your shifts and you still manned your wireless set.

21:30 But had they been older I don't think the impression on me would have been so long-lived. Because they were so young – I wasn't all that much older than they were. But that time I must have been getting on to around twenty, but it was just that they were so young, so young.

22:00 **Do you recall, I mean in training they prepare you for fighting the enemy and so forth but what is it like when for the very first time you are being put in danger, you know, you are being shelled? Do you think about it or do you just try to get through it?**

Never worried me because I have said to you before as far as I was concerned I was indestructible. I never had a moment's fear

22:30 during the war. I'll tell you a funny story – I went pig shooting after I got home, about five years after I got home and I had an incident where the rifle jammed and a pig charged me and I was more bloody scared then than I ever was during the war. I really was, I was scared witless. There wasn't a tree near me, I didn't have

23:00 anything to get up on and this bugger was coming at me. I ended up, somehow or other I got onto a fence post. And I still don't know how I got there.

Can you tell me about your job when you were on the beach signalling back to the ship and so forth, like how busy were you? Was it like a twenty-four hour alert kind of thing once you were on the beach?

Well you've got a team

23:30 and you keep watch. I can't remember if we kept the same watches during the landings as we did on board ship, but I think probably we did because we would be used to that. So you'd go on to the set at eight o'clock in the morning and you'd operate the set until midday. And then your oppo – that's your relief –

24:00 would come on at midday and go through until four o'clock. Then somebody else would do the four to six, and then the six to eight and then you'd probably come back on at eight o'clock and go through to midnight. A similar watch keeping system to what you would work on board ship. I' m pretty sure that's the way it would work. I mean that would be logical to do it that way. Because that's what you were used to. And your sleeping pattern,

24:30 I'm blowed if I know how we used to sleep there but we must have, we must have got enough sleep. I mean they're the sorts of things that happen without you really giving much thought to it. After three or four days I think we would have stretchers, they'd come in later on. You know when all the other essentials had been brought ashore I'm pretty certain our few amenities,

25:00 maybe tents and things would start to come ashore as well. By that time fighting would have moved inland quite a way.

You were also involved with going through the tunnels weren't you during the war? Do you want to tell us how that came about?

That's a strictly illegal. That's souvenir hunting.

Are you able to talk about that or...?

25:30 Yes why not. I got bored quickly once I came off watch and I used to team up with whoever else was off watch and we'd go souvenir hunting. And this particular day, I'm trying to think now whether this was at Tarakan? No, this must have been at Balikpapan. And this chap and I went off inland

26:00 for a bit, probably kilo or two. And we came into a, what I think was a quarry. So we got down into that and then we found this tunnel, which was open on one end of the quarry. So Johnno looked at me and I looked at Johnno and I said, "Well what do you think?" And he said, "Oh well we'll give it a go,"

26:30 and we did. And horrifying really when you think about it. First thing we came across was a corpse which must have been a week old. And alive, absolutely alive, everything moving, all the face and the body. So we just stepped over him and kept going, and we finally got, oh hard to remember how far in – let's say sixty, seventy

27:00 metres in and then the tunnel turned left. And the tunnel going straight on was blocked with drums and it was there that we got ourselves a real nasty one – there was a dog started barking. Now the question is – is the dog's master with the dog? Or has the dog gotten in there and is he alone?

27:30 Well it seemed a pretty good bet that if there was somebody with him that we would hear them when they came out so we turned left and kept going. And we came to a, I use this room about half the size of this room, an attic cut into the side, and here was this magnificent, they call them woodpeckers [Japanese 7.7mm heavy machine gun type 92], you'll probably of this is talks with your soldiers.

28:00 It's about a half inch machine gun, big heavy machine gun on a tripod, and it's set up to catch anybody going past this cut in the side of the tunnel. I never did find out if it was loaded. I never did check because it was too heavy too move and I didn't want it anyway. We were looking for field glasses and swords, which we found in that particular spot.

28:30 Including canvas kit bags of Japanese soldiers with personal effects in them. There were letters, I can't remember if there were photos – there probably were. But we were looking for pistols, binoculars and

swords. And that's what we did. On reflection, I mean to go into

29:00 that place, it's a wonder we weren't killed because it'd be so easy to booby-trap it – just put a tripwire across the tunnel and you trip over that and bring the whole thing down on top of you. But luckily they hadn't done that they hadn't booby-trapped it. Then we went out, and the dog was still barking. That's a question I've often asked myself – whether

29:30 there was somebody in there? Could be. I know one of my friends captured a Japanese. It was at Balikpapan in one of the tunnels. And the poor bugger he was so emaciated, he hadn't eaten for days. Just had a cloth around his waist. No hat, no shoes, no nothing. Kell nearly shot him because he got such a shock. He pulled

30:00 up just in time and took him down and handed him over to the army MPs [Military Police]. Pretty poor specimen, poor bugger. Going into the tunnels is not a good thing. I mean if I had had to do it as they did in Vietnam it would have been a different thing. But to go in there just looking for souvenirs it's probably not a very sensible thing to do. I wouldn't do it today.

30:30 **You must have been pretty bored to find that body and keep going in.**

Yeah it wasn't a pretty sight.

So was there a bit of a demand for souvenirs amongst the men?

You could swap, see as I said I allocated all of my money to my mother except for about ten bob a week. And I used the ten bob a week for gambling money and built up a kitty

31:00 so that I always had enough money to buy souvenirs if I wanted to trade them with the Americans. Or buy something from one of my mates to bring home. In the end I think I might have told you all the souvenirs that I did collect, I collected a number of things that I was bringing home for my brothers and I had a lovely teapot for Mum, but

31:30 one of the beach crew who was with me on the LST coming home he must cast a fairly avaricious eye upon this lot when I packed it, because I had it packed in a special haversack and when I got to Sydney on the way home I left the haversack outside the RTO's [Rail Transport Officer] office because my younger brother was in Sydney and he was waiting there to meet me and of course I wasn't worried about my luggage –

32:00 it would be safe outside the RTO's office. So Desmond and I went off and enjoyed ourselves and when I came back to pick up my bag it was gone. I couldn't believe it. And it took me ages to work out what happened. What this son of a, did. He bowed in a got my bag and then booked it in to a passenger service to Melbourne.

32:30 Got the ticket, and then that bag went on a passenger train to Melbourne and when he got off the train he waiting until I got clear and went to the passengers' office and picked up my bag and took it to Castlemaine. That's how he got away with it. Took me a while to work it out and by that time it was too late.

So were there particular items that were really sought after?

33:00 Yes. Japanese swords were very much of interest because some of them were really heirlooms. Hundreds of years old some of them, beautifully made. Japanese flags were very much sought after by the Americans, not so much the Aussies but the Americans liked the Japanese flag, particularly if it had any Japanese writing on it.

33:30 Japanese weapons were, see a man on an LST wouldn't come ashore at all, wouldn't be of any interest to a marine or a soldier. But a sailor who never comes ashore, if you had a Japanese rifle or a bayonet you could probably get a case of cigarettes for a Japanese rifle. Something like that. Now a case of cigarettes is fifty cartons of cigarettes,

34:00 and in those days you could sell them for a pound a pop. So one Japanese rifle, one case of cigarettes, fifty pound. Not a bad return. I did that with a bottle of scotch actually one time. My Dad sent me a bottle of scotch and I was on the wagon, so I said, "Oh well I'll make use of it." I went to an American camp and they gave me a case of cigarettes and I sold them in Sydney. But don't put that in the,

34:30 because that's very illegal.

So how organised was this stuff? Were there certain men who were running the show that you'd take things to?

No not really. The only thing that was organised amongst the Australians I would say would be the two up. There was always somebody in every Australian Army group, organised the two up school. The sailors didn't play two up to any extent. Not

35:00 our group anyway.

Was it permitted or…?

No. You weren't supposed to play two up. You really weren't supposed to gamble for money. But nobody ever really lowered the boom on you for that. Well the officers must have realised that it's a very boring occupation to be a wireless operator and sit on your backside for six hours after you've had a sleep. You can only read so much and there is only so much readable material anyway.

35:30 So cards, and you can't play cards for nothing. I mean you've got to have something to go for haven't you? And some of the gambling money, as you see, fifty three pounds is a lot of money in three days, three and a half days. And I got a stake to start in that school. The Americans had a knife, a throwing knife. It was a

36:00 trapezium shaped blade, very sharp point and a leather handle. And you could throw it, and it was pretty accurate. Provided you had an idea what the distance was, you could throw it and it would turn once and if it was a coconut palm you could stick it in and it would go in two or three inches. Anyway this chap was an Australian, what did they call them?

36:30 It wasn't commandos, it was a special service unit of about two hundred men, highly training for infiltration and that sort of thing. And he wanted that knife, and I wasn't keen to part with it but I had no money to get into the poker school. So that's what happened. I think I got three or four pounds for it. I made him pay for it and then I used that to build up the

37:00 stake and that's when I got up to fifty three pound. So I got a reputation in the family of being a poker player.

How much interaction did you have with the Americans?

Not a lot. Not a lot. Never went into action with them except I was on one of their, I think maybe the LST I came home on might have been an American one.

37:30 No I'm not sure.

But even say socially when you didn't have anything to do?

No, no.

Was that both sides just decided not to?

Well we weren't allowed into their canteens. In Cairns when we were there, and they weren't allowed into our canteens. The reason for this I think was that Americans had amenities that were not available to the Australians.

38:00 They were also, I believe, subsidised to some extent so that it would not have been of their interests – all our hordes of Australians in there to buy cigarettes and liquor and clothes or whatever else they sold. So we were not permitted to go into their service club, nor were they permitted to go into ours.

Do you remember at any time during your service seeing much of the entertainment

38:30 **groups that were around?**

No, only pictures. We had an outdoor picture amphitheatre, where was that? That was at Balikpapan. I think. But no entertainment groups. I never saw a live group. We had the Salvation Army but they weren't entertainment – they were working.

39:00 I had a great respect for them. Cups of tea on the beach when you got ashore, can you believe that? That meant they were ashore in the first two or three waves and that was at… Cappy Redfern, that must have been at Balikpapan. Great character, and we'd loved him so much we gave him a

39:30 Australian white ensign which was one of these huge naval flags. With the signature of every one of the beach crew, including the skipper and every one of the officers. That was his going away present. Very fine lad.

What do you remember most about him that made him so loved?

He was such a natural person. There was no airs or graces.

40:00 He was the senior man of that group of Salvos [Salvation Army] and he made himself available if you wanted to talk to him, wanted advice. And of course their tea and biscuits were famous. Cup of hot tea and a biscuit in the middle of a battle, not bad. There was another story about Cappy Redfern. I

40:30 think it was something to do with an ambulance. I think he tried to get ashore even earlier by getting into an ambulance. But that's a bit hazy. Very well thought of anyway. I had a photo of him for years and years but I think it went up in the fire as well.

Did you ever look at the Salvos and think, "What are they doing here? They don't have to put themselves in danger."?

41:00 We respected them greatly and I still contribute to the Salvation Army where I won't contribute to a number of the other charities. Maybe you could say misguided loyalty, but you can only go on what you've seen in life and if you see something like that in life you will never forget it. And then men and

women who do it now have nothing to do with Cappy Redfern and they may not be

41:30 in the same category but the Salvos in my mind will always be synonymous with Cappy Redfern and what he did. I'll continue to contribute to them.

We're running out of tape there so we might just stop there.

Tape 6

00:31 **I just wanted to ask you John about some other souveniring you did.**

Why do we come back to that one? Maps. Now maps, I love maps and in another, I called it, well we called it caves. It was a cavern cut out of the side of the hill and this is

01:00 where they stored their maps. And they were quite good maps, good quality maps on a linen sort of base. And I got my hands on one which showed the whole of the South East Asia area, which the Japanese had captured. Borneo, Singapore, Java, Sumatra, right down around Morotai and those places. And I got

01:30 the names again, names and addresses of all of the beach group on that particular map. All right back to the Harley Davidson. We were on one of our souveniring trips, and here was this beautiful thing lying in a ditch on the right hand side of the road. Still remember the colour, bright blue. And it looked immaculate.

02:00 And as soon as we approached to have a good look at it, son of a gun, I imagine one of the retreating Japanese gentlemen put a bullet right through the petrol tank and one right through the magneto. So you couldn't do anything with it. What we had in mind, if we could have got it out and started maybe, or even pushed it back. But then when we saw it was so badly damaged,

02:30 we left it there. And it was also at that place we saw some of the earlier model type cars, which they had obviously captured in Singapore and moved to Balikpapan. And they had been abandoned and either damaged or run out of fuel or something or other. The damage to the centres or the housing and that sort of thing. I mean far worse

03:00 in Europe but I mean to see it in the islands, what little the islanders had anyway, then you realise how terribly wasteful it was. And of course a number of them got caught up in the bombardment and were killed. Unfortunately, civilians.

What was the general perception of the Japanese by the Australians?

03:30 We didn't really regard them in the same way as we would have regarded the Germans or Italians. I tended to regard them as a very brutal almost sub-human type of person because of the things that they did and were

04:00 capable of doing. They can say they were ordered to do it, and in many cases they were. And they were brutalised as well. I mean their officers were terribly brutal with them. I mean if they weren't quick enough to obey an order, or didn't hear it, it was nothing for them to get a smack over the head with whatever the officer had. They were brutalised. But our opinion of them was,

04:30 well tenacious. I don't think we've ever come across an enemy who was prepared to sell his life the way the Japanese were. Their attitude to death, I would say, is similar to the suicide bombers. Their reward was that they would be deified in service of the Emperor if they lost their life in his service.

05:00 Well that's all hogwash as far as I am concerned, and I think for most Europeans of my vintage. There is no reward, and I'm too cynical anyway. I think probably if anybody said to me, "Are you prepared to give your life for Prime Minister," it was Curtin in those days. I would have said, "Get lost

05:30 mate." I mean it's just, I don't intend to die do I?

So if you had to give a reason to why you were there what would you say?

Well I don't like the word peer pressure but, I wouldn't like if I was eligible, which I was. I was single, I was young, I had no responsibilities,

06:00 I wanted to go. But if you ask me why I wanted to go and put some high fluting idea that it was for King and Country the answer is no. I went because I wanted to go. I think if somebody had stood me up and said, "You're going to be conscripted," they

06:30 would have found me in Bourke. I wouldn't have gone. But given the free right to go of my own free will that's a different story. And of course the other thing I know is that the Australian forces is the greatest single entity in the world of volunteers. There is no other country in the world that has volunteers. See the whole of the First World War was volunteers.

07:00 They tried to get conscription in and it failed twice. And a German, an Austrian once said to me when we were once talking about this, a chap that I go hunting with down at Armidale, he said, “Mr Cleary what you must remember is that a volunteer army is much better than a conscript army.” He said that because they were

07:30 conscripted, as you know – Austrians and Germans. And we weren’t. You’re there because you want to be there and since you made the decision you’ll see it out. But if you were conscripted, some other bastard has put you there, you’ll get out as soon as you can. That would have been the inference.

Serving in the Pacific then you would have known of the militia and the AIF, and the thoughts and feelings there. What were your feelings in that regard?

08:00 Well we didn’t know. I didn’t know until after the war how well the militia fought on the Kokoda Trail. I didn’t know. I knew that the 7th Division had gone in there, and I know that they had done pretty well, but they had suffered terribly. But I didn’t realise that the I think it was the 38th and the 39th Battalion, militia had actually brought

08:30 the Japanese to a standstill about the time that the AIF took over. So I mean there was the derogatory name of Chocco [‘chocolate soldiers’ – militia], I knew about it. But all of our associations were with AIF not militia. So I didn’t have any opportunity to compare man for man what the soldiers were like. I liked the AIF,

09:00 I mean they didn’t play bridge too badly either.

Was there a feeling of singularity like with the navy as opposed to the army and the air force or was there a feeling that “we’re all in this together”? What was the feeling there?

I think the navy felt that they were pretty professional. We

09:30 fought our ships pretty well. We didn’t have any disasters on the landings. We didn’t have any aircraft carriers in those days so we didn’t have a fleet air armed to content with. We were very proud of the AIF make no mistake, and to a lesser extent of the air force. Mainly because the exploits in the air force were not advertised as say the 9th Division in Tobruk,

10:00 we knew all about that. But it was not until after the war that I realised how many air force pilots and crew were killed over Germany. I was horrified when I saw the figures – I think it was something like twenty-five thousand Australians were lost. And that’s an awful lot of good quality young men isn’t it?

10:30 **Can you recall ever being on any ships when they were attacked from the air?**

No.

Can you recall ever having the air force in support of any of the operations that you did?

There would be air force cover on most of the landings that we took part in. But from memory, we were a

11:00 fair way off shore at Balikpapan when we went over the side. By that it might be two or three kilometres off shore. Not quite as far at Tarakan, actually I think I probably heard more Japanese planes then, although that’s something I’ve never given much thought about. Certainly the Japanese planes, because they used to come over at night and they had a

11:30 completely different rhythm. It was a brr brr brrr type rhythm, not the steady ground of the sixteen cylinder engines that were used in our aircraft.

Can you tell us how different it felt being on the beach during the day compared to what it felt like being on the beach at night time?

12:00 You know Pete [interviewer], it was just a job, it was work for me. I was manning a wireless set. My job was to get messages through and receive messages and make sure that I got it down on paper and handed off to the officers for transmission elsewhere.

12:30 The only one incident at night that I can recall – I nearly shot a friend of mine, but that was after the landing had taken place. We used to have to man a switchboard and they had moved us into some houses at Balikpapan, which had previously been occupied by the Dutch owners of the, or partisans from the oil plant.

13:00 And at the back of the place, as I explained to you, we were on a ridge and it went down very steeply, and this particular night I was on duty. And I think Herm Cabat, he might have been on duty with me. Anyway we heard this sound of somebody landing on the floorboards at the back of the house, which

13:30 was about eight or ten metres away from where we had the wireless set up with the switchboard. And of course imagination plays tricks, and it sounded as though somebody had jumped through the window and landed on the floorboards. And unbeknownst to me Herb went down and went around this way and I abandoned the switchboard and took the 303 rifle, put one up the spout and I came around this way.

14:00 I ran into him and I nearly damn pulled the trigger on him. There was just something – it might have been his silhouette. He was a big long, lanky fellow. It must have been his silhouette. And then we worked out – the bloody monkeys coming out of the undergrowth at the back of the house, climbing up the trees, and then off the tree through the window. And it sounds to all the world like somebody is landing on the floorboards.

14:30 That was just one thing that happened at night. It did get a bit spooky, you did hear things. Your imagination can run away with you if you want to let it, but you know you have to be sensible about that. On the beach you know that you're pretty right because for anyone to reach you they have to come through several miles or kilometres of Australian troops to get

15:00 to the beach. And their chances of getting through there would be pretty small really.

Where did you feel safer – on the beach or up in the tree line?

Never worried me. Never worried me. I just never had that feeling. I can honestly say if you have never been afraid then you are stupid,

15:30 but fear, it just never happened. And if I had been confronted by a Japanese at close range I don't think I would have been any different. Because anything that got within eight or ten feet of me, if I had a rifle in my hand there was no way I'd miss them. I wasn't a bad shot.

16:00 I used to practice quite a bit, even if it was only coconuts.

Did you ever have an occasion to fire your weapon in self defence?

I fired a few shots, might have scared somebody, but I've never admitted to killing anybody no.

I was going to ask you, you've mentioned the brutality of the Japs – how did you come to hear about stories like that?

Well if you saw the villages at Balikpapan

16:30 and saw the condition that they were in, you realised that they were desperately short of clothing, they were desperately short of food, and if you had tinned food you could bargain for whatever, for tins of beans and that sort of thing. I once went into a hut, again, no I was going up to the front line

17:00 to visit this Claude Bugle – the bloke that I sold the knife to. I was going up to see him. I'd loaned him a .45 [pistol]. I'd managed to get a hold of an American .45 and he wanted it during the landing, and I said, "Alright on one condition – if you get knocked off, can you get one of your mates to bring it back to me?" He said, "Well I don't think I'll be too worried about that son." Anyway I was going up to see

17:30 him, and we came to this hut and I thought, "Oh well I'll have a sift through there. You never know what you'll see." And what I saw wasn't very pleasant. The body was lying just inside the door and the head was three feet away – somebody had beheaded him. Well I don't know how they would have done it, but there was the body and there was the head.

18:00 That had to be Japanese. The villagers wouldn't have done that. I don't believe they would. What else did we see that? When you saw them as prisoners of war they were very unimpressive people. I mean the Germans were all, their

18:30 reputation as prisoners of war, they were still fine looking men and made an effort to hold themselves like soldiers. The Japanese just looked like little whizzled up chimpanzees. They were awful looking people, and of course when they are half-starved and ill-clothed they certainly don't look any better.

19:00 Yeah I would say my first realisation of what type of people that they were was their treatment of the natives. I mean we might have been a little bit anti-black, and there was the White Australia Policy in place in those days, but I don't think we would have ever treated the black people the way that they did.

So how did you deal with seeing things like that?

19:30 It's a question I've asked myself many times and I can only come up with a very simple explanation – there is a fair amount of Celt in me on my mother's side, and she was a pretty hard woman. I think

20:00 I inherited that hardness so that bodies and injured people, dead people, corpses whatever, didn't affect me. The very first time I saw corpses I walked off the beach at Tarakan and walked into a dugout. There must have been four bodies in there, but they were, I assume from the clothing that they weren't Japanese –

20:30 they were locals, and they had been in the dugout when it had been hit by either a rocket or a shell and they were just splattered. I just thought, "Hell, poor buggers. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time." Now I felt more, much more about those two boys that were killed. Well of course I didn't know these

21:00 corpses, I did know the two boys so I suppose that's a fair explanation. But I think there is a hardness in some of us. I mean I have lost a son but I don't go around weeping and wailing about it. He's gone,

there is nothing I can do about it. I think, by and large, I am not unfeeling,

21:30 but I am not sentimental about death.

You'd still presumably look at Australian corpse, even if you didn't know him, differently to the way you would look at a Japanese corpse?

Yes, there is always a sadness there. I wasn't far away, there was a chap named Tom Derek VC [Victoria Cross]. He got a DCM [Distinguished Conduct Medal] and another medal

22:00 in the Middle East, and he came back and went into action in New Guinea. And at a place called Sattleburg he wiped out four or five machine gun plates and he got a Victoria Cross. Now unfortunately he was only happy in the front line and the powers that be foolishly let him go back. They promoted him to lieutenant and he was

22:30 killed at Tarakan, and that had a big effect upon us in the beach group. We heard about it, and we knew about it. I mean he was famous – he was one of the most highly decorated Australian soldiers still alive. And that affected me. I have read his story and he was quite a man, there is no two ways about it.

23:00 And the corpses of Australian soldiers which we came across if we went too close to the front line, that was always a sadness. Because you knew some relatives, mothers, fathers, brothers, wives, children. And they always looked so much bigger than the Nips [Japanese], well they were much bigger men.

23:30 **Did you ever receive care packages or anything like that?**

Only from Dad and Mum. That's how I got the bottle of whiskey – my Dad dug the centre out of a loaf of bread and put a bottle of whiskey in it. And by the time it got up there the bread was like a bloody brick,

24:00 but the whiskey was all right didn't break. Bottle of Cario, terrible bloody whiskey, that's why I got rid of it actually. But I told him when I got home. He said, "Oh well it was yours, you could do with it what you would."

Do you recall any other care packages of anything else that you received from home?

Only what Mum and Dad sent. I never really got a package of any kind.

What kind of things would your mum and dad send? Besides the whiskey.

24:30 They sent me a birthday present, a cigarette case at one stage, that was one thing. The bottle of whiskey. Pickled onions they sent me. I don't know why they sent me those. Maybe because I said I hadn't had a pickled onion for twenty years. I can't really recall anything else. Wouldn't be cigarettes because…

25:00 oh I know what Mum sent me. No she kept it for me until I came home on leave, and this was unbelievable. Herrings in tomato sauce. Well if ever I was sick of something it was herrings in tomato sauce – that's what we used to get all the time. Dried potatoes, dried eggs and herrings in tomato sauce. And dear old Mum had got this tin of herrings and she

25:30 proudly opened it and put it on the table and I had to eat it. I didn't tell her. Oh dear.

Did you ever serve with any blacks? Were there any black fellows?

I did a bit of trading with the American Negroes. They were good fun to trade with. I think they liked Aussies. It was an American Negro that I swapped the bottle of whiskey for the case of cigarettes.

26:00 Big fellow.

Do you think the Australians got along particularly well with black Americans than they did with white Americans say?

I couldn't comment. Australians got on well with good American fighting men. They had a very poor opinion from what I read of the conscripts which were sent to New Guinea to

26:30 take Buna and Sanananda and Gona. However I think that they had a pretty high regard for the American marines, and it was the American marines that suffered terribly at Tarawa, that was a shocker. We did resent the amount of money that they had available, and the quality of their clothing which was excellent.

27:00 My personal recollection was that I certainly envied them the quality of their uniform. I was clothes conscious even then. I like good clothes, and I was aware of the quality of their product. We were aware in Cairns of their ability to

27:30 make liaisons with Australian girls and women folk at a much more successful rate than we were. Now we didn't put it down to lack of ability to make arrangements with Australian girls, but there is no doubt that money played a big part. And they were more sophisticated in

28:00 many ways. I mean it was not unusual for an American to show up with a great bunch of flowers. Well

an Aussie would walk around the block rather than do that. I think they were better at entertaining their girlfriends and their women friends, and I think Australians of the era were more chauvinistic.

28:30 And say, “Well bloody take it or leave it sheila [woman]. If you want to come out with me well and good, if not…” I didn’t feel that way. I thought I held my own actually.

Do you want to tell us more about that?

Well I wasn’t married. I was twenty-one years of age. I wasn’t bad looking in those days. I’ll show you a photo if you like. I danced pretty well. I was very athletic. I kept

29:00 myself fit. I was always running, jumping, boxing, skipping. And bit of a gift of the gab. I had a girlfriend in Cairns, amongst twenty thousand American servicemen. I mean I didn’t see much of her but whenever I went to the restaurant I was always made very welcome. Had a lot of liaison over the years,

29:30 some that were, one youngster that I met in Townsville, she was a WRAN [WRANS – Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service] – a member of the Australian Women’s Naval Unit. She was stationed at Townsville, and we met at a dance. And at that time I was stationed in Cairns and for me to see her

30:00 I used to have to jump the rattler in Cairns, travel pretty well all night to get down to Townsville, spend the day with the lass and then get back. Usually had about forty-eight hours. She was a very, very pleasant young woman. And I was just about to go on board the Manoora, and it could have been when we took the 9th Division to New Guinea

30:30 and I got a message from the depot – she had gone down with appendicitis. So I skipped off the ship, raced down to the hospital spent an hour or two with her. Gave her the last two quid that I had. Got back to the ship just as they were pulling the gangplank up, and away we went. I never ever saw her again. Very nice young woman. Had a number of those sorts

31:00 of relationships. My brother used to look after me very well when I got back to Bendigo. He was still there – he was on the local newspaper as a reporter, and he knew all the girls and he always used to see that I had a dancing partner. He was very nice.

So what would you say in defence of the saying ‘a different girl in every port’?

31:30 Well you take your liaisons where you find them. And if you pull into Sydney and you go to the local dance hall and you find somebody that you’ve got an affinity with well away you go.

32:00 Next thing you end up in London, which can happen. Same thing applies. I think the tendency for liaisons to happen between young people were very, very real at that time. I think it was real for the young women folk, and I think it was more real for the young men.

32:30 Which ones took more advantage of which ones I’m not prepared to say. But my attitude had always been if I had an affair with anybody they would know about it, I would know about it but nobody else would know about it. Not even my friends. I wouldn’t even tell my friends if I had had a successful liaison with someone that I met in Sydney.

33:00 It wasn’t their business, and I felt it was correct that that’s the way it should be. Because it was between two people, and it was over after that well and good, but if there was some life in it when you came back next time well even better. But I never ever spoke or ever named anybody ever.

Were there fellows on the ship that made a real game of it?

33:30 Oh yes. Some men are bloody animals, carry on about their conquests. I heartily disprove of that. And I used to tell them. That is between you and this lady, why should you make public what happened – it’s got nothing to do with us. But you know in a sailor’s nest you can get some pretty raw efforts.

34:00 One bloke used to parade around the mess with the greatest weapon you’ve ever seen in your life. Unashamedly proud of it, he used parade it as soon as he got it hard he’d walk around the mess and really turn it on. I felt like hitting it with a stock whip. We stopped him in the end in a very crude way, and

34:30 your co-producer said she’s very broad minded. We told him that there would never be a woman that he would be able to sleep with that would be able to accept that horrible thing, it was too big. That’s pretty gross isn’t it?

What about language? Is language pretty raw on a ship?

Yeah language – the f word and the c word and the b word a lot.

35:00 In fact I still have to be careful with myself. If I get into a situation which is, where bad language isn’t all that noticeable I can slip up.

Did you find a lot of fellows had that problem when they adjusted back into?

35:30 In our mess ninety percent of the sailors used bad language. There was only one or two older married

men that didn't.

Just going back to earlier, can you remember ever serving with any aboriginal sailors or aboriginal soldiers?

36:00 No.

Can you recall where you were or how you heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour?

No. I know where I was when the war ended, but I don't know where I was when I heard about the attack on Pearl Harbour. That was December 1941 wasn't it? Well I wasn't in the navy then.

36:30 I didn't join until May 1942, so I would have been probably a junior traveler somewhere out in the back blocks of Victoria when that happened.

When you heard about it, it still must have registered something with you. Can you remember that?

No.

What about Darwin being attacked?

No, because we didn't hear anything about that for many, many months.

37:00 Because that was in '42 wasn't it? Well I'd be in the islands by then, and the Australian government really suppressed that for months and months and months. In fact we still don't know how many people were killed there do we?

What did you feel about the news you were getting if any?

37:30 We used to get a newsletter, which was put out either by the Salvation Army or by the army. I'm not quite sure. And that wasn't too bad. We got a bit of news and then of course we got newspapers sent to us from time to time. That's how we knew we were famous after the Balikpapan landing. They gave us such a splash across the paper. Mum cut the paper up and sent

38:00 it up to us. We'd pretty well gone down on that, cop this lot. That's rude too.

Righto we might leave it there. That's the end of another tape believe it or not.

Tape 7

00:32 **Well speaking of letters, how often did you get letters from home or did you write to people?**

I tried to write to Mum and Dad reasonably often and by that I would say I would probably average once two weeks, two months. See certain places

01:00 it's pretty difficult to settle down and try to write a letter. I know from what Mum has said that that meant quite a lot to her. Interesting enough she swears until the day she died that she knew I was landing at Balikpapan. She had the most terrible nightmare that night. And she wrote to me and said where were you on such and such

01:30 a day at such and such a time? And that was actually the landing. She might have been a bit vague, I mean a cloud. She's a real Scot, one hard lady like I said.

Do you recall the letters coming say to you being censored much?

No.

Were the men instructed about what they could and couldn't write in letters?

Yes, they

02:00 didn't like us to mention ships or locations and times. You could say that tropical air had improved of late – which meant that you had left Sydney and you were in New Guinea or something of that nature, but they weren't very keen about specific places being mentioned. And I agree with that –

02:30 I mean you don't want to give information to people that could endanger you or your group.

Were your letters kept and have you had an opportunity to read them, you know, years later?

Mum kept every letter and when she died my eldest brother said, "Right what do you want to do?" And I said, "Put them in the fire."

03:00 What is done is done. What has been, I suppose there could have been a bit of history in those letters, but they weren't good letters because I could still have the recollection that somebody else was going to read them, that I couldn't flow the way I would have liked to and said the things I would have liked to

have said.

03:30 **Do you mean a superior would have read them?**

Hmm. The fact that another person other than my mother was going to read them, I didn't want them to know my true feelings in relation to my mother. And I had difficulty in writing in other than a fairly, this is my impression, a fairly stilted kind of letter. After I left the navy however I began writing to friends and I became much more free

04:00 and able to converse with them by letter. And I enjoyed it. I enjoy, as you have probably noticed I like to tell a story, whilst I might embroider a little bit, the basic truth will be in that story. And my letters are the same when I write to a friend. My feelings at the time of writing or my feelings towards him or her come out in the letter.

04:30 My doctor friend who is our family doctor for ages, I wrote to him when I was on a hunting trip and he said to me when I got back, "I can't do it, I just cannot put it to paper." And that's his problem. He just doesn't want whoever he's writing to to get too close to him. I don't mind now.

05:00 **So what parts of the ship that you had to keep parts of your true self closed in order to fit in or survive?**

I'm sorry I missed the point.

Just as you censored yourself in your letters because you knew that someone else was going to read it, did you find that you had to be a different sort of person on the ship to how you really were?

05:30 No I have been very confident of myself from a very early age. I think being a commercial traveller might have helped me in that you have to go into the shop and you have to convince the shopkeeper that what you are going to put in his shop is going to help him. And that's not easy in the bush. They've had all of these city blokes there. So I think that might have been the start of it,

06:00 and I did pretty well at that, getting the displays in. And that built up in confidence, and then one trip, one of the travellers mates' car broke down and he couldn't do his run. So my traveller's name was Hunt, John Hunt was his name. So he decided to take this fellow with him. And they got on the pots,

06:30 they were drunk as skunks from the time they left Melbourne, for ten days they never stopped. And I did everything – drove the car, took the orders, sent the orders back to head office, nothing. And Hunt said to me about a month later, "Boy you saved my bacon." He said, "I hadn't realised what a mess we were in." Nobody ever knew anything about it. Well I was seventeen at the time. So that's not too bad. That builds up your

07:00 confidence. And yet, I didn't want to be an officer. Even though I tried to get in as a midshipmen, and I tried to get in as a paymaster midshipmen, when the time came for me to be an officer, which Mum would have loved. I mean she, everyone loves a sailor, I said no. But of course there was by that time a relationship with my

07:30 mates in the wireless service. And I was a fully blown wireless operator going to war by that time. So I suppose it was understandable that I would say to them, "No way, you've had your chance. There is no way that I'm going to stick here for another twelve months." That's what it would have meant.

In hindsight are you happy with the decision or do you think it would have been maybe good to be an officer?

I think I matured in that sense later than I matured as a person.

08:00 When I went back to studying I accepted things like captain of the football team and captain of the cricket team. And then when I got my diploma of metallurgy and I became a cadet at BHP they made me a shift foreman within two months of being in the rolling mill.

08:30 Running a shift with two hundred men, so I put it down to a late maturing accepting responsibility. I don't know why that was. Because some people mature in that respect very, very quickly and very, very early, but I think deep down I didn't want the responsibility for anyone else during war. I didn't mind it in peacetime, where I

09:00 had at one stage in the rolling mill, what would it be? Twelve hundred men I suppose in the rolling mill at Port Kembla, and I was the superintendent of that and managed that, and did all of my industrial work and all the planning and so forth, not a problem. But I was twenty-eight, twenty-nine by that time. But you know eighteen years of age, and I didn't like authority.

09:30 Let's be quite brutal about that. I didn't like being told what to do, so I had trouble with the possibility of me telling you what to do.

You talked a little bit before about some of the colourful language on a ship. Did people have nicknames for different departments?

Yes they did. We were sparks. Wireless operators were sparks.

10:00 Flag operators were bunties. Bunting, bunties. Stokers, what were the stokers? Can't quite remember. I know the master at arms was a jontey – where that comes from I think it's from England. The skipper, well he could be anything from the old man, to the old bastard, anything, depending on how he came across.

10:30 **Did you find that different ships had different feels to them, like in terms of personality I guess?**

I know a five hundred ton minesweeper has got no personality and it has got

11:00 absolutely no feelings whatsoever for anybody that's on board. They are the most horrible goddamn things in the world to sail in. Because they've got no draught, and you get into Bass Strait sweeping mines, and as I said to you, you're rolling that way and you're pitching that way. So your tummy goes down to the bottom and then it gets to the top, and then it goes to the

11:30 right side. No, I think a destroyer I could have felt a personality. I think a destroyer is built like a greyhound. They're very snappy, fast, they're vulnerable of course. But the Manoora

12:00 was a passenger ship. I actually made a model of it. It's wrecked now. And I think we tended a little bit to still have a feeling of a holiday ship about it. Because a lot of things, the woodwork was still left in. The ballroom for instance which was at mid-ships, and I think probably a deck up

12:30 from the first line of portholes. That still had the timber on it. We used to go up there and sleep on that. In the tropics it was cooler, you got a breeze going through there.

Did you ever have an opportunity to go to the engine room and if so could you describe to me what that was like?

I never had an opportunity, I never had any desire.

13:00 So I never went.

What about smells and sounds on a ship?

Smells are very important when you are suffering from seasickness because a smell can set you off. And one of the reasons I spent so much time on the bridge on the minesweeper was just that. Downstairs would make me gag. I'd get the smells from the galley, the sausages or the eggs

13:30 or the fat. It would percolate through the ventilation system and somewhere through the passageway or companionway as they call them, somewhere in the body of the ship you would run into this smell which would make you feel a bit unwell. So I spent a lot of time on the bridge. And I was allowed to do that at the time luckily because I was in charge of the

14:00 signals for that ship. In charge of the signal section of the ship.

What about loneliness on ships with so many men? How did men cope with that?

You end up generally having a closer association with an individual in the mess

14:30 and that helps you considerably. Maybe he's your partner at cards, or maybe he's your offsider when you go on watch. If you're fortunate there is an affinity that will help. If unfortunately there is antagonism in the mess it can be nasty because it will poison the atmosphere of the mess.

15:00 I don't believe we had too much of a problem. We had a few minor blips where people didn't like their nicknames and they would bridle when you called them. Some of them were pretty rude, some of the nicknames. But that would be my explanation for, I was never lonely on board the ship.

15:30 **Was it hard for people who were loners? Was the navy a hard place for loners?**

I think it must have been. We had one chap, he was older than me. He was about thirty-five and married. Eric Brock. He was a bit of a loner, but on the other hand he played a lot of poker with us. So although he was a loner, when he was off

16:00 duty the cards helped him I believe. Helped him quite a lot.

Do you have any sea shanties that you can share with us?

Only dirty ones. The cabin boy's name was nipper, he was wily nipper… I don't think I can say it love.

16:30 **Maybe I'll go out later and you can tell Pete. We had a man share some fantastic sea shanties with us the other day so we're collecting them.**

Well you probably would have heard it. I'll give it to Peter afterwards if you want.

Can you talk a bit about homosexuality in the navy?

Yes I can. I still get into a bit of bother over homosexuality at the golf club because I'm willing to

17:00 talk about it. Anyone less of a homosexual that you will meet it'll be me. I'm definitely a woman man, but I got involved whilst I was in the navy with a petty officer who used to come into the cabin when I was on, particularly on night shift – that's twelve until four in the morning.

17:30 And first thing you know, you strip to the waist there, pretty hot, first thing you know is somebody sneaks up behind you and starts ruffling your hair so you look around and there's the chief there you see? So you hang on for a while and you say, "You know you're wasting your time chief don't you?"

18:00 "Oh is that so?" "Yes, yes chief you're wasting your time. Go find yourself another friend somewhere will you?" So he wouldn't argue, he'd drift off. But the final crunch came, I explained to you we had this ballroom on the Manoora which was an area twice the size of the floor room of this house. And lovely, what do they call it?

18:30 Parquetry, wooden tile. So you put your hammock down on that way, and you'd have your blanket covering you and a nice thick hammock underneath you so the cold wouldn't come through, and the breeze come through the open side and it was a very good spot. And scores of us used to get up there. In fact there was a bit of a race to get your hammock out – as I remember you couldn't get your hammock up there until a certain time.

19:00 So one particular night I'm settling down nicely and all of a sudden I start getting a bit of a dig around the back side so I roll over and who is camped next to me but the chief. So he hasn't been put off by the suggestion that he find someone else, instead of coming to the wireless cabin he decides to have a go up on deck. So this time I thought well

19:30 words weren't really strong enough. So I got close to him and I said, "Would you mind f-ing off chief before you get yourself into trouble, now f off." Packed up his bed and he went and he never came anywhere near me after that. Now that's interesting, some of them just won't stop, because he was superior and he could have made it difficult for me. They keep pressuring you, and a naïve youngster might think, "All right well I'll let him have a go

20:00 and then he might leave me alone." But they won't. Once they get on top of you that's the bloody end of it – they won't leave you alone. That's my impression, and I saw a shocking thing happen in Hobart. This gay lad came down to the wharf when the minesweepers were in and four of them got him on board and they really gave him a workout. And ended

20:30 up throwing him out onto the wharf pretty well stripped. And I talked to the leading hand, he was a leading hand signalman, and I'll never forget his attitude. "Better than any woman you'll ever get son. Just mind your own f-ing business." And I thought, "What a shocking bloody thing." And I know for a fact that one of the blokes that was involved in that was only a kid and I think that might have been

21:00 his first experience. Well I've talked to gay people, I've been involved with them – you occasionally meet them at the market, and my attitude is provided you don't involve me and what you do is private it's nothing to do with me. And some of them are very nice people, they really are talented

21:30 talented people. So I've got a completely open mind about them. And this is what is getting me, what gets me into trouble at the golf club. One of my friends said to me, "You better be a bit careful," and I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well you do talk pretty openly about it, you might give the impression you are… you know." And I thought, "Hell I never thought of that."

22:00 So I've stopped being a bit open about it at the golf club.

So how was homosexuality viewed in general on the ship? Was it tolerated?

Live and let live. Generally. If a couple get together, as long as they keep out of the public eye there doesn't seem to be all that much interest in it. I think the officers,

22:30 I believe from reading, and this is just hearsay, that the middies [midshipmen] came in for a lot of problems, particularly in the British navy. Now I'm not sure about the situation in the Australian navy but you see a middy is nothing onboard a ship – he's got no authority, he doesn't get to control anything. And the poor little buggers – if an officer decides to shack up

23:00 with them there is not a lot they can do about it. But there again that is hearsay. I have no experience in that.

So it sounds like you are talking about being forced basically? Raped? Would other sailors try to protect young boys from that?

I don't know. You see

23:30 my guess would be that the men's attitude would be if you want to do that that's your business, and I don't think they'd interfere because if they interfere they are going to create problems for themselves with the gay bloke. The other bloke knows that you're aware of what's happened, you could have problems with him as well.

24:00 And something to remember about a ship you can get thrown overboard in the middle of the night and that is curtains. There is just no, you'll never ever be found, even if you shout on your way down.

Nobody is going to hear you, because there is a fair amount of noise and wind and so forth, and if you shout before you hit the water. So, I've never even sought to interfere, even if I have

24:30 been aware. I've been perhaps, I may have been aware of a relationship building up or something going on but I just kept away from it.

So was it an open thing or was it a hidden thing?

No, no. Very closeted. They didn't want anyone to know. Because you know forty years ago homosexuals were regarded much more severely than

25:00 they are at the present time. I don't know if you were aware of that, but homosexuals used to get beat up something bloody terrible if they were caught out. Sailors and other people would beat them up and rob them just because they found out they were gay. What was it love?

(Lenore): No, nothing, nothing, I was just coming in to watch that was all.

25:30 **So in terms of people not saying anything would that be more if they were a higher rank, if it was someone of a lower rank that might know?**

That's always a problem. I mean, if an officer forms a liaison with a midshipman the question of his fitness report might well be involved.

26:00 And every officer on every ship gets a fitness report before he goes to his next ship. And you only need a couple of those and that's the end of your career in the navy – a bad fitness report and you're gone. Now that doesn't affect ratings, and I was a rating I wasn't an officer. So it didn't affect me. He could write whatever he liked. If the chief wanted to give me a

26:30 bad name he could give me a bad name but it wouldn't affect my career because I wasn't going to stay in the navy anyway.

What about, was there ever any incidents of married men being confused about their sexuality at all?

Not confused about their sexuality. But I did have a married man and I think another bloke also, I'm a bit hazy about that. One very nice married man

27:00 came to me towards the end of the war and he formed a liaison. He hadn't seen his wife for, oh it might have been two or three years, quite a long time. And he was very troubled and he came to me and asked me what he should do. I mean, what does a twenty-three year old know about

27:30 married life and the sexual connotations of what he has done? And he insisted he needed help and could I really give him some idea of what he should do? And it was a very, very difficult situation for me because I liked him, I respected him, as well as liked him.

28:00 And all I could think of was to say was you know, "You are, well we are going to finish this war eventually and you are going to go back to your wife. Now I think you should think very, very strongly about what is going on, what's going on is very, very important and there is a lot of feeling in it for you at the moment, but this is all going to end."

28:30 So I think that's the way I would look at it. We never ever followed it up. It was up to him to come back to me if he felt that he should do so. He never ever did. So I couldn't tell you what the answer was or what the answer was eventually. But he was a very fine young man so I think probably he would decide to go back to his wife and just

29:00 forget about his girlfriend. Tough on the girl I admit but after all marriage is marriage and I was and am a great believer in marriage. I think, philosophising a bit, it is one of the greatest contracts that you will ever enter into and I have a tremendous feeling about it.

How big a presence was

29:30 **faith or religion on a ship?**

For me personally none. I am not religious. I don't blame anybody for what I do or for what is done to me – I blame me. I'm the instigator of it, I'm the controller of it. I don't need a priest to tell me, I don't need a dormany to tell me, I don't need a bishop to tell me. My father was Catholic and he pestered the daylights out of me

30:00 in the early days when I was in the navy. Because he was superstitious and he thought if I got killed that I would go to hell and he would be punished for it. That's how superstitious he was and he kept sending the priests to me. And they would pull me out of the classes and give me a sermon about me entering into the Catholic faith. Now, I don't need it.

30:30 When I say that, I have a philosophy of life and it's kept me going for nearly eighty years. Lenore was a Catholic and she is now a non-believer as well. So religion and faith., maybe if I had been shipwrecked,

31:00 and ended up in the water and needed a hand I might have changed my mind. But I still would have

been prepared to swim as long as I could swim and then sink when I couldn't swim any further. And there is nothing the good Lord could do about that.

So you don't recall any regular services going on onboard or anything like that?

You had to go to services, you were obliged to go to services. You couldn't dodge them. There was

31:30 a church parade when you were on land I think nearly every Sunday. There was a church parade, and there was certainly a number onboard ship from time to time. And you had no option – you had to go. So I'd go and just in one ear and out the other.

And was there people of different faiths going there or was it just Catholic mass or?

32:00 Well there would be a Catholic parade because Catholics can't go to a Church of England parade. Church of England can go to Catholic if they wish, but there would be a separate group for Catholics, separate group of Protestants.

How did you come to be aboard... I can't remember the name sorry, the minesweeper?

Oh dear, the greatest bit of bad luck I had all the time I was in the navy.

32:30 I came back from Balikpapan and when I got to Balmoral my papers weren't there. And they said, "Well all right look we've got to have some information. Who are you? What is you rating? What was your last ship? And we'll just take a note of that." Well like an idiot I told them I was a famed WT3 [Wireless Transmission],

33:00 which is the third step up in the hierarchy of radio operators. And that makes you eligible for supervisory position on a bloody minesweeper. Because of course the bloke that was on the sweeper at the time, he was a permanent navy man and he wanted off, he didn't want to go to Bass Strait sweeping mines – he wanted to get into Balmoral, so he got an attack of appendicitis. And Joe Blow

33:30 got shanghaied onto this goddamn ship for six months. I should have been out of the navy six months beforehand, but that's what happened.

What was the name of the ship?

Rockhampton. I've got the flag here of the flotilla somewhere. Yeah it's in my study.

34:00 **So I have no idea what a minesweeper would look like or what the procedure would be. Could you just talk me through what the job involved?**

Minesweeper is about five hundred tons. They were corvettes and they were converted to sweep mines. Now the Germans laid a minefield outside the entrance to Hobart. And they also laid a minefield in Bass Strait,

34:30 to spite the shipping lines. From where the shipping lines used to come around the coast from Victoria, South Australia, through Bass Strait and come north to Sydney, the Germans laid the minefield. So they cordoned it off during the war and all of the ships sailed around that area. But in '46 they decided they had to sweep it. They put this flotilla of corvettes, now a corvette would be roughly,

35:00 I'm a bit hazy on this, but I'm just trying to think. It's not as big as a Sydney ferry, about half as big as a Sydney ferry in width. And about two thirds the length. Little stubby things they are with a four inch gun on the front and a twin barrel Oerlikon

35:30 high angle gun at the back. Not very heavily armed. Now what they'd do, they put what is called a paravane – that's a steel wire with a float which can be set, preset descent to eight metres, ten metres, fifteen metres descent below the surface of the sea. Now that rope

36:00 theoretically hits the rope or the chain that is holding the mine on the bottom, because they've got a counterweight which goes to the bottom and the mine floats around maybe ten or twenty feet under the water. That rope hits that and theoretically the chain and the hawser runs down it to a cutter which is at the end of the rope

36:30 just before you get to the paravane, which sets the depth of it. And that's what happens. The mine, you hit the rope that's holding the mine to the bottom, runs down the hawser into the cutter choof. And then the mine comes to the surface. And then they explode it with machine gun fire, or rifle fire or whatever.

37:00 And the way that you safeguard yourself is that you know approximately the area of the minefield. So I don't know what they used to do, but I think probably they added ten percent onto it. And the first ship sails past the minefield and its paravane went out and it covered fifty metres of the minefield. Now the next ship came slightly in board of that so that any mines that the first ship hit would come to the surface, so the second ship

37:30 wouldn't hit it. Now the third ship is inside the next one. And you might have eight of them lined up. Well eventually you sweep the mine field with the protection of the paravane and that hawser. And the one that's in front is right outside the known area of the minefield so hopefully it won't get caught. Does that make sense?

It sounds like an extremely dangerous task?

38:00 I don't think it's the safest thing in the world to do but it was the only effective way that we had of getting rid of those minefields. I don't know what they do now but I mean that's, it's not a very scientific explanation, but that's the way it was done.

How many hundreds or thousands of mines would have been in Bass Strait?

38:30 Not that many. But I mean you only need one mine to sink a ten thousand ton ship. I doubt if the Germans dropped more than fifty or sixty mines. But I mean that's just a figure I plucked out of my hat. I don't know. But I mean a mine is a fairly big thing, and they are dangerous things to handle and store. And there would be a limit to how many the Germans could carry from Germany to Australia or Japan to Australia. Wherever they got them from.

39:00 **So how long did it take to clear the waters and how many ships had been working?**

Let me get that, doesn't matter. The pennant will give us the number of ships. But from the time I left Sydney to the time I managed to talk my way out of it was roughly six months, took us about six months to do the job.

39:30 And it was early part of winter, which, Bass Strait is not a nice place generally because of the prevailing winds and the rips and tides that go through there. So early winter is not a nice place to be there. I would never want to go back there again, ever.

So given that you would have rathered been discharged at that point, how did you cope with having to be there another six months?

40:00 Just have to put up with it. See I thought I might have been able to wrangle my way out. There is a clause in the document when you sign up – 'duration of the war' or, I can't remember now it's so long ago, or I think it might have been a period of three months thereafter. In other words, the war is over

40:30 they're obliged to let you out in three months. And I thought I might be able to swing it by using that. But they didn't want to know. I got one of those ribbons for that. I was only looking at the letter the other day where they informed me that by virtue of the fact that I was part of the minesweeping flotilla in 1946 here with

41:00 Australian south west Pacific something or other.

So it was worth it after all?

Again only for the grandchildren. I lost the medals in the fire. And it wasn't until Dylan my grandson, ten year old, a little bit of "What did you do in the war? What did you do in the war grandpa?

41:30 Come on grandpa John, where are your medals grandpa John?" I thought, "Oh well hell," so I wrote to your group, Veterans Affairs and explained that the medals were burnt in the fire, in South Africa and they wrote back and said, "Ok supply us with an affidavit to that effect." And three months later they replaced the whole lot. Gave me a complete new set. Finished?

42:00 **That's great that they were able to replace them.**

Oh Veterans Affairs…

Tape 8

00:31 **I think a fairly important aspect of your life was dancing. Can you tell us about that?**

Well as a trainee traveler I'd go to these country towns, and at times I'd be there for the weekend.

01:00 Well the best place to meet anybody was to go to the local dance. Now I didn't dance very well so I enrolled with Norma Perrugio. Amazing isn't it after, gosh that's getting on for sixty years ago. And she taught me these various dances, and as I mentioned I went to the various dance halls around Melbourne and practiced them on people.

01:30 Most of them didn't mind. I wasn't in uniform at that time either. And I got to like ballroom dancing. I liked to learn new steps. I mean I wasn't a professional but I was a little bit better than competent, and I could dance with anyone. Once I got the rhythm with a partner

02:00 I could adjust and dance with them. If they took long steps I could be with them, if they took short steps I could be with them. And that's how it started and when we got into the navy of course, as I said, we used to go to the local dances when we came ashore on leave. And because I was so keen to learn these steps, I found that Bill Marney,

02:30 one of the wireless operators in our group was a teacher. And he really was tops, he would take the woman's part and we would do our steps. And this was on the Manoora, landing ship, infantry. And that's what I said at the time these blokes used to take an eyeful of these two blokes dancing, and of course we were a monty to be gay, for sure.

03:00 So there were a few punch ups over that, or a few words said but in the end they decided to leave us alone. So that was it. And then Bill and I would go to the dances, I still remember and gee, he was a really magnificent dancer, beautiful rhythm. And after we married, Lenore does ballet, she trained for ballet until she was thirteen years of age and then,

03:30 she has told me, I think there was some family problem over it and she was either withdrawn or she withdrew from the ballet school. But her training was such that she had beautiful balance. And we danced ballroom dancing together, not professionally in any way, but if there was a dance on, or there was a house party we'd be first on

04:00 the dance floor. Now to a lesser extent. My knees are giving me problems, but Lenore had a very nasty motor accident in South Africa and she is having problems now with her neck and her knees. So we don't dance anymore. And she obviously couldn't stand it, so she's left.

04:30 **Despite the ribbing you got on board the ship I suppose you had the last laugh when you got in town to port did you?**

Oh we did all right. But the trouble with Bill was he used to fall in love with them all of the time. I mean I liked them and I could form a relationship, but he used to fall head over heels in love with every second one that he met. Well the dramas that he got into, hell bells. I lost track of him in the end,

05:00 you know you do. I think he probably went off, not quite sure if he joined another ship and he didn't come into the beach group or what happened. But I lost track of him.

You told us about what you got up to when you went ashore. What about the drinking, the problems with that?

Yes, I had a bad patch.

05:30 I was a sensible drinker and the reason for that was that an older chap once said to me when I came back to the ship a bit worse for wear, the following day he said, "You were a bit of a mess yesterday," and I said, "was I?" And he said, "Yes, and just remember your friends are going to be the ones that tell you what a goat you made of yourself the following day.

06:00 So if you drink too much they'll be only too happy to tell you what a billy goat you were, just remember that." And I did remember that so I was very studied. And then for some reason or other, I began drinking spirits. I think the problem was if you drink two beers quickly you're full. If you drink three beers quickly you're even fuller.

06:30 So you're bloated and you're not comfortable drinking. So instead of drinking three big beers I began drinking rum and whiskey. And of course if you drink four or five rums or four or five whiskeys you'll get drunk. And I got drunk on one occasion in Newcastle, I went back to the hostel.

07:00 No wait a minute. I got drunk and I got rolled and the bloke that rolled me took my cap which was a special cap that I had had made, quite expensive, and took my overcoat. Then I went back to the hostel at Wallsend in Newcastle,

07:30 and a deserter happened to be unfortunately in the hostel at the same time, and he cleaned the rest of it out. He took my uniform, my wallet, he left me with boots. That's right. So when I woke up in the morning I had a pair of underpants and a pair of boots. So I thought, "Well this is a pretty kettle of fish, where do we go to from here?" So I rang the, there was a naval depot in Newcastle in those days,

08:00 down on the wharf. And I rang there and explained my predicament and the officer of the watch said, "Well what do you want us to do about it?" And I said, "Well if I don't get back to my unit by a certain date I will be classed as a deserter," I said, "I don't think that is fair and reasonable. I have been robbed. The

08:30 proprietor of the hostel will testify that I have been robbed. And what I want the navy to do is send a car out here or a messenger on the tram with a set of overalls and a cap. Because I am not permitted to be in the streets without being fully clothed." So he thought about this for awhile and that's what they did. They sent a cap out and a set of overalls, and I got back to camp. Never found

09:00 out, but I believe, I know his name tab was Vendetta which was one of the destroyers, but he obviously wasn't from there. I think he was just a deserter who was going around through the hostels and taking rings and wallets. Might have been the uniform which he probably sold for a couple of bucks. And the overcoat which was a

09:30 beautiful heavy watch keeper's coat, which took me two years to get it. So that's the story of that being, so after that my drinking became fairly studied. I haven't been, I've been drunk once since and that was after a cricket match at the steelworks. Which wasn't a good story either.

10:00 But now, you won't ever see me drunk again, ever. I haven't been drunk in forty, fifty years. I drink regularly but…

Can you tell us about how the fellows used to get in trouble by going shouts, going rounds?

Yes. That's one of the difficulties – if you go ashore with four blokes and you have one round that's not too bad. But

10:30 if you have two, that means you had eight drinks. Now if you have eight beers I mean that's a fair amount, and you drink fairly quickly, because there is always some glutton that pops it down. And you probably drink that in less than two hours, and that's bound to go to your head. Now if you switch then onto spirits, and you drink whiskey on top of, lets say you had four beers and then you had four whiskeys. Four beers and four whiskeys.

11:00 That's also going to be a problem. Not an easy one. All you can do is you shout your round and then you back off, but there is a tendency once you've had your four beers not to want to back off, you're enjoying yourself. And then by the time you had the eight it's too late.

Can you tell us about your midnight swim one night?

Oh hell. Yeah

11:30 the flotilla was in at Hobart – that's the minesweeping flotilla – this is after the war is over. And it was a big boxing tournament on at the local stadium, so we bought ourselves a bottle of this wine, and God knows how strong it must have been, I don't know. Must have been homemade, and there we three of us, and that one bottle knocked the three of us,

12:00 me more than the other two, but definitely the three of us were not in good shape when we got back to the ship. Now I went across the gangway first apparently and went head over turkey down between the ship and the wharf. So the watch keeper he was a, he wasn't an officer, the officers never kept watch when we were in

12:30 harbour, especially not after the war was over. He quickly got a rope down to me, but I've got an overcoat on and I am fully in uniform, boots the lot on, so I'm pretty much, I've got pretty much of a weight on me by the time I try to climb up this rope. And I can remember my hands used to get caught between the rope and the side of the ship,

13:00 so I would pull them out and half the bloody skin would go off there and then I'd grab another, and then finally I'd lose my grip because my fingers just couldn't take any more, boom. Back into the water again. Now I don't know how often I went back in, but I think from the stories I have heard I must have dropped in at least twice. And then somehow or another he must have got another rope to me

13:30 I think and then pulled me away from the ships side and they pulled me onboard. But I had swallowed a fair amount of gunge by that time, so all they did was took me down stairs, strip me off, undid my hammock and threw me in the hammock. And I woke up in the next morning and looked over the side of the hammock and I couldn't believe it. That'd be the last time I really got tanked. That's 1946.

14:00 **Can you recall where you were and how you heard about the atom bomb being dropped on Hiroshima?**

We were at Balikpapan and the newsletter came out and they told us about the dropping of the atom bomb and we realised that in all possibility the war would be over in the next few months. And we began thinking about getting out, and it was then that I found so many

14:30 of these youngsters were going to stay in. I couldn't believe it.

Did you have any idea at the time what the atom bomb was?

Only roughly. We knew that it was tremendously powerful, and it was very, very dangerous. That's about all I knew about it.

In retrospect are you quite happy that the Americans dropped that bomb?

Yes. I don't think one American life is worth sacrificing,

15:00 well that any life worth sacrificing against a nation that did what the Japanese did. I went back and did business with them when I joined Anglo American and I actually formed a friendship with a Japanese captain who looked after the prisoners of war in Singapore. I actually played golf with the man.

15:30 But I'll never condone what they did and the reasons for what they did.

So can you tell us about when the war was over and you were leaving New Guinea, what the feeling was like?

Relief. Anticipation to get home. Start planning what I was going to do once I got out. Of course all of this blew up in my face when I got assigned to the minesweeper. But

16:00 I lived through that, I couldn't get off so in the end I buckled down and did what I had to do. I kept

asking, I didn't give up I can tell you. But that's about it as far as returning is concerned. That's when I began learning French as something to do on the way back. I like French, I think French is a very pretty language, but the fad didn't last

16:30 long. I had to earn a living. French, and learn to play the ukulele.

Did you get any time off when you first got back to Australia and if so what did you do with that?

I had pretty generous leave conditions. I swindled them on one lot.

17:00 I got sent up to Cairns and I had what they call embarkation leave. If you were going to go onboard a ship and go overseas you got embarkation leave, so I got one dose of embarkation leave. Then they put me a troop train and sent me up to Cairns and my papers hadn't arrived, so I said, "Well I'm into this," so I applied for another, I think it was two or three weeks embarkation leave and got it.

17:30 They never ever caught up with me, but I got pulled into gear. I went to a local dance ran into one of the girls that I had seen a couple of months beforehand and she took the wind out of my sails. She said, "You back again? You back again," she said. Because some of the blokes, the army particularly, they never got back for three and a half, four years.

18:00 I was lucky but as I said I had a lucky war didn't I?

Now can you tell us about your uniform, at one stage when you had a crossover uniform?

Well it was a hybrid uniform – it was jungle greens, army gaiters, boots and hat. And RAN [Royal Australian Navy] tabs on my shoulder, but you could also wear the hat, the sailor's hat. So you can imagine, you

18:30 come home on leave on the train you've got a sailors hat on, an army uniform on, the stories you could tell were legend. And we weren't supposed to tell anybody what we were and what we were doing. Really I don't think it was all that secret, but we were just told, we weren't to discuss who we were or what we were doing.

19:00 **But you charmed the ladies with plenty of stories no doubt?**

Oh tell them any story you like. Survivor story for instance is a good one, I don't think I told that one though.

Can you tell us about that story?

Well you see the easiest thing is you're in special services and you can't talk about it. And that intrigues them and they keep trying to find out what sort of special services?

19:30 Well see you keep hedging – you don't talk about what you're doing, but, "Well sometimes I take part in landings." "Oh is that right? Well where?" "We're not allowed to talk about that."

Can you tell us about when you finally went home?

20:00 It was such a relief to get out that I paid a lot of money to get my own teeth done. And the reason for that was, I was at the depot in Melbourne and my discharge papers came through and I said, "Right when can I leave?" And the officer of the day said, "Well the law is until your teeth are done we can't release you."

20:30 And I said, "That's a load of codswallop." "Oh no, you've got to have your teeth done and when the dentist can get around to doing you then we'll release you." So I said, "Well how long will it be before I see the dentist?" And he said, "Oh well there is a waiting list," and I can't remember how long it was but let's say it was a month. And I said, "Absolutely no way, there has got to be a way out."

21:00 And he said, "Well you can get them done yourself but you'll have to pay for it." I said, "Right, you want me to sign for it?" There and then I signed myself out. The next day I was on the train, and it cost me quite a bit of money because I hadn't had my teeth done for the whole four years. And I had beautiful teeth when I went in – Mum saw to that she kept us going to the family dentist. That was a bit of a no-no. I lost teeth in the back, but I've still got

21:30 my own teeth so it was all right. But I was determined not to spend another month – I'd have gone AWL [Absent Without Leave]. I wouldn't have waited.

So in general terms during the war, how did you feel the navy looked after you – your wellbeing?

Except my dislike for authority, and my extreme dislike

22:00 for being told what to do and when to do it, I didn't suffer too much indignity. I did a reasonable job as a wireless operator, so there were no complaints about that. I never showed the white flag when we went ashore, so there were no complaints about that.

22:30 As I said I was a pretty lucky man I really was. I mean there are some, some of the landings as you well know, if it were later on in the war, and Australian troops had been used on say Iwo Jima or one of those places. I mean the Americans

23:00 lost tens of thousands killed and wounded there. So I've just got to repeat I'm a pretty lucky fellow.

Can you go back there and tell us your feelings when you got home?

Not really. Mother of course was very relieved. I think my younger brother might have been discharged by then I'm not sure.

23:30 She was very relieved because having four brothers away in the First World War she had already been through it, and having two sons away in this one. Bit of a load for her. And I was casting around trying to find my feet. Well I think it was only a matter of a month or two before my air force friend,

24:00 Harold Boyle, and I got together and went to Cairns and bought these trucks, so that filled in two or three months. And then I got the job as a labourer in the magazine area, and then I met this bloke and decided well if you can be a metallurgist, I can be a metallurgist. Just as simple as that. But life is strange isn't it? Just a chance meeting like

24:30 that with a fellow. Another two minutes and I would never have had seen him. And this story would have been entirely different.

Can you tell us your thoughts on Anzac Day?

I don't march but I'm not a club man. I am a loner. I marched with Lenore's father on one occasion, but I wasn't impressed with the antics at the

25:00 local club. Everyone just got full of booze and talked too much and laughed too much and said stupid things. I'm beyond that. I wouldn't mind a quiet drink with an old mate if that came up. Anzac Day means a lot to me because I know a lot about the history of ANZAC and why it came to be. And how important it is in the Australian psyche to be an Anzac.

25:30 But I might march if my grandson wants me to, if he wants to march with me sometime, but I have no acquaintances here from the beach group. A lot of them are gone of course, and the others are spread the breadth of Australia. If there was a beach group

26:00 marching, maybe I would join them. But I doubt it.

Has there been any, have you kept in contact with any of them gentlemen? Any reunions or anything like that?

I kept in contact with two of them, three of them for several years. But then of course I went back to studying, and then I moved to New South Wales, and

26:30 the three of them were Victorians. And I wasn't a great writer and they weren't great writers and we didn't telephone each other – telephones were expensive in those days. So I lost contact with them. I have tried to find two of them, but I think Gilbert Schoots, I think he's dead. And Herbert Cavatt, he seems to have disappeared altogether. I don't

27:00 know what happened to him. And the third bloke, Kelvin Smyther, we went to his wedding. He married a country girl out around Warumbul. And that would have been in about '47, '48. That was the last I ever saw of him.

Can you tell us about meeting your wife?

27:30 Yes. Ken Exelby the bomber pilot and I used to play cricket together and we used to go fishing together. And we used to go to country dances. He was the one that used to drive the vehicle down to Castlemaine.

28:00 This great big automobile as long as this house. Terrific driver. He must have been a marvelous bomber pilot because he was a terrific driver. And he had a girlfriend who worked in a dress shop in Bendigo. And Lenore was invited

28:30 along. I had a married girlfriend at the time. Well she had been married – she was no longer married. And I caught sight of Lenore on Laurie Cannon's arm at this dance at Castlemaine, and I thought, "Hey that's a very lovely young lady." So I gradually eased, Boom Cannon was his nickname, I gradually eased

29:00 Laurie out of his squiring Lenore to the various dances and that was it – I took over. But then I decided to go back to night school, and by that time it was becoming a little more than just a boy and a girl, boy meeting girl. I was pretty interested.

29:30 And I think Lenore was too, but we got four years ahead of us now. I was getting two pounds fifteen a week rehabilitation money. Well there is no way you can get married on that. So once we got down to the nitty gritty, I said, "Well this is the situation – it's going to be four years

30:00 before anything can come of it." And she said, "Alright." Part way through that I managed to save enough money. I used to work underground – I used to work on the wheat grader. And then I went to Broken Hill and got on the lead bonus there. You could earn big money in those days, gee it was big money. And got enough money there

30:30 to buy the engagement ring, and enough money to get married. And within a few days of doing the final examination we got married, and got the results of the last subject while we were on our honeymoon. Oh unbelievable. And that was it, but Lenore was very staunch. She tells a funny story;

31:00 I couldn't go out during the week – I had to study every night for four years, otherwise I would never had made it. I'm not a good student. I really had to work at it hard. And this chap asked her out, and somehow or another they drove past our house, and here was the light on in the front room. And she said, "Max never knew what happened, but I saw the light and I knew you

31:30 were in there studying and I just said, "Max take me home." He said, "What?"" She said, "Take me home," and she never went out with him again. Yeah.

We'll just stop the tape there. Right can you tell us about sea shanties?

Well this one goes, the cabin boy's name was, it's either flipper or, I think it was flipper.

32:00 He was a wily nipper – he stuffed his arse with broken glass and circumcised the skipper. That's enough, I think that's as far as I should go. I don't think I can remember any of the others. Have you heard that one before?

32:30 **What occasion would call on these sort of ditties to be sung?**

Well you'd get a few drinks in, and provided the publican wasn't too straight laced we'd entertain him with these dirty ones, and entertain a few soldiers perhaps. You might invite a few soldiers to have a drink with you and they'd reciprocate.

33:00 **Are there any other really funny stories that stand out in your mind that really crack you up when you think about them?**

Probably are, but I'm just about talked out I think. There probably are if I reach back.

Can you recall any other, any cleaner ones perhaps or…?

No, the mind,

33:30 strangely enough, one that does come back to me is the sailor's hymn. I can't quite recall how it goes. It's

34:00 sung in a baritone – it's not a tenor. It ends up the words 'with those in peril on the sea', but I can't bring the rest back. It's quite a well known hymn. It's a hymn a definite hymn, and we used to belt that one out because you could really get some feeling into that.

34:30 It was sung to protect the sailors at sea.

Did that have significant feeling for you? What sort of feeling did that have for you?

I did have some feeling for that particular hymn. I think it was because it expressed a feeling of the peril that existed for us. And I mean if you're two thousand kilos

35:00 from wherever and you go down you haven't got much hope. I never ever worried about that greatly, but I have thought a bit about it lately, well as I got older. And a story that I read after the war, the story of the [USS] Indianapolis which was an American battle cruiser,

35:30 that just before the end of the war left Wake Island to go somewhere and by the greatest piece of misadventure ran upon the path of a Japanese submarine and was sunk. But nobody thought to check when it didn't arrive, and well over twelve hundred sailors drowned or were eaten,

36:00 and that was only days before the bloody war ended. I mean that's one that really hit me, and hit a lot of Americans. Hit them so badly that they didn't publicise it until a long, long time after the war was over. Kept it quiet. It was a case of misadventure – they should have checked. Should have been aware it was missing and they should have gone looking for it,

36:30 but it was three or four days before they started looking. And of course by that time the sharks had really taken a lot, drowned, died of exposure. But, we used to sing because one of the chaps was a very good pianist. And I loved to go ashore with him, and you'd attract a lot of interest,

37:00 get to a piano and he'd start jazz or whatever.

When you think back of your wartime service is there one memory that floats to the top straight away, that you think about straight away?

Nothing that stands out no.

37:30 **Do you think about it often or talk about it often?**

No. Might occasionally say something to the grandchildren. My sons have talked to me from time to time. It's pretty brutal though you know. I've told you things about corpses and going into the tunnel and here's a Japanese soldier who had been laying there for God knows how many days and he is absolutely

38:00 alive. Well that's not the sort of thing that really you want to talk to your children about, or your grandchildren about. I mean there is no point in it is there? It's just a fact that it happened and it is part of an experience when I was looking for souvenirs. It's a zany thing. Aussies do it a lot, and they're buggers for souveniring they really are.

38:30 **And how did you feel, what did you take out of being in the navy and being in the war?**

Oh I became a man. I was a boy when I went in and it turned me into a balanced thinking person, there is no doubt about that. And that has been the backbone of my career. I don't go off

39:00 half-cocked – I think about what I am going to do, I think about other people, I reason. I don't try to rampage through the problem. And I observe. I am probably one of the best observers you will ever see. I don't miss much. And that's very handy, and I see what I look at – I don't look at something

39:30 and see something that is not there. At least I don't think so. No it made me a man, no two ways about it. Well you look at the sailor there, looks about fifteen or sixteen. And I came out, and Lenore said that when she met me I was the first mature boyfriend she had ever had. Well I mean that's a big plus. I had only been out about twelve

40:00 or eighteen months at that stage. She said before that, they were all, they couldn't get on the same wavelength as her at all. And she has been an absolute jewel in our crown. There is very few grandmothers like granny Nor, and I make sure the grandchildren know about it, I really do.

INTERVIEW ENDS