Australians at War Film Archive

Brian Sheedy (Shaggs) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:46 **Brian, thanks very much. I'd like to start asking questions regarding your life story. If you could just briefly outline where you were born and just move chronologically**

01:00 **towards the post war era as well.**

Well I was born in Melbourne in 1919. I was born in Melbourne in

01:30 1919, right at the end of the Depression years.

Whereabouts in Melbourne?

In Carlton actually. My grandparents came from Warrnambool. The great grand father was of German extraction. The Saltaus. 1854. Heinrich Saltau came into Warrnambool.

02:00 He married a Miss McKenzie. Heinrich had three sons. There was Henry, John and Marcus. Marcus Saltau became a fairly good philanthropist and built the wing on the Warrnambool [hospital]. You'll see it there. 'Marcus Saltau Wing'. My

02:30 grandfather was a brother to Marcus Saltau. I had two uncles, Brian Saltau and Vic Saltau. Vic Saltau was killed in Gallipoli and Brian Saltau was killed in France in 1917. He was 21 years

03:00 of age and he is remembered at the University High School. They have four houses there and one of them today is still Mark Saltau House. The photograph of Mark Saltau is in the foyer of University High School. But that was done through Marcus Saltau because Brian and Vic were his nephews. He has also donated to Scotch College.

03:30 These are all mentioned in the book. The background history part of it. During the Depression years. My mother…I lost my father at seven years of age. My mother had four children. Two boys and two girls, and things were really bad. I often think there should be a book written about how rabbits saved

04:00 a lot of Australian families. There was no government handouts in those years. If you talk to someone today about people being paid for being out of work, it's just unbelievable in the Depression years. The simple fact was if you didn't earn any money, you didn't eat. The thing with rabbits they were everywhere and a lot of families existed just on…they used to be called

04:30 underground chicken and they existed on rabbits. It was a lifesaver for Australian families because you got nothing from the government, and people got one week's work in three, men…they would be given a rotation. They got one week's work in three and they rotated the job around so you got a week's work in every three. When I started work as an apprentice baker

05:00 in one of the…it was the largest bake house in Melbourne at that time. I was paid 12 shillings and sixpence a week. After three years I was getting 28 shillings. A master baker was paid 5 pound 4 shillings, and families were kept on that. You would be married and have a family. But after…I did three years there at 28 shillings and

05:30 the legislation called for 48 hour weeks. But of course there was no overtime paid. We'd do 50 hours, 60 hours. All night work. And of course it was a great burden on my mother to raise four children. She had to go to work as a cook.

06:00 I think that was one of the driving things that sent me to join the Navy, because when you joined the Navy you got dental, medical, a place to sleep, you got clothing. But they had you for 12 years, 24 hours a day for 12 years. You were paid…when I joined up in 1938, you were paid 28 shillings a fortnight.

06:30 That wasn't so bad. You got your meals and your bedding and all that. That was all in. You didn't have to pay any extras, except you had to buy toothpaste or something like that. Out of that 28 shillings a fortnight, I used to give my mother one pound of it, and I'd keep the 8 shillings. It's not generally

publicised now about how grim

07:00 things were during the Depression years. And it wasn't just Australia, it was world wide, because of the Wall Street crash in 1929. It happened all around the world. It wasn't just local in Australia. But that was the driving force I think, to help the family. Because families were very strong then and they really stuck together. They all helped each other.

07:30 I did the 12 years there and all those 7 ships I served in. Seven Australian ships. And then I did a short time in one of the Royal Navy corvettes. I was the only Australian there. Because of my training as a signalman, I was made the yeoman in that corvette over all the Royal Navy people, who were 'Hostilities Only People'.

08:00 But the signallers and telegraphy course before the war was 15 months. It was the longest course in the Navy. seamen did 9 months. You went through all the codes and the ciphers and later on we were trained on the British equivalent of the Enigma machine [a German code and encryption machine in World War II].

08:30 It was called Type X. That was from the German Enigma machine that was captured by HMAS Bulldog. The story about the capture by HMAS Bulldog…the British destroyer. It only came out about 12 months ago after the archives in [British] Admiralty were released and the true story of how the Enigma machine was captured

09:00 and taken to Bletchley Park, the code and cipher place in the United Kingdom, and the true story is now…I have it here in a book that I got some months ago. The true story. The Americans made a film. It was called 'U' something with a number, which sort of indicated that they had captured the Enigma machine.

09:30 There was quite a bit of feeling about that by people who had gone through the Second World War. They story was not true. It was actually captured by the British. The thing with naval service of course,

10:00 there were overtones there of captain Bligh's years [William Bligh, captain of the HMS Bounty; Governor of NSW, 1806-08]. It's not generally realised, the naval discipline. It had no co-relation to the army and the airforce. There were still overtones of captain Bligh. There was an offence still on the books which they called 'silent contempt'…that an officer could charge you for the look on your face.

10:30 You laugh about it now but it was a very rigorous discipline. I think the main thing about service at war, in a war ship, is lack of sleep. Always you were looking to lay down and rest. You never got a full nights' sleep and the whole disciplinary thing with a ship, like the HMAS Perth and those cruisers where you've got six or seven

11:00 hundred men…the whole operation consisted of keeping the men so busy that they never got disobedient. So you had…the routines of things that went on in a ship…trivial things, to keep you busy.

11:30 I can remember being in the Quickmatch…up there…there's only six signalmen and a yeoman. The six signalmen, there's always two on watch, so you did four hours on and eight off. The watches rotated because of the 'dog watch', which meant that every third day you saw the sun come up. You were there from 4am to 8am every third morning. That went on at sea,

12:00 in harbour, four on and eight off. I can remember being on watch in Scapa Flow [Orkney Islands] in the Quickmatch. We were on a mooring there with about 12 destroyers in a long line in a destroyer trot. And I can see it in my mind's eye now. The King George V, the battle ship. KG5.

12:30 She was anchored several hundred yards away and it was snowing. They had about 200 of the crew from the King George V, hauling up the anchor by hand while it was snowing. I could see them faintly and I could hear a fiddle. And these 200 men with a big windlass with the big handles, going round and round

13:00 hauling the anchor up, just to keep them occupied. That was the only way. It worked very effectively. It kept men under control. Because of the confined space in a ship you have to keep them busy. You can't let them lay around where they might get the wrong sort of thoughts. So the idea was to keep you right on the edge of tiredness. It worked very well. There were a couple of mutinies that took place

13:30 that they knew of, but they were very few.

On Australian ships?

Well there was one took place on the …it's never been recorded. I've never seen anything written about it. But these things happened.

Can I get you Brian to briefly mention all the ships you served on?

Well the Australia.

14:00 That was a 10,000-ton cruiser. That's the ship's crest there. Then there was the cruisers…the 7000-ton cruisers. They were the Hobart, the Adelaide. They were cruisers. Then there was the Vendetta the destroyer.

14:30 Quickmatch destroyer. Memory fails me now. But there was seven of them. What's the other ones. No my train of thought… There was seven anyway. There was at least three cruisers. Two destroyers.

15:00 HMS Kingcup. A Royal Navy corvette. They were called Flower-class [ships]. They all had flower names. Petunia, Kingcup and Dandelion. They operated in a group out of Londonderry, North Island. On the trip before I joined her. I was the only Australian on that ship. There 65 Royal Navy fellows.

15:30 On the trip I joined her, the trip before I joined her, the Canadian corvette Spikenard got torpedoed and sunk. There was one survivor. When I went on board the chief bosun said, "You're the senior signalman, so you're the yeoman, you're in charge of the signal." I said, "Well where's the

16:00 fifth one?" It came out that they had lost her because of this thing about a German U-boat [submarine] calling up to give me a bearing and Spikenard, the Canadian corvette responded by giving the count down from one to ten and from ten to one, and on the end of it she got hit. Steel ships sink very quickly when they get a hole in them.

16:30 A minute or two minutes they're gone. In the North Atlantic at that time…

Actually before we go onto the actual campaigns which is something I really want to go into in depth, can I just get you to speak briefly about the theatres you served in?

The theatres?

Say for instance, the Mediterranean…briefly.

Well of course the…

17:00 when the HMAS Perth went into the Mediterranean, it was January 16th 1941 when we had only been there a matter of weeks coming from Australia through Colombo [Ceylon, now Sri Lanka]. We got into Alexandria [Egypt] and a few weeks later we were in Malta when the first German air raid…

17:30 they were after the HMS Illustrious which was in the dock yard just across the way from where the Perth was. That was an area of about 8 acres and there were four ships in there. The Germans, being very thorough, they only attacked that one area. They had lots of targets all around Malta because we had nothing there, no aircraft. They had three Bristol fighters, they were bi-planes with two machine guns.

18:00 That was all they had. But the Germans were only 60 mile away, and when the air raid went it took 20 minutes for the Stukas [German Junkers Ju-87 dive bombers] to cover the distance and they concentrated just on the 8 acres. There was a submarine in the dock at the back, the Illustrious on the far side, and behind us was the Essex, an ammunition ship which caught fire. And the Perth got damaged.

18:30 But that was the baptism of fire in there. Then of course we went out on the Greece and Crete campaigns. We took three loads of troops up there. The Maori Battalion, we took them up overnight from Alexandria to Cairo. We did three

19:00 runs. The Germans hadn't attacked Greece at that time. Anyway we were in Piraeus [Greek port] the morning the Germans declared war on Greece, 11am that morning. That same night they came over the town and the port. They struck the Clan Fraser, an ammunition ship which blew up. A 6000 ton ship just disintegrated.

19:30 Some of our fellas were ashore there and there were ship's plates 10 feet by 20 feet long a mile and a half back in the town. The whole of the ship, the ammunition ship the Clan Fraser just disintegrated. Part of it struck the Perth. You could hear the sound of steel. This is 10 o'clock at night in the dark and you could hear steel striking steel, as bits of this ship

20:00 hit the Perth. Of course men were running all round getting under cover. Two of Perth's men got injured. But the whole port caught fire. We got out of that, and then of course that was the initial German attack on Greece. They came right down of course. They drove the army out and we did

20:30 evacuations there from Piraeus. We went up one night for another evacuation at Kalamata, right down the south, very close to Cape Matapan. And there were 5000 troops there. We went in there in the dark. Anyway, we could see the German guns at the back of the town firing into the township. It's very close to Italy there and our captain decided he was not going to go in and pick them up. Our

21:00 captain was a Royal Navy captain, not an Australian. He turned the ship around. We had two destroyers with us… because apparently he thought, with the fires in the town and the ship standing there which had to be stopped to pick up these 5000 army people, it made a beautiful target in silhouette for an Italian submarine. So he aborted.

21:30 We retired from there. It caused animosity in Alexandria between the Royal Navy people. There were quite a few brawls took place between the Royal Navy people who reckoned that the Australians, in the vernacular, had dogged it. There's no comparison. If a captain says that's it, that's it. You can't go up to the captain and

22:00 grab him by the scruff of the neck and say we've got to go and pick these blokes up. Anyway it caused a bit of animosity between the Royal Navy people ashore and the Australians.

Did they get captured? Those troops they left there…

Yes, they got captured.

How many of them?

About 5000 of them. Mostly Australians.

So this is the HMAS Perth you're talking about?

22:30 **This had a Royal Navy captain, not an Australian?**

Yes that's right. Sir Phillip Bowyer-Smythe.

Was he liked by the crew?

I don't think there was much feeling either way actually. He had some relation to royalty. I think the Bowyer part of it. He disappeared. I don't know what happened to him. But I imagine Admiral [Andrew] Cunningham [CinC, Mediterranean Fleet], who was a very direct man

23:00 had something to say. It's only supposition on my part. But I've never heard of captain Sir Phillip Bowyer-Smyth ever again. He may have caused the …in the term of the day, the displeasure of their lordships in the Admiralty. And once you reached the displeasure of the Lords of the Admiralty you're in trouble.

23:30 Anyway that's by the by, and speculation on my part.

I really want to get back to the campaigns a little bit later on, can you tell me just very briefly in regard to your war time service, what happened when the war ended to your navy service?

Well that was interesting. For all those years, they had you signed for 12.

24:00 The 'Hostilities Only People' were signed on for the duration plus 12 months afterwards. The consequence was they were very short of people. The Royal Australian Navy was short of people for all the jobs they were called to do. The Royal Australian Navy in 1939, the permanent service was 5,444

24:30 men. They were all 12-year men. The consequence was, when the war ended, they had commitments, the Royal Australian Navy had commitments and very few men to carry them out. The consequence was after the war I was shuttled onto the HMAS Hobart, that was 1946

25:00 and I went up to Japan, Hong Kong and Japan, peace time of course. I don't know what the trip was for. Anyway, the HMAS Hobart. That was the same as the…the same type of ship as the HMAS Perth. We went up there. In 1948, when I came back I went into Navy Office into

25:30 the teleprinter room where…that was at Victoria Barracks here.

This was what about 194…

Nineteen forty seven. The teleprinter room in Victoria Barracks was connected to all the capital cities and to HMAS Harmon [Canberra] WT [Wireless Transmitter]. All over Australia. I would be in charge of a watch. They would all keep watches all the time. They'd be 8-hour watches. You would have to travel from civilian

26:00 quarters to get there. And you're in contact on the teleprinter to Darwin, Harmon WT, all the signals which were made by the Navy brass went through the teleprinter and up to Harmon WT in Canberra. And then it went out on the air to Whitehall or where ever. It was the most powerful wireless set in the Southern Hemisphere receiving and so forth, and despatching signals.

26:30 Then I got a draft to the HMAS Australia and we went down to New Zealand, and we went to four ports in New Zealand. It was the first Australian warship that had gone to New Zealand since the war ended. Of course we were fellow neighbours and we were very welcome and popular wherever we went. There were about 800 in the crew on the Australia and we did two ports in the north and two in the south.

27:00 Of course we always had connection with the New Zealanders ever since the Great War [First World War]. Then my 12 years finished in 1950. Things weren't too good on the employment market at the time,

27:30 so I signed on for what they called the Dockyard Police.

The Dockyard Police?

Yes, Dockyard Police, the Naval Dockyard Police as a Constable. There were quite a few of my comrades that I served with did the same thing. You signed on for five years as a constable in the Naval Dockyard as Dockyard Police. It meant you lived at home of course.

28:00 You had to travel…all the dockyards, Garden Island or Williamstown, any dockyard, it was policed by Naval Dockyard Police who were ex-naval personnel. It was a great saving to the government because they didn't have to pay insurance. They had Naval Dockyard Police walking around with a big stick in their hand. The good thing about it was that all the people who were there had been through the Second World War.

28:30 You had some sort of connection with them. All the Dockyard Police were ex navy people. I finished up in 1955 after 17 years.

When you were Naval Dockyard Police, these were civilian ports you were looking after as well?

No, just naval installations, like Garden Island and Williamstown.

29:00 Where there were naval vessels under construction or workshops all run by the navy.

So you were still officially in the navy?

Well you were part of the naval establishment. You were still in the Defence Department.

So you finished that in what year?

Nineteen fifty five.

What did you do after that?

Well I joined the State Government.

29:30 What they called the Transport Regulation Board, it's now Vic Roads. I did 20 years there with them. I was what you called…I rose to the giddy heights…there was only about 80 of us…as an Investigations Inspector. I think I interviewed all the Managing Directors you could think of.

30:00 I used to interview Lindsay Fox [transport mogul]. Lindsay Fox had…I remember he had two trucks, and he used to cart a tray truck with bags of briquettes and firewood over his shoulder into houses. He's a multi millionaire now. But I did a lot of court work. Log books and interstate trucks and things like that. Where trucks were pulled up.

30:30 The normal thing would be, the fellas on the highways all over Victoria, the Transport Regulation Inspectors would pull up a truck. The driver's employed and I would have to go and see the owner, who wouldn't be in the truck obviously. There could be trucks from…a lot of companies, and the driver pulled up for some infringement of the log book, and it would come to me.

31:00 The only people who could speak for a proprietary company is a Managing Director, legally you have to interview the Managing Director and he's responsible sometimes for the action of the driver or the failure of the driver. That normally would lead to court action. In those years they had what they called road tax. At one time if you drove a truck between New South Wales and Victoria,

31:30 you paid threepence a ton tax when you went over the border. Under Section 92 of the Constitution it said that freedom of trade between the states shall be free. And that was fought into the courts and the trucking companies succeeded in having that tax, that 'crossing the border tax' struck off the courts.

32:00 So the governments had lost the money so they came up with this thing called road tax which every truck operating on Victorian Roads, by a computation of arithmetic paid a certain amount for each mile they ran, and it was called road tax for the upkeep of the roads. That's now gone by the by too. That's finished.

Did you spend most of your time in the

32:30 **Transport Department there?**

Well I can say I've been in every court house in Victoria. Right down the other side of Cann River, back this way to Warrnambool, Mildura. Every court house, I've been there, because the trucks would be picked up in different places.

Now on another note, did you actually get married during or after the war?

We got married in 1944.

33:00 **You got married in 1944? And to an Australian girl.**

Oh yes. She's passed away with cancer. But no, I don't think I can add anymore.

And you had children of course?

Three, yes. And my son, he's a building surveyor. He's running his own…Nepean Building Permits.

33:30 He's the proprietor of that. Although there's three building surveyors in there and I think there's three or four girls. See the thing with building permits. There's only two places you can get them. The Shire

Office or from Nepean Building Permits. Actually this was a present from my son.

There was something else I wanted to get back to in regard to your

34:00 **early days, your pre-war days. Now you were born in 1919, can you tell us more about your schooling?**

In the Depression years, the law said that children had to go to school till 14. After 14 they said nothing.

34:30 Everyone who turned 14 went out to try and earn pennies. There was no furthering of education because of the circumstances with the Depression years and the Wall Street crash. You looked forward to getting out of school to help the family. A great many men who joined the AIF [Australian Imperial Force],

35:00 who joined the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] or the RAF [Royal Air Force], they got paid five shillings a day. There was a big incentive for the generation of the Depression years to join the armed services. They got more as regard to some sort of subsistence than they would walking around the streets, trying to find a job. There were no jobs.

35:30 I would think that a great proportion of the AIF were from the Depression years. They would fall within that era.

Unemployed chaps?

Yes. As I said, when I went in as an apprentice I was getting 12 shillings and sixpence a week, and I was 16, 17, and you did 50 hours minimum for 12 and

36:00 6 pence. If you're going to get paid 35 shillings a week to go into the services…there was no thing about ideals. It was just a matter of subsistence. And like human nature, if the opportunity is better there than walking around trying to find a job! It's a natural human instinct. I would think that the great proportion of the AIF were

36:30 all Depression year people. I would say, all. There was no work.

What about in the navy?

Oh yeah. They would all be from that group. They would all be in that group, in that age group, 18 to 19. And you can't get a job. I mean, if you go to the doctors you have to pay. If you go to the dentist. You can't afford to go to the dentist, it's too much. But if you go into the services

37:00 you get free dental, free medical. You get food, you get a place to sleep, and clothing. There was only one reaction to it if you were in that position as a Depression kid. It was the only way.

Tape 2

00:33 **Just a sec Brian. With those stories can we get to them just a bit later on. We'll just move from the Depression and when you get to the war you can tell everything. Now can you…I just wanted to ask you a few questions about your parent's background. Was it your father's side that had the German background?**

No, my mother.

01:00 Up there. That's the original thing for the University High School, Saltau House. That was given to my grandmother. And that's the original writing of the author of that, that's the house song for University High School, and that's the original. My grandmother gave it to my mother and then my mother gave it to me. It's an original.

01:30 **Was he a wealthy man?**

Marcus Saltau was. That was the bird clock. I didn't hear that. Every hour there's a bird song that comes on. The only thing is it's not Australian.

02:00 There's no Australian birds on it.

So you were saying about Saltau. So he was a wealthy person?

There was Heinrich Saltau. In the cemetery at Warrnambool he's got Henry Saltau.

02:30 Henry…it's quite a large figure on his grave. He had three sons. He had Henry, John and Marcus. John was my grandfather and Marcus the youngest one, he took over the hay and grain store in Warrnambool.

03:00 And there's still a building there with the name Saltau on it, in stone. He made a great success of the

business. They used to cart…they had a couple of ships, small ships that ran between Melbourne and Warrnambool and they did cartage like wool coming out of the western district. He made a success of that to such an extent that when he lost his two nephews, Brian and Victor. The Brian that I was named after,

03:30 when they were killed in the Great War, he made donations to Scotch College and to the University High School. Because Brian Saltau was 18 when he finished at University High and four of them from University High joined the AIF and of course they were killed. I think it was because of that that Marcus made donations to Scotch College and University High.

04:00 **When did Marcus die?**

I don't know. It would be…I don't know…I never thought of that. I really can't remember. It never occurred to me.

04:30 Marcus had a son at Scotch College, Stuart who would be my cousin. He was 16 and he got pneumonia and died while he was at Scotch College. Marcus, his father apparently made a donation to the Scotch College. That would be going back to 1928 or something like that.

05:00 **So having a German background, did they maintain those traditions?**

I don't think so. All the way from Warrnambool right into South Australia are German names. I served with people from South Australia. There was Kluge. There were 13 in the group. We went 15 months together. And of course he was called Von. Von Kluge.

05:30 **That was his nickname?**

Yeah, we used to call him Von. His name was Ron. There was Ronnie Schweikhardt. It was full of German names and a great many of them were in the Australian forces. Their forebears came from that area of Europe. There were quite a lot of them. There was Germaine. That was another one in our group. That was a German name. Von Kluge. Schweikhardt.

06:00 Ronnie Schweikhardt was the best mouth organ player I ever met. He could…everyone would stop. He'd get the mouth organ up. You never see it today. And I regret it. You never hear it. And the other thing you never hear is whistle. You never hear anyone whistling. In those days there used to be virtuosos. Whistling. The postman would walk past or a workman.

06:30 No one whistles. It's to do with the music. I mean, boom, boom, boom, you can't whistle to that. In those days it was the waltzes and all those sort of things where people would imitate like a waltz. Like the 'Blue Danube' or something. Whistling. Have you ever heard anyone whistling? Have you?

Yes.

Where here?

In Melbourne, I remember the school I was at

07:00 **we had this cleaner. He used to clean up. He was an oldish man. He was in his 50s and he had this amazing whistle. He used to whistle. The older generation. It was very interesting that you said that.**

It's a pity. It's a pity, really.

Can you whistle?

No.

For the camera at least?

No, no. But I can admire people who could. They could bring some surprising things, with

07:30 their tongue and their lips. I put it down to the music.

Can I ask you. On the topic of these people with German backgrounds, how did you view them having this German background? Was there any sort of suspicion?

No, because they all spoke the same tongue. They all had the same accent. The Australian accent.

They were very Aussie?

Oh yes. It happens with people.

08:00 If you get someone with an accent that's different to what the normal group is, he's singled out. But if you're all speaking with the same accent like I am now…

Were there any with German sounding accents?

No. No.

08:30 The thing with the Australian accent, I don't know if it applies now, but it used to be you could go from here to Darwin, and walk into a pub, and say to the fella next to you, "Have a beer mate." The accent was the same wherever you went.

09:00 Of course in those days it was Anglo-Celtic mainly. Practically, you could say, wholly. To go from here to Darwin and walk into a pub was like walking into a pub in Fitzroy or Brunswick. It was just the same dialect then. There was no difference. I mean, I don't know what it would be like in Darwin now

09:30 with the mixture of different ethnic groups to walk into a pub and say, "Have a beer mate." It's one of those generation things.

On the topic of culture, I have come across some people and it seems that some of them were actually ashamed of their German background. Did you ever hear anything about that?

No.

10:00 No I don't know. No, well they were accepted into the armed forces. People with Germanic names. They had been here that long. See the original Saltau came into Warrnambool in 1854, but there were lots of Germans all through. Well, you've got Hahndorf,

10:30 a town. A German name. There's lots of German connections in South Australia, and particularly all through that area. I don't know. Perhaps there's some sort of story there where their parents may have been reluctant to let them join the armed forces when they were going to fight

11:00 some relatives back in Germany. I don't know. I've got no idea of that. The poor fellas that joined up with German names, they were just Aussie's with a German name. That's all. They weren't Smith or Brown or Black. They were Schweikhardt and Kluge…Von Kluge. We used to go round with Kluge and put him up. "Heil Von Kluge."

11:30 There was a German general named Kluge. It may have affected them, the people themselves.

How did they react to that sort of humour?

They would tell you to go and get whatnot. Everyone…it was in that generation when you were 18 or 19. You're taking the mickey out of somebody, and you get the mickey taken out of you. It's a great leveller. It brings you all down

12:00 to one level. But when things happened and you were in trouble, they were all there. I can recall a brawl that took place in Durban…

In South Africa?

Yes. Anyway there was some brawl that took place and there were some Americans in there. I can remember a voice shouting out, "Up the…" was it the Perth? If you belong

12:30 to a ship and a ship mate was in trouble, they'd say, "Up the Perth!" And you'd all run down. You'd all come together if a ship mate was in trouble.

What anywhere? In a pub or somewhere like that?

Oh yes. They all banded together if you came from one ship, and if the cry went up and someone was in trouble from the ship, you'd all get down there to try and help out.

13:00 It was one of the group mentality.

So what happened in Durban. Tell me that story?

I wasn't there on that particular occasion. But a couple of fellas came back with skinned knuckles and bruises and that. A brawl had taken place. But they had all run down when they heard the ship's name being called out. They may be a bar or next door and they hear the shout. Something's happening. An uproar, and

13:30 they all get in to help. It was a ship thing. You helped each other out.

Now towards the Depression period, your father, what did he do for a living?

He was a bag merchant. He used to go around collecting bags in a horse drawn tray vehicle, a cart. All around Fitzroy,

14:00 and within an area out from Brunswick. He would travel in a horse and cart. A lot of Chinese marketers used to be around the Maribyrnong area. And the bags were made for chaff. They were chaff bags. They were made overseas. I think they were made in India. And there was always a shortage o them. So he would go around and buy the empty bags and then resell them on to a merchant

14:30 who resold them again. He made a living out of it. It was a great thing, bag merchants. I was only seven when he died so I don't remember much about him. But he used to take me on the cart. With the reins. He would show me how to hold the reins with the horse going along. All the Chinese market gardeners

and other

15:00 people. There were a lot of market gardens all around Maribyrnong, and that's where the river…out to Fairfield. In a sort of circle area. He'd do a run through there every two or three weeks, picking up the bags and buying them and then reselling them on. He would make about a 50% profit on each bag. A lot of them

15:30 you know, I saw them, the gardeners and the marketers and the farmers that existed around Melbourne…there were a great deal of them. Because the transportation in that generation was all horse and cart. You grew materials like vegetables, and whatever was accessible to the market by horse, not by motor car.

16:00 We're talking about 1925, 26 and there were more horses going down Swanson Street than there were cars in those years. He died when I was about seven.

How did he die?

I don't know. You know, seven years of age,

16:30 I couldn't take it in really. But my mother was left with four children, and there was no government handout. And she wasn't alone in that. I'm not saying she was some special type of person. There were thousands of Australians struggling to get enough food to feed their children. Things were bad. It always amuses me, you pick up a paper and you see an article, single mum. I haven't got the telephone on.

17:00 Why won't the government give me a telephone, and you look at it and you think, Jesus Christ. I've done a lot of work for Legacy over the years. I don't know if you know about Legacy?

Yes I do.

In that briefcase there is all my Legacy stuff. I've had about 30 odd widow files. They're all pretty good in regard to

17:30 standing up to the loss of the husband. But I had one or two they'd ring me up and ask me to come down and I'd go down there. This is all in the local area, and they'd be complaining about how bad they were. I used to stand it for some weeks and then I'd go down and say, "Mrs Smith, life's a bugger at times but it's the only one you've got."

18:00 You had to give them a jolt. You had to give them a jolt. But to give them their due. Ninety nine percent of the widows, they stood up well with the loss of the husband. What used to happen in those cases, it was always the male or the husband who did the paper work. And when they die the wife's got no idea of paper work. So the Department of Veteran

18:30 Affairs would let us know within a day sometimes. Bill Smith has passed away and left a widow. So we used to go down there sometimes when the relatives were there. I used to explain to them, "You mustn't think it's intrusive that we're here so soon. What's happening, when we make that first contact with the widow,

19:00 and the War Widow's Pension is granted, it is granted from the day we see you, that first day. So it's to the benefit of the widow that we come here as soon as possible. So, I'm Bill Smith and we make the contact. If the War Widow's Pension is granted it will be granted from the first day we see you." We've got something like 3000 war widows. They go

19:30 back to Cheltenham, of course, Frankston and right round. There's about 3000. It's always the men who drop off the twig. I mean, they're all over 80, World War II fellows. We've had problems with Legacy because all the Legatees are falling off the twig too. They're all over that age group. We've lost about 5 in the last 8 months. They're just falling away.

20:00 And the Charter of Legacy is that the Legatee must have war service. A fellow who's been there and seen it and has some connection with the war widow.

Were there any sort of associations that helped people during the Depression?

I was only seven to fourteen. I wouldn't know.

How old were you when you joined the navy?

20:30 Nineteen.

That was 1938 was it?

Yeah, 1938.

So in the mid to late 30s things were tough still…

All the way up to 1939.

It was all Depression really?

Yeah.

Tell me how your mum coped with this. What did she do once your father had passed away?

She worked in the Bank of New South Wales in Collins Street

21:00 for many years. She was the cook. They call them chefs now. But she was the cook there for many years. And she was well remembered. She'd go off there every morning for years, and years, and years.

What time would she come back?

I wouldn't remember now, it's that long ago. I wouldn't remember.

21:30 You see when I went into baking, that was all night work. You sleep during the day, or try to. Then we'd start work in the bakehouse at ten. I used to ride a push bike from Brunswick right out to Northcote, St George's Road in Northcote. We'd ride there. My brother in law got me the job in the bakery. He was a Master Baker, married to my sister. He was on five pounds four shillings. Untold wealth.

22:00 Five pounds four shillings. He got me the job. There were four apprentices and we were paid twelve and six a week. And after three, twenty eight shillings a week. We'd ride the pushbikes. I remember the lamps on the bikes were little kerosene lamps. They didn't have the ones that ran off the wheel. You know, little generators. They were little kerosene lamps. Of course there were no cars around in those days.

22:30 The brother in law and I, we used to wake up and our meals would be left on a pot, a saucepan with water in it, with a plate with the meal on there. Everyone's in bed. So we'd have our meal and then we'd ride our pushbikes. About a half hour ride. Right from Brunswick to Northcote. And then we'd start work at ten.

23:00 Down would come the dough through a big hole in the roof onto the table. It was all done by hand. All dough was mixed by hand. They've got a machine now. A baker today, he doesn't even get flour on his hand. But in those days, the dough was up on the floor above so the heat would make the dough rise. Then there was a trap door and they all drop down onto a big table. Then you'd slice it up and put it on a scale, slice it up.

23:30 It was all done by hand. I mentioned in the book, in the ships…all the signal halyards were the province of the signalman. So if the halyard broke and it ran out through the block, someone had to go up the mast and put the rope through the block. In a ship like the

24:00 Perth there would be about 20 signalmen. Out of about 700 men there's about 24 signalmen in four watches. They used to call for volunteers. A lot of people didn't like…because there was no safety gear. You had to go up just on the strength of your arms. The thing with baking, because of this, you built up

24:30 strong shoulders and arms. It's the old thing, when you're in the forces, never volunteer. I volunteered in the Australia and that was over 100 foot up the mast. But because of the job I had been doing, all bakers built up very strong shoulder

25:00 and arm muscles. Anyway I volunteered once and then I never got out of missing it. Every time something needed doing up there, it was me. Of course with a ladder with the strokes like that. You never went up that way. You went up sideways. When you go up…see the ladder's only that wide with rungs. It was a 100 feet up and you have to change from one little ladder to another half way up.

25:30 And you'd look down and see the little Sydney ferries like little toy boats. And people pointing up.

Must be scary or did you get used to it?

Well the trick was never look down. Never look down. And the other thing was to just think you were only two feet off the ground. Because if you looked down you could be gone.

26:00 I often used to see the linesman doing the electricity wires with all their hoops and the belts. None of that. You had to go down to the wireless office. There was a board in the wireless office in a wire cage where all the power went for the transmission of wireless signals. There was a board there that said, 'man aloft'. You took that board out in the wireless office

26:30 and you went down to the quarter deck, to the Officer of the Watch, and you said to him, "Permission to go aloft sir." And he'd take the board. Because if he didn't do that and they operated and turned the power on, the power to the aerial would throw you right off. It would kill you. The power going into the aerial to transmit was electric current. Anyway you gave the officer of the watch

27:00 the board, ask for permission to go aloft, and you'd just climb up. You might have to take an end of a rope tied onto you because the pulley up there, with the rope that went up with the flag hoist, it had broken or just fallen through the block. So you had to carry a length of the rope, just the end, not the entire length. You'd tie it on your waist and you'd go right up. Right out along the yard arm,

27:30 and you'd be hanging on the side like that with one arm, undoing and putting it through the block and

then pulling it down. I volunteered once and I was a pressed man every time. When someone had to go up it had to be me. But some people, they just wouldn't do it. They had to call for volunteers.

Just a few other questions

28:00 **before we move on to the war. With the Depression period, you also mentioned that rabbits saved a lot of families. How did it help your family?**

There was about five or six of us, all young fellas. We used to ride bikes every weekend, out from Brunswick.

28:30 And we all put together and we bought a ferret, and we built a box, and I got the job of looking after the ferret, feeding it every morning and all that. Then we had a little box we'd carry. We'd cycle out near Tullamarine. It was Tallarook, near Tullamarine where the airport is. And there's a big gorge down there where you drive down a

29:00 side road and it falls away in a big gorge. There were rabbits…you had to be there…with the ferret you could chase the rabbits out of the burrow. But you wouldn't see them in the day time. They go underground in the day light. And we'd get the ferret out and we'd get a dozen pair of rabbits. Twenty four, thirty. We'd gut them. Cut them open, all the guts

29:30 fly out, tie them on the handle bars of our pushbike. There were six of us and we'd all take a certain number, hang them on the bar and then cycle all the way home. Then if we had enough left we'd give one to the neighbour on that side and we'd give one or two to the neighbour on that side. It was always the joke.…

30:00 Mrs Smith said, "Thank your mother for the rabbits." That was a joke between us. They were all very thankful to get a nice clean rabbit. There was no myxo in it.

Is myxo, myxomatosis is it?

No, there was nothing.

How did you know they didn't have myxomatosis?

Well it hadn't even been invented.

Right, so that came a lot later on?

Oh yes. See I'm talking about the 1930s.

30:30 And myxo hadn't been invented. The only thing you had to watch out for was hydatids, and we could pick that right away. It used to form in the lungs, but I can't remember that…it was very rare, the hydatids. It was passable to human beings. It was like watery lumps on the lungs. It was

31:00 quite detectable when you opened the rabbit up. But lots of people lived on rabbits. You've got rabbit stew. Fricassee rabbit.

Fricassee rabbit?

Yeah.

Tell us about that one

'Hunting man's chicken' they used to call it because it was white meat. There was a book written

31:30 by John McGrath. I only got the book six months ago and I gave it to my son. It's called 'The Rabbit King' and he had the farm down there off Boneo Road…no, not Boneo Road, Jetty Road, Buninyong Farm. I don't know if you saw it. You go down Jetty Road and it's right on the corner there.

32:00 John McGrath was called the Rabbit King. He sold millions of rabbits to America and the United Kingdom. Everyone in those days wore a hat. All men wore a hat. The skins from rabbits were what made the Akubra hats, and he sold millions of them to America where they were made up into hats.

32:30 All men in those years all wore a hat or a cap. You never saw a male bare-headed. Anyway John McGrath, he had refrigerated trucks, semi trailers all over Australia, right up in Western Australia, Northern Territory, big refrigerated trucks where

33:00 the rabbits trappers who were make a living would bring the rabbits into where the refrigerated truck was and it would be trucked down. It was a big operation. The rabbit meat during the war, there was tons and tons of it sent in refrigerated ships to England. It was a food staple. It saved a lot of people going hungry.

33:30 When the chemist devised the myxo, the whole business fell down. The whole business fell down. John McGrath, the rabbit king. His business just fell because the myxo…it was a hideous thing. The rabbit would go blind. You could see them running around. They couldn't see. And people wouldn't eat rabbit like that.

So that's where it stopped?

34:00 Well he had to find another avenue of employment. But he was in it in a big way. He had refrigerated trucks especially made. It's a very interesting book. 'The Rabbit King' by…it's not by John McGrath. It's written by a woman. I must get it back from my son. He's got it down there somewhere.

What about your brother…you said you had four siblings?

34:30 Two sisters.

Any brothers?

Yes, one brother, Martin.

Was Martin older than you?

No six years younger.

And your sisters?

One sister was two years younger and the other was six years older. The oldest sister is still alive. She'd be 88 now.

35:00 Up in Wyuna, up near Cowra…not Cowra…up on the Murray River. Wyuna…there's a town. New South Wales on the other side. She's still going around.

What did she do? She was six years old in the Depression period, would she be looking after the family as well?

She was married to my brother in law and her name became Pollard, which is a

35:30 Welsh name. She's still alive up in Wyuna. I'm trying to think of the town on the other side. Cowra? Not Cowra. Doesn't matter. Anyway, there's only two of us left. We're all falling off the twig.

What are the dearest memories of the Depression period?

36:00 Of the Depression years? The best or the worst?

Well the best and the worst. What were the sadder points of the Depression that you experienced?

Well it was the closeness of the group of fellas. In those years, there was about six of us. Every weekend, that was the bike ride. We'd ride

36:30 to Geelong, and this is in the time you didn't have the bikes you've got today. You had a gear but you only had two ratios, and to change them you had to get off the bike to do it. Not like to day. They're Rolls Royce bikes today. But in those days…it was bike riding I think.

So that was the happiest time for you?

Yeah I think so.

37:00 And after the rabbits. We went on then to…or I did anyway. I got a pea rifle and I'd walk all day. And I'm talking about the back of Bacchus Marsh and …there were no fences and any farmer there was glad to see you if you were killing some of the rabbits. But you walk all day and that's something you can't do now. The farmers down there are waving you off.

37:30 I mean if you're walking around with a pea rifle. The photograph there, when I joined the navy in '38, everyone had to do rifle training. I was pretty good at it. There were 15 men under training there and myself and another fellow, a telegraphist, were picked for the HMAS Cerberus Rifle Team.

38:00 The two of us out of 1500. So eventually I got the crossed rifles as a qualified marksman. You had to shoot over 300 yards, 500 and 800, and you had to get 80%. I had pretty good eyesight. You got to wear the badge which you got from the store,

38:30 of the crossed rifles, and in 1939, early in '39, they had a combined army, navy, airforce rifle competition. The three services. There were 19 teams from the army and the airforce, and there was only one team from the navy. That was Cerberus. Anyway out of all those 19 we came 3rd. There were only about six of us in the group.

39:00 We fired the old type Lewis gun and rifles, on the Williamstown rifle range. There's a photograph there of the team that went over. But I always enjoyed rifle shooting. It calls for a bit of nicety. The wind blowing from the left or the right, and things like that. I was pretty good at it. I don't mind saying. I like rifle shooting.

39:30 I think we always like the thing we're good at don't we. I mean if you're good at soccer then you always like it.

I've got one more question for you before the tape ends. What were the saddest points of the

Depression for you?

40:00 I lost my cousin Vic. Vic McNeil. He was named after my other cousin who was killed at Gallipoli. lieutenant Saltau was killed in Gallipoli, and Brian, the one I was named after…Brian Saltau and Vic Saltau were brothers. Brian Saltau the one I was named after was 18,

40:30 and Vic was 21 or 22 or something. Anyway he got killed at Gallipoli. Brian Saltau got wounded at Gallipoli. They put him in hospital, patched him up and sent him to France and he got killed in 1917 in one of the big battles there. I've lost my train of thought. Vic McNeil

41:00 was named after the other uncle…

Tape 3

00:33 **Alright now I just want to take you right back, what was it like growing up in the 20s up until the Depression. Your father died at seven. What were those first ten years like? What did you do for fun. What do you remember of those days?**

Well at seven I was still at school until, to

01:00 fourteen, so that would bring me up to about 1932 I suppose. I left school and then of course everyone looked for work.

But before you left school, as a child what do you remember of those times?

It was very rigorous…

01:30 the law about you going to school. The government employed truancy officers, and if you weren't there for one day there'd be a knock at the door from the truancy officer asking your mother or whatever, why wasn't he at school. That was rigorously enforced. It worked very well because you went to school to stop the fella knocking at your door

02:00 and asking you questions. And there were young fellas who told mum they were going to school but they were down the creek looking for yabbies. They catch up with you. I don't know what happens today. I don't.

Truancy officers don't really exist any more but they're still pretty strict, but it's more enforced by the school itself.

02:30 Well there was a state school, and whether it was a Catholic school, you only went to 14. The only other teaching you could go to was a technical school where you learned woodcraft or something like this. What do they call it? Where you sawed a bit of wood up…I don't know if there was any practical applications.

03:00 **Did you do well at school?**

I wouldn't remember. I always did well in the subject of compositions. Compositions meant writing. Writing a story about something. I always did well in that. And I think it applies to most children. There are certain things that catch in your mind. I always liked history.

03:30 And of course, all the history that was taught then was all British colonial history. They teach you about the sea battles and the war battles and all that panorama of British history. A lot of it based on military history. You'd hear about

04:00 [Admiral Horatio] Nelson and all this. Of course this was the 1920s and we were still very much orientated to the United Kingdom. I suppose from their point of view we were still a colony. So a great deal was given…not necessarily a great deal. But I can remember the many courses that went back into British history.

04:30 But at the same time they taught you geography. The rivers, the great rivers, the Nile and all that. I think compared to some other nations, they gave you a general…the education system gave you from the age of six, eight years to fourteen, it gave you a broad

05:00 general knowledge which I think in some countries is not given. I say that because I've met Americans over the years, not recently who have absolutely no clue about what happens outside of America. I can remember when

05:30 we took the aircraft carrier Victorious across …there was three destroyers, that was one of them. She lost a propeller and we escorted her to Norfolk, Virginia into the dockyards in America. We were in there for about a week. We had American workmen come on to do little jobs we wanted done, some bit of welding or something, and of course when the

06:00 Australian ships, when they're moored or anchored, up in the bow where that mast is there, is the national flag. And of course we're in there with a lot of American ships, and we've got the Australian flag. There was an American on a couple of boats down, he got up with the semaphore… "What's that flag? What's that flag you're flying?"

06:30 **So not much knowledge of who they were actually fighting with?**

No, and about the world at large and other countries. It's only a generalisation by me, but I've struck that on occasion. They sort of lack some idea of the world outside of the boundaries of the USA [United States of America].

07:00 **So when you were at school did you learn a lot about the First World War?**

No, no.

Why do you think that is? It seems odd.

We had teachers there, there were a couple of teachers there who were in Gallipoli. I'm about 7 or 8 or something,

07:30 never mentioned. But I think that was a general thing with ex-servicemen. It was the same after the Second World War. Time and again, relatives of people, would say their dad hadn't told them. He had never said anything. But there's some psychological thing taking place. I read an article somewhere in the last few months…the fellas in the Second World War who are in

08:00 the 80 group….I think this came from the DVA [Department of Veteran Affairs], some sort of article from the DVA…they're starting to talk. It's psychological. They're realising they're not going to live forever, and it's happening a lot more now than it did just after the war. Some psychological ploy there. But at times I've met

08:30 fellas who served in the war and you get talking to them, and because you were there they'll talk to you. And I've said to them, "Put it down. When you're gone, who's going to remember?" And I encourage them all the time. I don't know if it works.

But when you were at school, didn't you learn anything in general about what had happened during the war?

09:00 It's so long ago. There was always Anzac Day and in those days of course every morning up went the flag with a kettle drum and a bugle, and you saluted the flag and then you all marched in lines, into the classroom.

What did that mean to you?

I don't remember at that age. It was just something the school said you had to do, so you did it.

09:30 The headmaster was there and the teachers were all there, and you all lined up in Grade 1 and Grade 2 The kettle drum would go and then the bugle and up would go the flag, and then you all marched away.

And so after school, what did you do for fun?

We went to school bare-footed, and this is in Brunswick.

10:00 Stuart Street, East Brunswick. The school right down the end. You went to school bare-footed. You couldn't afford shoes. You didn't have shoes, you had boots. Everyone had boots, the men anyway, the males. You never had shoes. That was sissy, you had to have boots. But you only used those on Sunday. So in the summer time in particular you would go barefoot to school.

Were they dirt roads?

10:30 All the gutters were made of the blue stone blocks. Not concreted. You know, the rectangular blue stone. Cobble stones they called them. All the way down Stuart Street, and if you went further down you came onto the creek, Merri Creek ran down the end there.

11:00 You asked me the question but my memory fails me, I never thought about it. I can't cast my mind back. They used to have a game called 'cherry bobs', and they had a game called 'toodly buck', which was a piece of cardboard on a cotton reel and on an axis. They had all the horse names of the Melbourne Cup on it. It had a bit of string around it and you'd pull it and you'd bet on the horses with so many cherry bobs

11:30 on the needle coming to your horse.

What's a cherry bob?

A cherry bob was the pip out of a cherry. It was very unusual for anyone to buy cherries. They were very scarce and you couldn't afford them anyway. There's not many people grew cherry trees. But for some reason the cherry bob, being scarce became valuable in the child's mind.

12:00 Toodly buck. And the young fellas operating these things would be touting because they were winning

like bookmakers. If you put four cherry bobs on Phar Lap for instance. It had all the horse names from the Melbourne Cup on this cardboard cut out, and they'd pull that and if you didn't win he'd collect the cherry bobs.

12:30 So it was very good training to be a bookmaker I think.

Did you ever go to the Melbourne Cup?

No. You couldn't get there. And in those years to go to the Cup you had to have money. The idea to go to the Cup was to bet wasn't it. Nobody had any money to bet. And you never had a car. It was all horse and cart. It's a strange

13:00 thing, there were horses running around but to get there you had to have a horse to get there. You didn't have a car to drive out there to Flemington.

And your family didn't have a horse itself?

No, we lived in Brunswick see.

Did you use the trams?

No, my father used to hire a horse and a cart, which was a flat tray, and we went around…he'd go around to all these customers

13:30 and buy their bags and then he'd cart them back to the merchant. It was up in Moreland Road somewhere, up in Coburg. He'd buy the bags at a price and then he'd sell them for a plus price. He was a bag merchant up there. He wasn't the only one doing it. It was quite a trade. Because the bags weren't made

14:00 in Australia, they were made in India. These were chaff bags. And of course chaff bags carried the food for all the horses. I mean if you had a transport that was predominantly horses, you had to have food. Not like petrol stations, you have petrol stations to fill your tank. The chaff was fuel for the horse drawn transport.

14:30 So there was a great many bags to carry the chaff for the horses.

Did you go with your father sometimes?

Yes he used to take me yeah. He would set me up on the front seat and hand me the reins. And he would tell me how to hold the reins between by fingers. But he never used a whip. He never whipped a horse. But it was all horse orientated then.

15:00 The same as it is now. It's orientated to a Holden that's been hotted up. The same thing happened with horses. Apparently, my mother told me, there used to be a parade up St Kilda Road on the weekends with horse drawn jinkers and all this with all glossy wheels and horses all groomed. It used to be a competition

15:30 with the horse transport as you get with the young fellows now in petrol driven vehicles.

As a young boy did you want to have a nice looking horse and a nice looking carriage?

No I never thought about it.

Ok. What did you dream about when you were a boy? What did you want to be when you grew up?

16:00 Didn't occur to me. You just went from day to day I guess. But of course all the families, like the group of us in that age group, there were all about five or six of us and we always went together. No one ever raised about what they wanted to do or what they thought they could do. There were no opportunities. I mean, you did 14…at the age of 14 you left school and then you

16:30 made your way somehow. But with no sort of definite aim, because you didn't have the education. I mean you couldn't be a nuclear scientist for instance. The opportunity wasn't there. I think even the smart children in that group, when they left at 14, I don't know how they got on. The ideal would have been to go to a place like Scotch College, but that cost money.

17:00 **So you didn't dream of being a cowboy or something like that?**

Oh yeah, being a cowboy. Tom Mix….I can remember…now what age was it. Anyway, I wanted to write to Tom Mix…a lot of the films were cowboy films. Of course all black and white. I think…

17:30 silent movies gave up somewhere in the 1930s, I think 1932 or something. That's when the talkies came in. As I can remember, I must have been about 12 and I kept on about Tom Mix. I wanted to write to Tom Mix.

What, he was a cowboy?

Yeah, he was Tom Mix. He had the big hat and the guns and all this.

18:00 I wrote a letter and of course the family I was in, my eldest sister and my mother and that, because I pestered them, they addressed the letter to America. And I kept waiting and waiting and of course they had it all worked out. They put a letter in the box.

Did you go to the pictures a lot?

18:30 Yes, that was our only entertainment. That was in that point where the silent ones began to give way to the talkies. I can remember the advertising and the talkies came in. I think it was '32 or around about then. And it, of course it was a great impetus for people,

19:00 going to the cinema when the talkies came in. There was Eddie Cantor. And the fella who used to sing the Negro songs…

Paul Robeson?

No…I can't think of the name.

19:30 I can't think of the name. But I think the…

Al Jolson?

Al Jolson! A white man with the black [face]. It was a great thing for the film industry when the talkies came in because everyone wanted to hear the songs.

20:00 I think you could get the old plastic discs and then you had to have a machine that could play it and that cost money. You paid your money to the cashier at the cinema and there was Al Jolson and there was the sound, and I think it was a great thing for the cinema people when that came in. And of course they used to have a lot of serials.

20:30 They've got Nelly tied down on the railway line and the train's coming, continued next week. And you went up there. Those serials went for a many years. They would have a different serial every Saturday. And of course all the audience wasn't silent by any means. There'd be a scene and the baddies would be up the back…and he's creeping along, and they'd all

21:00 yell out, "Watch out!" In the audience…this is ten and twelve year olds. But you don't get that in a cinema today. I've never heard that…all shouting, "Look out, look out!"

So as a boy of about 8 years old, did you have a lot of friends that you would run around with and go to the cinema with?

Oh yes. There was always the

21:30 same group. In those years it was possible…you formed a group in that street and if somebody came from another street then you'd gang up on him. Oh yes, it was the fore runner to what they called the Pushes that operated through Fitzroy and through there. If you wandered into their territory, that was defined,

22:00 you'd be attacked. Oh no, there were a lot of things. There was a mob in Fitzroy called the Crutchies, and they were renowned. They all had crutches and they formed a group and if you happened to wander down their street then you were in trouble. Bad trouble. They'd really do you over. Boots and all.

Why did they have crutches?

It was a sort of territory thing. You shouldn't be in our street.

22:30 It was one of those things that's inherent in human nature I suppose. I don't know.

Are you talking about a crutch like this?

They had crutches, you know long ones, under the arm pits. Not like the ones they've got now. They were all wooden ones then. They'd use them. Oh yeah. They were a feared mob.

Had they broken their legs or…

I don't know. But they

23:00 used the crutches as a weapon. But they were well known through Fitzroy and there. And of course there were lots of other names. But it's out of my age group. They were in the 18 or 19 or 20, or even older, group. But the same thing applied even to the younger groups. There was a group in that street. And if someone came in from another street, they'd be told to get out or else.

Did you get into trouble yourself?

No, no. We all kept to

23:30 ourselves. We didn't wander around into other streets. I remember, I sold newspapers there. After I turned 14 I got a newspaper round. I worked out of a shop up in Sydney Road. And they were to be

desired. You had to go and see the newsagent owner and find out if someone was leaving, and then you'd be given a round. You had a push bike

24:00 and my mother made a bag out of a baggie and you put them in and you had to get a money belt, and you had this certain route. And if you strayed into some other person's route, and I got over there. A fella from another newsagent abutted onto the area I was in

24:30 and he got me up a back lane one day and tore all my papers and threw them in the air. But that was the way it worked. In Sydney Road, the area of that newsagent finished…there was a store on the corner of …Maples Store. And on this corner here that was our boundary. If we walked over the street to that other corner, the other newsboys would gang up on you. That was their territory.

25:00 The territorial thing was very strong.

Were you delivering them door to door or were you selling them?

Normally they were sold by word of mouth or lungs. As you rode your bike you called out "Herald, Herald." And there were certain people you got to know and they were always there waiting. The papers used to come in by motor vehicle from Melbourne. I'm trying to think of the…

25:30 there were different names. The names of the papers have changed now. I can't think what they were.

There was the Argus before the Age.

I wouldn't remember. They had what they called the Sporting Globe. That came in on a Saturday night. That was a yellow paper. I can't think whether the Sun…it escapes me. There were only two daily newspapers. And then on Saturday you got the Sporting Globe.

26:00 And we used to all wait…there might be about 8 news boys employed by that newsagency with different routes or rounds to sell the paper. And we'd all see the truck coming and we'd say, "Here they come." The truck would pull up and the fella would throw them out on the footpath. One of us would pick them up and run them into the newsagent, and she'd count off, "Two dozen for you and two dozen for you." And it was all marked down.

26:30 You got threepence a dozen. If you sold a dozen you got threepence. Six nights you'd get eight or nine shillings. The cable trams ran up Sydney Road then and we used to swing on and off the cable trams with our bags, and our money bag around our waste on a sling here.

27:00 But the cable trams used to run at about 8 miles an hour I suppose. And you could swing off them and we became quite used to hopping on. But you had to wait until they stopped before you could hop on.

Did you pay to go on the tram or did you have to sneak around?

Oh no. Well the fella on the cable was on the big break in the middle, and then there was the conductor, and they never worried you.

27:30 The thing you had to aware of was travelling on the cable tram into someone else's area. You could be in trouble there. You could be in a fight because you were in their area. So you used to always watch on the cable car that you weren't going too far. If you did you would have to hop off and get the cable car going the other way to

28:00 get out of that area. And it worked both ways. You didn't allow the others to come into our area. If they did we'd give them billyo. There were various territorial things in that age group, in that generation.

This is around '34, '34?

Yeah, I don't know when the cable trams went out.

So when you were working on the cable trams you were about 14?

Yes, I could only do it when I was…no wait on, I did

28:30 it before then. I used to do it after school. I must have started about 13, I think. I must have still been at school.

So about '32, 1932?

Yeah it could have been. See the first thing you had to have to apply to do a paper round, you had to have a push bike. We didn't have the money, but my brother in law…I don't know what he did but he advertised somewhere

29:00 and we had a couple of people who appeared with bikes and we bought one for thirty shillings. And having a bike you could go and get a job on a paper round.

Did you ever read the newspapers yourself?

No, no.

Not even the funny pages?

29:30 You never had time to undo a newspaper. They were quite large and you were only about this high. I'm not that much higher now, but you were smaller again. I mean opening a paper up? No, no. You've got money bags and all that. All you wanted to do was sell them and get paid for doing it.

And you always sold all of your papers?

No, no. You always had what you called returns.

30:00 **Did you get a little bit of money for the ones you took back?**

If they gave you two dozen and you brought back six, you were only given a credit for 18, and it was threepence a dozen you got paid. So that's four and a half pence. So to earn 8 or 9 shilling a week you had to sell a hell of a lot of papers and do a lot of peddling.

30:30 But it was an era. But the old cable trams…

You've mentioned about the different pushes in different areas. Was there any kind of cultural or religious differences as well, like Protestants or the Irish or the English?

Well in those years

31:00 the Catholic schools existed on their own merits, their own finances. You alright?

You said that your father died when you were seven. You must have had some memory of that. How did it effect you?

31:30 I wasn't deeply affected, no. I didn't really know he died because my mother said, "Your father won't be coming home." The word death was never mentioned at that age, to me anyway, seven or eight I suppose. She just said, "He won't be coming home." I didn't grieve about it for some reason.

Were you close to your father?

32:00 He was one of the cleanest mouthed men I ever met. I never heard him say damn or bloody. But it wasn't a particular thing with him. It was the way men were then, particularly when there were women. If you happened to use a swear word, you were expected to…unbeknown there was a female within hearing distance, you were

32:30 expected to go up, all red in the face and apologise. That was the generation then. But when I was with him on the cart he never used a whip on the horse. He never belted it and I never heard him say dang or damn or bloody. Very clean mouth. But I don't think he was unusual in that.

33:00 It was the way people were. It's not…a lot of people don't realise that in 1834, eight men came up this bay in a boat. Now that's a 169 years. Europe's had what, 3000, 4000 years? All

33:30 the construction here, in Victoria I'm talking about, the roads, the buildings are 169 years old. I was thinking last night knowing that you were coming, that I've lived nearly half of that. I'll be 84 in September, so it's almost a half of the entire history of Victoria.

34:00 Before 1834 it was all black fellas. It's amazing, the rapidity of what's happened. When the war started the population was seven million. We had a small navy. Today we've got 19 going onto 20 million. When the war ended there was 7 million.

34:30 And it's not generally realised that the Australian Navy had the highest proportion pro rata of the loss of men in ships, of all the navies during the Second World War. So I say that in respect of all the fellas who are not here today, that have gone. I will always …I suppose I will always beat the drum because

35:00 not much has come out about the Royal Australian Navy. Anzac Day, do you remember any mention about the Royal Australian Navy. You ask anyone and they say, no. The thing that's happened, the army and the airforce, there's always a little white cross somewhere in a green paddock.

35:30 But that doesn't happen. People ask me, have you marched on Anzac Day, I've never. Because there's no sort of recognition through lack of knowledge of the doings of the people in ships. The only place I know where there's a white cross

36:00 of sailors is in Kanchanaburi, the Commonwealth War Memorial, 60 mile west of Bangkok. And I went there back, before 1990 anyway. I went up there and I travelled out by train to Kanchanaburi. The cemetery there had 1400

36:30 buried, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Very well kept as they all are. I've been to the ones in Crete and Greece, the war cemeteries for the Australians. Very well kept, all under the Commonwealth War Graves. I spoke to the Manager, the Thai Manager of these 1400 graves and he looked up the records. He was very cooperative.

37:00 He said there's 18 sailors in this 1400. Now the only difference, they were a small concrete stone with a

brass plate. The only difference between the brass plate for the navy fellas was a fouled anchor. The Manager and his two assistants and I walked up and down,

37:30 and every time we found one they put a pebble on it. And they went around the names of the fellas together with their service number. That's the only place I know where there's sailors buried. The embassy in Jakarta, every Anzac Day

38:00 they organise a group to go to Sunda Straits [Indonesia] where they put wreaths over where the HMAS Perth lies on the bottom, 180 feet down for the HMAS Perth. Out of 681 men there was 220 came home. A lot of them down there, locked up. No little white crosses. I don't think the word is 'riled',

38:30 but I feel there's something lacking. Anzac Day, and to me there doesn't seem to be anything, any remembrance. And then of course there's the Sydney. Six hundred and forty five. They never found a body. But you see them all marching down with their flags up, the army and airforce and I've given up watching the Anzac Day parade. That's why I'm pleased

39:00 today to have you here because all those fellas, there should be something. Something on record for them. That's what gives me great pleasure.

Tape 4

00:34 **Now that the camera's running. I did just want to ask you…I know we've talked about what was talked at school about World War I, but up until you joined up, before you joined up, what knowledge you have of World War I and what happened there?**

01:00 **You had two cousins who died there,**

Uncles.

Two uncles, sorry.

Victor and Brian.

And what impression did you have of it and what did you think of war in general?

I think there's always a correlation between Australians who had relatives within a family

01:30 group who served in the Great War. There was a …what, would it be, pride? I don't know. You had a relationship between relatives who had served and had been killed in a war. So it was sort of part of the family, the family history.

02:00 I'm not alone in that. I think a lot of people who served in the Second World War also had a connection with relatives who served in the Great War. There was an infinity between that generation and that which had gone. There was a common affinity because their relatives had been in action or injured or killed. There was that melding together of the two generations.

02:30 That was a common thing.

So did you? Did you have a sense of pride and feel it was part of your heritage?

Yes, I think that's probably the word. Probably the word. See Brian Saltau who's photo is…they've got a painting in sepia in the foyer at the University High School. He had a glowing

03:00 report about his academic ability. He had it up here apparently. I've lost my train of thought.

So there was a picture of him in sepia…

Yes, in sepia. A very large one as an old boy and the song of the house. It's still there. It's still part of one of the four houses at the University.

03:30 So I think it's a natural human feeling. If you have a relative who had some distinguishing thing happen to them then it flows on. It impinges on your own life. I mean, there's a great many people who are very proud to acknowledge they have a convict in their family history and they search around looking for it. I don't.

04:00 It's one of those things I guess.

So you say you had a sense of heritage. Did you have much sense of the dark side of the World War I and the damage done? Did you see people who had been hurt and maybe who had had their legs amputated?

No, no. You don't at that age. It's only later.

04:30 **Was it a sense for you that it was a time that men distinguished themselves?**

Well in that era, what was the phrase? “Stick it out, don’t give in.” There was a saying my father used to say. We had a pony at one time at my grandfather’s place in Buckley Street Essendon,

05:00 and he used to say if you get tossed off a horse you’ve got to get right back up again. And it was that thing. You have to get up and keep going. Don’t lay down. It was a sort of credo in that generation. And of course you had the backing of forebears who went through the Great War,

05:30 were killed, injured, and you sort of related it to them. They didn’t give up and you don’t either. I think in the Depression years the Australians were well know in the Middle East, together with the New Zealanders, you stuck it out. You didn’t drop everything and run away. That was a terrible thing. No, it’s an Anglo-Celtic thing I think too.

06:00 The Black Watch and the Highlanders [British army regiments] are renowned. If you’re in a fight you want them there because they’d never give up.

Ok so in 1938 you joined up. You said that in some ways you joined the navy for the benefits?

Yes, the family benefit yes.

06:30 **And also because of your mother being a chef or a cook, and obviously for the better pay? What other reasons did you have for joining up. Did you think of anything else?**

That was it. subsistence I suppose would be the word. subsistence.

Yes we were speaking about your reasons for getting in to the navy.

07:00 **Did you feel it was affected by that sense of heritage towards your relatives in the First World War?**

No it was mainly subsistence. My mother had been working since what, 1927, 1928. Off to work year after year. All the way up…she was still doing it when I went into the navy. Well that’s a few years isn’t it?

07:30 Fifteen years she would trundle off to get the train in Lygon Street, go into the Bank of New South Wales in Collins Street, then back home again. All those years. So I think it was subsistence. The very fact that she didn’t have to cater for one person, and of course the other thing,

08:00 well, in the service you had your medical and dental looked after, and food. And if you weren’t there you have to pay for that outside. It was a simple matter of mathematics I think. I wouldn’t be alone either, in that era. A lot, the great majority of the 2nd AIF would be in the same…five shillings a day, and it took me three years…that’s thirty five shillings

08:30 a week. And it took me three years to get twenty eight shillings a week working as an apprentice baker. I mean, if you just look at the figures. There was no sentiment there at all, don’t worry about that.

So in 1938 there’s rumblings in Europe, did it ever occur to you that you might be sent to war?

09:00 I suppose it did. I suppose it did. But there was no great talk about it. It was just something that was there in the newspaper. You never had discussions with anyone about it. I suppose when you join an armed service perhaps there’s some feeling of…oh this will be great because you’re going to put into practice what you’ve been under training for.

So tell me a bit more about that?

09:30 **You mentioned you had to learn a lot of code, Morse code being one. What are the other codes?**

Well there were all the codes and ciphers. It was the longest course in the navy, it was 15 months for signalmen and telegraphists.

10:00 I worked out, there was something like 201 flags and pennants. You had to be able to describe in words…if you were doing an examination, they’d say, “Describe flag X in the International Code. Describe Pennant One in the Naval Code. What does pennant so and so hoisted up mean?

10:30 “You’re talking to a merchant ship and the merchant ship hoists a string of three flags, what does that mean?”

So just as an example what does pennant one look like and what does it mean when it’s hoisted up?

I wouldn’t remember. There was that many. You had the international code of signals, the full alphabetical lot. Then there were substitutes. We had to repeat

11:00 a letter. The Naval Code, the RN Naval Code, 26 alphabetical, 10 pennants. And a myriad of a dozen other flags, special flags. There was a black flag for instance which was used when you were opening fire on an exercise, as a gunnery shoot. The thing with all

11:30 these, you had to memorise them. You could see a…for a laymen seeing a flag go up he can run to a book and open a book and try and find it. But you can't do that at sea sometimes. You have to do it instantly. Like Flag O. I don't know if it was man overboard. Then there were two letter groups, then there were three letter groups. There were flags for indicating enemy.

12:00 A U-boat. Aircraft attack. All these things you sort of digested inwardly because you had no time when something was happening. It had to be up here. That's why it took so long.

You mentioned off camera about DB [Duff Baker].

Duff Baker. At eight o'clock in the morning at the beginning of the Battle of Cape Matapan [off Greece, March 1941] there were four cruisers.

12:30 The Orion, Ajax, Perth and Gloucester. All six inch gun. They were all travelling in line ahead. At 8 o'clock three ships were sighted 13 or 14 mile away. We could just see them from the flag deck, just the blur shapes.

I want to get onto a detailed description of the

13:00 **battle later, but just as an example of the flags before you get into that. You mentioned DB being Duff Baker. What did that mean?**

'Proceed independently'. We were under fire for about an hour. The Perth was…In the army

13:30 when shots fall either side of the target they use a word bracket. In the navy if a shot falls and it lands on both sides of you, where you are, that's called a straddle, not a bracket. We were under fire for about an hour at extreme range. The four ships in line ahead.

14:00 The Perth was third. The Gloucester with twelve six inch guns she was next to stern. Where I was, I could see her just there behind us. She cocked all her twelve six inch guns and fired a full broadside and they landed short. I could see them land short. The Italians were 8 inch and they had about thirteen or fourteen mile range so

14:30 we couldn't hit them. But they were lobbing them over and you can hear the sound of them coming. The noise you get on the American films. A shell approaching. The signal came down the line from the Orion who was leading the four cruisers, 'duff baker'. So instantly I knew what it was. I said to the commander, there's a signal to

15:00 proceed independently sir. What it meant was, every ship for themselves. And in the book I've mentioned in the vernacular, get to buggery out of it. Anyway the Perth clapped on speed and pulled out to starboard. And we drew level with the Ajax that was ahead of us. They did good work in the engine room. We jumped out. The ship was doing 34 knots.

15:30 And then we made smoke which is a normal thing. And the smoke takes two knots off your speed. Now the ship's engines are actually doing 36 knots. To put it in emphasis, 7000 tons of steel running down Swanston Street at 40 mile an hour, it's the heaviest piece of steel

16:00 structure that you can imagine travelling at that speed.

Ok we'll get back to that. So in 1939 when war was actually declared. How did you feel then?

I looked forward to it. It took you out of the training depot into something that was exciting wasn't it. To be in a war!

16:30 No, it was exciting. Let's face it, in a training establishment there's a hell of a lot of repetition. We did all the …

So you were in training right up to the point of…

Oh yes. You did the thing with the marching and the rifle and the bayonets. That was all tossed in with your instructions on signals. The routine in navy is rigid. You have this to do in that time.

17:00 You had physical education at that time. You had instruction on Morse code. You had instruction on signals. A whole raft of things and it went on day after day, week after week, month after month. So when something happens like that you think this is good, we're going to get away from all that bullshit down there.

Did you find it hard adapting to such a rigorous physical and mental

17:30 **lifestyle from being a baker before that, which is physical but perhaps not…?**

The discipline of navy personnel is way beyond anything you think in the army or airforce. Way beyond. There's overtones of Bligh in there. There was

18:00 a great gap between officers and men. An officer was an officer. Do you remember Charles Lawton in 'Mutiny on the Bounty' and he says, "Mr Christian, a midshipman is the lowest form of animal life in the British Navy." That sort of attitude was there. It was there. That's why I wanted to get onto this fellow

here.

18:30 **How was discipline enforced?**

Oh very strict. One minute late, off leave, one minute you would get docked a day's wage and seven days stoppage of leave. Because in a ship there are no spare numbers. When the British Admiralty built a ship they say there are so many men for that engine room, so many men to work the gun turrets, the number is

19:00 finite. There's no spare numbers. So the object was, if you were one minute late and you were part of that team, you could put the whole ship in danger. That was the thinking. So the discipline that you got back to the ship when your time expired. Not after it. So you know, if was those sorts of things. I don't know what happened in the army, but

19:30 it had no comparison. Let's face it the British Navy, discipline wise, it goes back, a long, long way back. The changes take many years and are very, very slow. I don't know how they do it now. The result of that was, when you had 700 on a ship and 700 men in a battalion on land, the discipline…the gap between,

20:00 in discipline was quite dramatic.

Well you mentioned Bligh. Were men ever physically disciplined? I mean Bligh flogged people.

Oh no, not flogging, but you could get five days on bread and water. Then there was the ordinary one, jinkers. I don't know if you've heard of that. Jankers [punishment] was a drill where, in the dog watches …

20:30 the dog watches were between four o'clock and eight, and normally the dog watches were free time. If you were under punishment and you were given jankers, in the four hours between four and eight pm, you'd run around the parade ground with the rifle over your head. Round and round with a Petty Officer screaming at you or yelling at you. "Keep it going seaman whathisname."

21:00 And you might get that….I've never had it. I was very careful. But no, you could get stoppage of leave, stoppage of pay, you could get physical punishment, jankers.

Was there any pranks or rituals that you had to go through?

Well Petty Officers …

21:30 the hierarchy of an Ordinary seamen, then you had a Leading seamen, then you had a Petty Officer, and each one had an amount of power. The fella on the bottom of course got the rough edge of all of them. He couldn't answer back. If you were a Leading seaman and you're talking to an Ordinary seaman,

22:00 the Leading seaman could say, do that, and you'd do it.

As a new recruit, did the older…when you were still doing training did the older recruits have any kind of pranks that they would put you through…what they call bastardisation now.

No not really. It was a training establishment. You were all more or less…

22:30 that's a bit of a pun I suppose, but all in the same boat. Because you're all under the same regime where there's a whole hierarchy of people with authority above you. And I suppose if you had have thought it out, the quicker you got promotion and the higher up the hierarchy the more power you had. Similar to a policeman. He's a civilian one day in a civilian uniform

23:00 and he becomes a policeman next week and he's given a hell of a lot of power. And some handle it well and some don't. Same thing. There's a great levelling out in the navy because if …the people who were up in the hierarchy had been through it before and they could sort of understand.

23:30 They could go that far and not over it. There was that sort of balance. But there was power at different levels according to where on the ladder you were. Like Charles Lawton said, "Mr Christian, a midshipman is a midshipman and the lowest form of animal life

24:00 in the British Navy." That sort of thing. I actually wrote an article about that. I've got a book here somewhere. It's entitled 'Bligh's Bad Language'. But he doesn't use bad language in the sense that you and I might think it's bad. It's sarcastic. Ridicule. Not obscene language, because

24:30 all power came from the top. With Mr Bligh, which is applicable…I don't know what's applicable now, but in the Second World War, the man at the top if he said jump, you'd say, how high. You never argue. There was…I don't know if it's still there, a crime of 'silent contempt'. Where the look on a fella's face,

25:00 when an officer or somebody higher up, particularly with an officer, a commissioned man, said something and you didn't like it and you made a face. You could be charged with silent contempt.

That's an old world, old English school of thought.

It's an old navy thing. I was actually in contact with somebody in the navy, historian… Joe Straczek in Canberra. He's a naval historian there. Royal Australian Navy Historian.

25:30 And he gave me some background on the silent contempt. But the thing with Captain Bligh, and when you try and read up punishments inflicted in naval service, the man on the top, like say, Charles Lawton, all the contempt went the other way.

26:00 You couldn't throw back contempt or ridicule to someone up the line, it all flowed back this way. And apparently if you read Mr Bligh's Bad Language, it was all ridicule but you couldn't throw it back to him because he was the man on the top. So you can imagine the heat and displeasure of the fella on the receiving end.

26:30 And that's apparently one of the things in this book, that Fletcher Christian blew up in the end. He couldn't fight back against the ridicule. Although they say 'Mr Bligh's Bad Language'. It wasn't swearing. It was belittling people under them. And that occurred in World War II with commissioned officers. The things with communications,

27:00 the visual signals and the wireless signals, there was no commissions. All signals in the Navy were done by lower deck people with the responsibility you can't imagine. It used to bemuse me when the war started, there were army officers, commissioned signal officers. RAAF, commissioned signal officers. I used to think

27:30 what the bloody hell do they know. You know the…can I talk about him now because it's to do with signals.

Sure, but remember the people watching the camera can't see that picture. So try and describe it as much as possible.

Well the HMAS Quickmatch, 2000 ton destroyer, commissioned in the Isle of Wight in Cowes in 1942.

28:00 captain lieutenant Commander Rodney Rhoades. The crew 165 men, and I think four of us…

Was this the first ship you were on?

This is '42 I was talking about. No I was in other ships before that way back to '39. But I was sent from Alexandria. The Perth left Alexandria to come back home

28:30 with three signalmen and three telegraphists were drafted to the United Kingdom to pick up a new destroyer. It took a while to get around to the UK I can tell you. We were living out in the desert for two months waiting for transport, sleeping on the sand. Rodney Rhoades,

29:00 lieutenant Commander Rhoades had been in the Vendetta on the Tobruk run, and they ran from Alexandria into Tobruk under [Commander H.M.L.] Hec Waller. Anyway he was a remarkable man.

They called him Dusty didn't they?

29:30 **His nickname was Dusty?**

Well everyone in the navy, if your name was Williams or Pedler or Williams or whatever, you never knew their first name. Well there were Millers and they were always called Dusty Miller. Rhoades, Dusty roads. Bungy Williams, Pedler Palmer, Peggy O'Neil. Never knew their first names.

30:00 Anyway he…we had lieutenant Geoffrey Gladstone, lieutenant Bill [William] Dovers…who were the other ones. Anyway,

30:30 lieutenant Bill Dovers became Rear Admiral in charge of the Royal Australian Navy after the war. Geoffrey Gladstone became a Vice Admiral. These were lieutenants at the time and Rhoades was the lieutenant Commander. He was in charge of the depot here after the war and the Secretary of the Lord Mayor's appeal here in Melbourne. Anyway to get to the point,

31:00 I was having a bit of trouble health wise and the DVA said you need more evidence. Anyway I contacted Dusty Rhoades when he was Secretary of the Lord Mayor's Appeal. And he wrote me a letter later and he

31:30 said, "I'll come down and give a personal recommendation to the DVA Tribunal." It really got to me because naval officers…it's a very close club, the Naval Officers Club. But he was prepared to come from Sydney

32:00 personally, to speak on my behalf. Every time we had a reunion for the Quickmatch, they used to come from all over. South Australia and everywhere, once a year. And every time, he'd be circulating and he would always come up to me and every time he would say, you know, you were a tower of strength. He never missed. He never missed.

32:30 It was…

What were you going to say about the Quickmatch and Dusty Rhoades in '42?

The normal thing then, the ship was commissioned in Samuel White's yard in Cowes. The normal thing for new ships and new crews was you went to Scapa Flow for six weeks,

33:00 for what they called working up. You exercised gunneries. You exercised torpedo. You exercised signals. Everything. All on the run at night time. You'd be out with four destroyers in line ahead, in pitch dark, 150 yards apart, 25 knots. The order would come down the line with a little blue light, alter course to 90 degrees. You're the only signalman reading it. One hundred and fifty yards at 25 knots,

33:30 pitch dark night, you're really …you never took the binoculars from the eyes. You were simulating in the presence of the enemy. Anyway, what happened was, we had four fellas who were reserves and they weren't up to it. They didn't have the training. So myself and young Roger, who was permanent service, we were put on two watches.

34:00 The captain couldn't rely on them because they didn't have the knowledge. So we had to do four hours on and four hours off, for four and five days. The four hours off we had to sleep and eat and whatever. You never took your clothes off. You just kicked your sea boots off and laid down. And I think, he came to rely,

34:30 Dusty Rhoades, on the two of us to maintain the keeping of the ship up to scratch, because the other four fellas were weekend fellas. They didn't have the background knowledge. When you're on a destroyer bridge in the dark, there's no lights. There's no books available. It's all up here. And these fellas just didn't have it. They had never had the 15 months that we'd had.

35:00 I think from Rhoades point of view he always remembered that and it got to me a bit. That an officer of such high standing was prepared to come down here to Melbourne and speak on my behalf at the Tribunal. We corresponded a bit backwards and forwards. He died, must have been in '81 or 82. I sent a letter to his wife.

35:30 They lived in Warronga I think it was. A fairly affluent suburb. I said in the letter… "Mrs Valerie Rhoades. I had served on the bridge of several RAN ships in close proximity to officers. Respect was due to all officers.

36:00 Captain Rhoades was respected and liked. The world is a lesser place without him." They had a funeral service for him in Rushcutters Bay in the naval part there and they read my letter out. There was a gathering of naval hierarchy. We

36:30 went into…on the way, taking the Victorious across to North Virginia in '42, we had to go…the destroyers had to go into Bermuda. We went into Hamilton, that's the capital. We had to go in there to get refuelled, and as we were going in…the three destroyers in line ahead, I think we were second, a Royal Navy submarine was coming out and he was using an

37:00 Aldis lamp. Not directed at us but the Father…what they called 'Father is Leading'. The head destroyer is normally the senior officer. They used to refer to him in navy talk as Father, follow Father. He's making…the signalman on the submarine has got the Aldis lamp going, and of course it was coming along…it wasn't directed at us but I'm reading it. And it's saying, "You

37:30 outside the chan…" and then the light disappeared because of the angle. And I called out to Captain Rhoades, "The submarine is signalling you're outside the channel." Well of course there's all bloody mines there. You're going through a mine channel into Hamilton. And almost as I called it out to him, we saw three big puffs of steam

38:00 further up ahead. That was the leading destroyer and that was the siren. But before the sound reached us it gave Captain Rhoades just a handful of seconds warning. He was onto our lever, on the siren before the sound reached us. There were things like that happened several times, and he never forgot that.

So basically throwing it into reverse and you were also throwing it into reverse so as not to hit them.

Oh yes. You don't know.

38:30 You might be running into a mine field. You're not in the channel. The channel's normally swept every day by mine sweepers. But it was things like that I think that stuck in his mind.

If you hadn't have been reading the signal, or if you hadn't have picked up even the A or the N at the end of it, your ship would probably have run into the other ship?

Yes, you could do, yeah.

39:00 Alertness.

It must have been very hard when it's just blinking lights.

Well an Aldis lamp is only about that big. One million candle power. It's very direct. With some signal lights you've got dispersion where the light goes out this way. But a four inch Aldis with a mirror at the back…

39:30 And of course submarines, they don't carry …that's the only signalling they've got, visual signalling. They don't carry a great deal of…see on these ships here, you've got two big signal lights and two small

ones. There's a ten inch lamp and then there's the eighteen inch which is two carbon rods. A negative… it gives off a light like a welders. A very blue intense light. We've signalled up to 20 mile

40:00 with that power and the light, if the conditions are right. You can read an 18 inch signal lamp, with good visibility, and provided you've got the height above the horizon.

Tape 5

00:33 **Ron I want to focus now on your war time experiences. Where were you first stationed outside Australia? What was your first operation?**

I went into the HMAS Australia.

That was your first ship?

Yes. It was an 8 inch cruiser, 10,000 ton, and we did convoys then with the troops.

01:00 Sydney to Fremantle…

So in regard to your deployment, can you talk about your first operation with HMAS Australia?

Well I went into the HMAS Australia and then we did

01:30 I'm trying to think of the months. The Australia did several convoys, including the Queen Mary carrying Australian Army troops going to the Middle East. The Australia would escort them, not just the Queen Mary but other ships carrying troops to Fremantle.

02:00 We turned them over there to the HMAS Canberra, and then went half way across towards Colombo, and then other Royal Navy ships would come out half way across the Indian Ocean and take them over from there. It was a step by step. The idea was not to leave Australia without its own war ships, but to pass them on down the line in the middle of the Indian

02:30 Ocean. We did several of those. I don't remember how many now. From Sydney across the [Great Australian] Bight, non stop to Fremantle. Then we'd come back again and do another one. There were other ships there. One of the New Zealand cruisers used to join us. And when we got to the turn over point

03:00 we sometimes took them out into the Indian Ocean, and every time we did that the ship, the Australia, would turn around and sail down the columns with the ship's band playing, and all the AIF fellas hanging over the side clapping their hands and what not. That became a bit of a routine. I'm trying to think…I left the Australia. I had to get an operation for tonsilitis.

03:30 That was done in Sydney. I'm just trying to think. After I had that operation, they sent me on leave for a few weeks. I was in Melbourne and I got a telegram to join HMAS Perth in Port Melbourne. When it came back into Port Melbourne, I had to go down there and go

04:00 into HMAS Perth there. It was sometime about June. It was about June '40. Then I spent almost 12 months to the day in the Perth and finally left her in the week that the Perth left Alexandria to come back to Australia, three signalmen and three telegraphists were drafted to the United Kingdom.

04:30 As a result, the ship left Alexandria and came back to Australia and the six of us lived out in the desert sleeping on the sand. The lice were terrible. We used to be bitten all up and down our legs. They used to turn into ulcers. The reason we were there of course in the desert was waiting for transport and that took a while. I don't know how long we were there. It might have been two months camping out on the sand.

05:00 We finally got…we went by train down to Suez and we went into the Mauritania. The Mauritania uniquely was one of the only three ships that were built with four funnels. One was the Mauritania, Aquitania and the Lusitania. They were built with four funnels. When you saw them from a signalman's point

05:30 of view we knew they were in that…there weren't anymore built with four funnels. We went down to Durban and there were 2000 Italian prisoners on the Mauritania, and there were quite a lot of Royal Navy fellows who had been in the Mediterranean for four or five years. A lot of submariners which were being rotated.

06:00 They had been there before the war and it was their turn to go back home. And they were all mixed in there. We had Royal Marines. A lot of the Royal Navy personnel during those days, served five year terms in places like Hong Kong or in the Mediterranean…the eastern Mediterranean operating out of Malta. They were permanent service fellows

06:30 and they would go out on those stations for quite a number of years. Anyway we were put ashore in

Durban and we were put out in tents. We lived in tents, all this group because there was no ship available. I remember the tents, they had no drainage and it rained. They unrolled the hammocks on the ground inside the tent,

07:00 on the ground and the water just ran through. It was terrible. Anyway I don't know how long we were there. We were there for some weeks, then we finally got put into a ship called the Cameronia, and that took us all the way up the Clyde River to Glasgow. Because we came from the tropics and we had no proper clothing dished out, I got bronchitis,

07:30 and I got carried off the ship in Glasgow, in Greenock, on a stretcher into a hospital. What was the name of it? Anyway I forget. It was a hospital just out of Glasgow. I got patched up there, then we were sent down to Portsmouth Navy Dockyard to the barracks there.

08:00 I'm just trying to think of the month. About October or November I think. Anyway I think it must have taken us about 3 months to get from Alexandria and arrive in the Portsmouth Naval Base.

And you went around the Cape didn't you?

Oh yes.

So you had to go from the

08:30 **Suez down through the Red Sea?**

No. You couldn't go down the Mediterranean. You had to go right around because the Italian submarines were there you see. It must be borne in mind that in 1940 and 1941 the allied forces there were …England and Australia and New Zealand, no Canadians.

09:00 The materials…they didn't have the material like guns and tanks and aircraft. They were non existent. So if you wanted to get from Alexandria to the United Kingdom, all traffic went around through the Cape. It was a long way. But it was too dangerous to go up through the Mediterranean. In Malta they had three aeroplanes called Faith, Hope and Charity. I think they've still got one there in the museum.

09:30 They were biplanes, Gloster Gladiators. They were biplanes. They had two machine guns fitted on the cowling through the propeller and they were up against the Italians, and later on of course, the Germans. The Germans…at the time of the first German air raid, January 16th 1941, they flew from Sicily, up to 70

10:00 Stuka bombers. It was only 60 mile, so by the time they started to wind up the siren they were there. It was only 20 minutes and they had these three bi planes. There was absolutely…the things that happen, there was never ever any publicity about it. Because what could they say from our side, it was all bad news. You'll never see anything printed about what happened

10:30 or how bad things were because the British Government, from the morale point of view…you don't tell the enemy how badly off you are. But one of those aeroplanes is still there and they've got in a museum apparently. But on January 16th there were three attacks with about 70 Stukas. And they formed circles right up,

11:00 I don't know how high, about 4000 or 5000 feet, all going around in circles. Then one circle would peel off and they'd all come down. You were looking up at an angle. They were very steep, and you could see the tracer, the white tracer coming out. But they hit the Illustrious again. That was on the other side of the creek.

You were there at the time?

Oh yeah. We were standing there on the flag deck, and at the stern of us was the Essex

11:30 the ammunition ship, that caught fire. There were bombs…in the Dockyard Creek, it's an area called Senglea, and there's a dockyard right down the back. That's why they call it Dockyard Creek. In there was a submarine and astern of us was the Essex, that caught fire. All along the…there were three bombs buried in the wharf alongside the ship, and as we sat there we could see bombs hitting

12:00 the housing…the housing there was at an angle like that, all stepped down, like they do in the Mediterranean. And you'd see a great puff of dust and you'd see a couple of religious photographs swinging in the breeze. One of the things there, the houses were not built of solid stone or rock. They were built of soft sand stone, so there was never much debris floating in the air to fall down on you. You'd see a great puff of dust

12:30 and there would be the inside of this house all revealed with photographs swinging around. But one bomb struck the concrete edge of the wharf, just astern of the Perth, and it took a big chip out of the concrete edge of the wharf. And it landed, it must have been, I don't know…30 of 40 feet I suppose from the stern.

13:00 But it lifted the ship up and at that time the yeoman on the flag deck…the Yeomen were older and had been in the navy for probably 15 or 16 years before we got there. He sent all the younger ones into the bridge superstructure and told us to lay down, because we thought the ammunition ship, the Essex, was going to blow up. Anyway, I can remember laying on the

13:30 deck facing…I don't know who it was, one of the other signalmen, and the ship, 7000 tons of it, it sort of moved up and whoof…it lifted the ship and moved it. The wire cables and moorings of course held it back. We looked at each other and we thought we'd been hit. But what happened was, there were several dozen holes burst through the

14:00 stern of the ship. It was punctured by shrapnel thrown up by the bomb. A couple of dozen holes I think it was. Of course, the damage repair parties have pieces of wood, plugs, specially made and all around the ship were repair parties. When you get a punctured hole from shrapnel they hammer in a wooden plug. The

14:30 wood's made of a particular type of wood which will expand with water. Anyway, the thing you can't capture in these interviews is the noise. The Illustrious on the…it's all in an area of about 8 acres. You've got 70 Stukas all concentrating just in that little area. The noise of the Stukas is something else. But the sound of the guns…

15:00 Malta is sort of…when you're in a ship there, everything sort of rises up and all the guns, the anti-aircraft guns and that, are sort of placed at the highest part they can get.

On the hills is it?

I don't know if you've been to Malta but the town of Valletta, the

15:30 capital, is probably two hundred feet or more above the sea level. The signal station, St Angelo is right up high. All signal stations wherever you go they put them right up because they can see all round for making signals. The …I've lost my train of thought now.

16:00 **You were talking about the anti aircraft guns…**

Oh the noise. As I say, the area is only about 8 acres and the Germans are very methodical. There were other targets but they only went in that 8 acres, so everything that came in came into that area. They hit the Illustrious again and she caught fire about 200, 300 yards from where we were across the other side of the creek. But Illustrious…

16:30 the area there where the ship was, the Perth, it's on an angle like that with the buildings and the Illustrious over there could see them first before they came into our view. And the Illustrious was firing over the top of us. All their guns, the Bofors and everything, were all firing over the top of us. Then you had the other anti aircrafts guns on the heights

17:00 surrounding the dockyard creek, they're all hammering away. You could stand next to someone on the flag deck and you couldn't hear what they were saying. This is something in an interview like this, you're talking about war time, you can't put into words. The noise. And someone's trying to give you an order and you can't hear him. They're shouting. Boom.

17:30 The noise. I don't know…there's no way of doing it in an interview that you're doing now. The noise that occurs in a war. With, I don't know, firing.

What was it like to hear the Stukas, 70 Stukas dive bomb?

Well quite often…they were fitted with some sort of device that

18:00 made a noise. A war time thing. Not just in this war but all…make a lot of noise and you frighten your enemy. They had some sort of gadget fitted on them that made a screaming noise. But that was largely blanketed out by the sound of the guns. A lot of the stuff from the other side of the Dockyard Creek, coming from the Illustrious…because she had these, what

18:30 they called…they were nicknamed 'Chicago Pianos'. They had eight barrels and they fired a 40 millimetre shell. An explosive shell, and when they're firing boom, boom, boom, they're all firing and all these things going up and down…Chicago Pianos they called them. And all that stuff is like snow balls would be flying across the top of the Perth because we were on that side of the creek. And then of course our four inch guns

19:00 opened up when they got over head. The Stuka wouldn't sneak over the head and dive on you. They formed these sort of circles, three or four circles about seven or eight and then apparently someone would give an order and someone would turn off and they'd all come down one after the other. They were 1000 pound bombs then. They were big bombs apparently. But the ship was lucky it wasn't

19:30 hit. We had to…we left there that same night in the dark and we went into the floating dock at Alexandria, and they had patches all over it. All around the hull and down aft, the stern part of the ship. It was all patched up with patches welded on. But that was…we'd only been in the Mediterranean two or three weeks. So you know it was a good baptism

20:00 I suppose. But …

Did anyone from the Perth die in that attack?

No. There was no one hurt. There was a group, I think it was 8 seamen, I don't know if they were ordered or they volunteered…they left the ship to go down and put the fires out in the ammunition ship. It had several thousand tons of ammunition.

20:30 I can see them, it was a group of them. They ran along the ship. We were standing on the flag deck, and I could see these fellas all running down, our fellas. And apparently they had to manhandle ammunition that was burning and throw it over the side and into the harbour. They all got a recommend for that. They could have been blown to pieces if the ship went up.

21:00 The other thing that happened. About 200 of the ship's company all gathered on the fo'castle. You've got A turret and B turret. This is the furtherest away from the ship that's burning.

21:30 About 200 men got on the fo'castle and they tried to get under cover, under the overhang of the turret. And apparently somebody must have said there, we should abandon ship. And apparently there was a word to abandon, and the ship sort of caught fire, and among the group they ran, they

22:00 thought they were obeying an order to abandon ship and there was a rush to get off the ship, onto the wharf and run down into one of the shelters. Anyway, they all acted on what they thought was an order. But it was mistaken. Someone must have said something about abandoning ship and it was taken up. Anyway

22:30 I can remember I got on the wharf with crowds of other people and we all ran along the wharf down towards Grand Harbour, the open harbour where there were deep air raid shelters. In the harbour, in Dockyard Creek, there were thousands of fish. There were that many bombs

23:00 went in there, near misses, and of course they sent over 70 aircraft on the first raid and I think it might have been the same that came back. Because they only had half an hour to go, twenty minutes to come back. They came over three times with three groups of about 70. It might have been the same aircraft, reloading or coming back. There was no opposition. No aircraft opposition. I've lost my train of thought

23:30 now. The Illustrious had been hit three and four days before out in the open sea with Stuka aircraft. That was the first Stuka at sea. January 16th was the first attack by German aircraft on Malta itself. But they hit the Illustrious four or five days before out in the open ocean.

24:00 There was something like 250 killed there. They got the Illustrious into Malta and she was in the Dockyard Creek on that side and some of our fellas walked around there…right round to the end of Dockyard Creek to have a look. In an aircraft carrier you've got the upper deck

24:30 and then on the flight deck where all the aircraft are stowed, it's long one room. They got hit, they said, with a 1000 pound bomb. It killed about 250 in that long room where they stored the aircraft. Of course you've got aviation fuel. These fellas who went over from the Perth came back and they were telling us about how they had seen figures…

25:00 bodies had been flung up against steel walls and you could see them like a mosquito, but they had all lost their heads. They had no heads. Apparently what happens with a blast explosion at close quarters, the head's small and is the heaviest part of you, so your body is blown out underneath your head. There were these outlines,

25:30 bodies up against. The other thing they reported was the smell. The smell of blood. When our fellas went over to have a look they were using salt water hoses to clean it up. The Illustrious go out of there. While we were there they were working…we could see the arcing of the

26:00 dockyard workmen cutting things out. She got out of there eventually. But it was a day, or two days later after we got out that they got her out. She went under her own steam back to Alexandria and then finally over to the United States. The British ships were very well built to take the punishment they did.

26:30 It had an American lieutenant Commander in the Perth…I forget what period it was. It was in the period that the Perth was in the Med of course, and he came up on the bridge and I can remember him saying that the punishment that the British ships were taking, especially the aircraft carriers, the American ships just wouldn't stand up to it. The United Kingdom aircraft carriers had an armoured deck. I'm not too

27:00 sure but I think about four inches of steel, like an armour which the American ships didn't. The British built ships stood up to a lot more damage and punishment, then the ships built in other places.

How did it affect you, your first experience?

Oh it's all exciting. What was

27:30 I then…20, 21. It's all excitement, what's the word…not unusual…when you think you're going to be killed, everything's very vivid.

28:00 Everything's twitchy when you're in fear of not being here.

What goes through your mind?

No, it's not possible to answer that. You just don't think. You just hope to Christ it's not going to be you, and go about your job. I think that's one of the things

28:30 with naval discipline, the discipline that's there stands in good stead, because if something has to be done, you do it. What happened…we had three groups of German Stukas come over for about four or five hours backwards and forwards from Sicily.

29:00 And after the bomb that put all those shrapnel holes in the hull on the stern, the captain made a damage report, and I had to go up on the bridge with the semaphore flags to the signal station half a mile away, right up on the height over Valletta, the township. With semaphore when you're

29:30 transmitting, you've got to have a good background, so the fella can see the angles and that. So I had to get on the front of the ship on the bridge, and there's a gap…you know, you've got the bridge combing like …all British ships were open. They didn't have a roof. You stood in the open on the bridge. You've got the bridge combing, like the wall around

30:00 which is so high and on the top of the combing you've got about that much space to stand on. So I had to get up on the combing and there's a 25 foot drop right down to B gun deck. When you're operating signals there was always two. You had one reading the signal out and the other one transmitting it. Whether you're doing it on a lamp or whether you're

30:30 doing it with a semaphore. You always worked in twos. One reads it out and you transmit it, and the other one reads an incoming signal and calls it out and other fella writes it down. So you all work with two signalmen. I had to get up on the combing and the fella who was with me was leading signalman Peggy O'Neil, and he took a handful of my pants

31:00 at the back while I'm up and standing looking down at this drop. So he's got my pants in one hand and he's got the signal in the other. I transmitted it, he reads the signal and I send it off to the signal station indicating what damage we'd suffered at the time. Anyway we got out of there of course at 10 o'clock the same night. We went down to Alexandria and straight into the floating dock.

31:30 We were there a while too.

Was it from there you went to Cape Matapan?

Well that took place later of course. See in January the ship had only been there for three or four weeks. We went straight into right away.

Now when you were in Alexandria, what sort of…did you have leave I take it?

32:00 Well not all night leave. Only seven or eight o'clock or something like that. We'd go ashore. There was a problem with Alexandria from a war point of view. All Alexandria Harbour had a high brick wall right round it. That was under some sort of treaty with the Egyptian Government as part of parcel of a British Naval Base.

32:30 Outside the wall, Egypt was neutral. King Farouk was inclined to be with the Nazis [Germans]. His feelings were for the enemy.

King Farouk of Egypt.

And when the Italians would bomb the harbour and later on the Germans, they always

33:00 attempted to get their stuff in the harbour rather than over the wall and into the Egyptian population. They wanted to keep them on side. So if there was an air raid in Alexandria it was always concentrated in the dockyard. Sometimes of course it didn't work. There was one night there when one of the mines they dropped…don't know if it was Italian or German, it floated over and landed in one of the streets in

33:30 the town and killed about 200 people.

What do you mean it floated over and landed?

Well they're on parachutes.

Mines on parachutes? Oh I see.

Like normally there were about three parachutes because they were very heavy. They were meant to land in the water for ships. Anyway, they used to catch quite often…the search lights would catch

34:00 the three parachutes with the mine hanging on it and everyone would be going…there would be tracers going up all over the harbour with everyone trying to explode them before it came down. But I never saw one explode in the air, never. When they came down they were suppose to drop just off the harbour or inside the harbour but on this particular occasion it drifted over and fell into the town. The Egyptians were going…going home, go away when you went down. British

34:30 go home.

That's what they were saying?

Yeah. But the Germans and Italians were always trying to keep the Egyptians on side and drop it in the proper place. The enemy not their friends you see.

Did you socialise much with the Egyptians in Alexandria?

No. Language.

What about the women there?

Women?

Yeah when your crew got leave there did they go out to look for and meet…

35:00 Oh yes of course. You're a sailor. You could be dead tomorrow. So what do you do. It's the national male instinct. I mean there were lots of fellas there who had never touched a woman in that age group. And it wasn't done in Australia, but there, I mean in an Eastern port like that. You might be dead tomorrow. So you try and get as much out of

35:30 life as you can. There's nothing untoward about that. It's a natural human feeling, particularly with fellas in that age group. I mean they're all about 20, 21, averaging about 20 years of age.

So they visited the brothels there?

Oh the brothels were licensed by the military arrangement. Apparently they had

36:00 to be tested to keep them clean. Otherwise the troops get sick and you're in trouble trying to fight a war with sick men…but that was a normal thing with armies, going all the way back many years. You had licensed brothels. It was a precaution to keep your troops in a fit state.

So did they conduct any lectures or did they

36:30 **inform you about how to avoid VD [Venereal, Disease]?**

Oh yes, the medical officers, yes.

Can you walk us through that, what they would talk about?

Oh, preventative measures.

What would they encourage you to do?

Well they always encouraged you to take…there's Australian Letters, and there's Norwegian Letters, and they always encouraged you to take French Letters. Oh no, that was part and parcel of the medical

37:00 system with the doctor and the surgeon. There would be one surgeon on a cruiser with four or five sick bay attendants who did training in hospitals. That was their job to keep the crew free of disease. There used to be particular groups of

37:30 the ship, would be summoned to sit in on a lecture.

How often would you and your mates go to these places?

What?

Like to meet Egyptian women…

No, don't think about it. Don't mention it.

They didn't mention it?

No. Don't you mention it. It was part and parcel of war wherever you go. You don't need any

38:00 detail on it. A natural human feeling. If you're going to be killed tomorrow you want to get…what? You're 20 years of age for God sake.

So what else could you do in Alexandria socially?

Meals. The cafes and the cabarets. The belly dancing.

38:30 Most of the places of entertainment would go on the dancing, you know where they did the belly dancing. The other thing would be the food. To get a variation in your meals, different on ship to on the shore. They had a thing called the Fleet Club in the town

39:00 run by the Royal Navy and you could go there and buy bottles of beer and that. I think it was Egyptian beer too, I don't think they had any Australian beer. No, it was Egyptian beer. I can't think of the name of it. Forget the name of it now. But that was very popular with the navy because they used to have boxing events. They had a ring there inside the Fleet Club, well not inside the club. It was in the grounds of the Fleet Club

39:30 in the open air. And there used to be competitions between the Royal Navy and some of our fellas would get up. Light weights, feather weights, welter weights and they all had to have a bet in it. They had about 500 sailors there all cheering while these fellas are having a go in the ring. All half drunk.

Tape 6

00:34 **Now you were saying about going to into town and so forth but you were also warned about travelling at night time in Egypt.**

Oh yes. Some people got robbed at knife point. Had been cut with a knife. Not stabbed but cut. You see you can cut someone with a shallow knife and you can be covered in blood.

01:00 The other thing is you could kill him, but if you just cut him so he gets a lot of blood running all over him, then you can rob him blind. There used to be a lot of pick pocketing. What did they used to say? "Clefty, clefty." Someone would call out…clefty meant thief. They pick pocket you. They would come up

01:30 with a knife and…you wouldn't even feel it, and make a slit where you pockets were so whatever you had there would fall out. You wouldn't even know. They were very good. The Egyptian pick pockets were really…they were top class. They would take your wrist watch off your wrist and you wouldn't know it was gone.

Did this happen to you?

02:00 No. I mean, you strike fellas who it's done to and everyone's alerted. Everyone's alerted to it then.

So how would you avoid being pick pocketed? Would you travel in groups to different places?

Always, always. Never walk around…certain town, Alexandria being one. Never go there alone in the dark at night.

In the night?

Oh yes.

02:30 We always went ashore with somebody. In a ship…because when you're working watches, it's the same people you're with. Each watch you do, the four hours you do on watch, the other eight hours you're always with the same people. When you had time off…don't worry, it's only water it won't hurt...so when you had time off you always went with your

03:00 …with the people you worked with. You didn't go on your own. I can remember some of my colleagues who went through the signal school back in 1938, they'd be on one of the…I know there were three of the them on the HMAS Stuart destroyer, and I'd be on the flag deck on the Perth. They'd be there with their binoculars…

03:30 we could recognise each other 300 or 400 yards away in different ships. And then they might signal privately. See you ashore at the Fleet Club at 1630 hours. That was just between the two ships you know. It was illegal of course. You're not supposed to do that. But there were other jobs I had in Alexandria.

04:00 They used to have a launch, an Egyptian police launch. I don't know why I always got this job. This police launch would be manned by a sub lieutenant, two seamen and a signalman. And I always seem to get the job. But the idea of it was

04:30 this police launch would take this group from the Perth, sub lieutenant, I think two seamen and a signalman and put them in this boat. And the idea was, every time the boom gate was opened for a ship coming in or a ship going out, this launch would follow in the wake. It was to catch any frogmen from getting into the harbour. We carried

05:00 half a dozen miniature depth charges about the size of a 5 pound tin of jam, and we'd follow…every ship that came in through the boom…we would be in the harbour, we wouldn't be outside. But when the boom gate was opened…the boom gate was a big wire net to catch any of the mini subs or torpedoes. When the gate was open to let ships in

05:30 the harbour was vulnerable. So this police launch, it was manned by Egyptian police too, used to follow in 50 yards behind the ship watching for anything strange that shouldn't be there. Then we'd drop over one of these mini depth charges. When the boom was shut we used to go over…the launch would take us over to a yacht

06:00 which belonged to some very rich fella, I forget who now. Anyway the yacht had been impounded and we'd take the launch up there and we'd go on board. We used to carry our food with us, bully beef and a loaf of bread and something like that. Nothing very ornate. But it was a 24 hour thing. Every time it came up I seemed to get it. I had to take Aldis lamps and things with me and other apparatus for signalling.

06:30 That was my job on this launch. And we used to follow these ships in and out. Later on of course the Italians got in there with the frogmen and sank the Queen Elizabeth.

So the actually still got in?

I wasn't there then. They had these two man torpedo type things, where they sat on them. They were very brave men.

07:00 I think there were three who came in one particular night. Three of these men, and two Italian seamen, outside the harbour. They got through the net somehow, I forget the details of it, but they got into the harbour with these explosive charges. One of them got underneath the battle ship Queen Elizabeth and released these charges, explosives.

07:30 And something happened to their submersible. It was like a torpedo where they sat on the outside like a horse. Something happened to them and they climbed on to the big buoy, the mooring buoy that the Queen Elizabeth was tied up to. And they were sitting there, and it's the first time the phrase 'frogman'…because they were dressed in black, black oils. The word frogman, that's where it started.

What did they call them

08:00 **before that?**

Nothing. It had never been done before. They were all dressed in this black sort of oil thing.

Really? I thought frogmen existed well before this?

No, not the word. Not the word.

But they had navy divers and things?

Oh yes. But this was the nickname because of the black rubberised thing. Anyway, they had a lookout of course, a sentry who saw them on the buoy. It was in the dark in the night.

08:30 And there was these two fellas. The buoy's a great big thing….that's the clock. You'll get that on there too…Anyway they got these two Italians. They were brave men.

Did they get captured?

Yes. They had to, they couldn't get out. Their submersible got damaged or something and it sank. So they had to leave it and they climbed onto this buoy

09:00 where the battle ship was tied up to. The sentry saw them, they captured them, brought them up and they took them right down below into the ship because they knew they had dropped something there. They tried to frighten them to get to tell them what they had done. Anyway, there was a great explosion which blew a hole in the bottom of the Queen Elizabeth battle ship and down she went. But not very far because the harbour is shallow.

09:30 There was no discernible display that she had been damaged. She only sank about six or seven feet. And of course Egypt, Alexandria was surrounded by agents with binoculars watching all that was going on. Ships going in and out…

German agents or Italian agents?

Oh yes spies. It was full of spies. I mean it was a neutral country. They

10:00 were reporting the movements of Royal Navy ships going and coming in. Wireless sets, and of course when the Queen Elizabeth settled on the bottom the naval authorities tried to keep up appearances that everything was normal. Which succeeded to some degree and which gave the impression that she was unharmed. But they took these two Italians right down into the depth of the ship,

10:30 hoping they were going to tell what they had done, to frighten them, but they didn't. They were brave men. They were brave men, no doubt about that. But that was the whole idea of this launch thing. What I'm telling you about…that happened after we had left there. But that was the whole idea of this launch thing was to stop these sorts of people from coming into the harbour when the gate was open. So that was one of the things.

Did you like your stay in Egypt?

Like it?

11:00 I don't think you can use the word like because you're in a ship and that's where you live and where the ship goes, that's where your home goes. So you don't sort of like…it's not a question of like. It's an experience. Every port's a new experience.

What were the Egyptian people…how were they seen?

You never met them.

11:30 **Like when you walked in the streets of Alexandria?**

No, the civilian population were a race apart. You had a language thing because they spoke Arabic. Of course you pick up a few slang words in Arabic.

Can you remember any of those words?

Well there was 'imshee' which meant bugger off. 'Clefty' meant look out thief. The other one,

12:00 'quish-cat-ear' which meant very good. But these were all things you pick up. It doesn't matter if you're in a French speaking country, Arabic speaking country. You pick up little snippets of things that are passed down through the mess decks. If you're English speaking in a Royal Navy ship where English is the basic thing…if you go to Spain you'd pick up a little bit of street

12:30 argot. Well imshee meant bugger off, get away.

Why did you use that word particularly. Was that because there were beggars or anything like that?

Oh yes. They're always around. But the thing is with the pick pockets being so good, you never let them get close up to you. I mean you didn't let them get very close up. They were very good. The world's best.

13:00 They'd take your watch off you and you wouldn't even know it was gone. Oh no. But they weren't alone in that. We had the same thing in Hong Kong. They were pretty good there. I'm talking in 1946. I went in there with the Hobart. This was after the war, and my friend had his pocket picked by a little nipper about this high.

He was a kid?

13:30 Yes. But they were in a terrible mess in 1946. To be a Chinese child…they would be sleeping in the street, kids this high. You'd be going back to the ship and they're laying there against the wall.

Now Egypt. How long did you stay there all up?

Stay where?

Egypt?

Well we operated out of there for six months.

14:00 In and out of there. Alexandria [Egypt], Piraeus [port, Greece], into Crete [at Suda Bay].

Now, so you're next combat engagement was…

Matapan [sea battle off Greece].

That was a major one. But you were also helping with the evacuation of Crete. Was that after the battle of Matapan?

Yes.

Can you walk us through the steps that led to your involvement in the Battle of Matapan?

14:30 The Ajax and the Perth operated as two ships, two cruisers. We used to do patrols from Alexandria to the north of Crete. We operated out of Alexandria, Suda Bay in Crete and Piraeus. And we'd do patrols watching for the Italian Navy. It was an ongoing thing, day after day, week after

15:00 week. We were out there watching for the Italian Navy. We were in Piraeus on the day Germany declared war on Greece. I remember, it was 11am in the morning, and in the harbour there was the ammunition ship, the Clan Fraser, a 6000 merchant ship with 4000 tons of ammunition.

15:30 Some time after 11am there were a couple of hundred of our men on shore, on leave. They went ashore before the declaration of war by Germany. The ship was moved out of the harbour into Salamis Roads, outside the break water in Salamis Roads. We had 200 men still ashore. Around about 10 o'clock,

16:00 the German Air Force appeared. Things were so scarce there. I think there were 3 search lights and about 3 Bofors guns. We had nothing. This was '41 mind you. As regard to material and equipment they had nothing, but you never saw it in the paper because that's bad for morale to say…and it helps

16:30 the enemy. Around about 10 o'clock, we could hear the German airplanes, and the three search lights would go up in the air and you'd see three or four German aeroplanes…all at once in the one light. And they're firing their machines guns down the beam of the light.

17:00 You could see the white dots of the tracer. They didn't drop bombs, they were dropping mines. And they're a bugger of a thing, you can't see them coming. Anyway about ten o'clock there's a tremendous explosion when a mine struck the Clan Fraser and the ship disintegrated. It just…it went up like a miniature …in the pitch black of the night with no lights shining. They turned all the lights

17:30 off because…the Greek authorities turned all the lights off. When the explosion went up, we were about a mile away out in Salamis Roads. You didn't hear the noise right away, it had to travel to you. But there was a column of fire that went up like about 2000 feet and like a big mushroom, like a miniature atomic explosion.

18:00 It was all lit in the column, black and red and the big mushroom cloud all ignited by the explosion of the ammunition. Our fellas that had been ashore told us there were steel plates from the Clan Fraser, ten feet by twenty feet, a mile and a half back into the town.

18:30 We saw it go up in silence, and then all of a sudden there was a tremendous crashing of noise, then there was another pause and then there was a hot wind. It was fierce. We were sort of leaning forward on the flag deck sort of leaning into it. There was another pause and then all the stuff started to fall out of the air. Around the ship there were great heavy splashes. I would suppose, you'd think, like a locomotive

19:00 falling out of the sky. You'd hear this great plunge. Then all the lighter stuff up higher started to come down and you could hear it like rain. Some of it struck the ship. Pieces of steel. You could hear them and there were fellas running all over to get out of the way. Two of our fellas got hit, injured. All the electricity in Athens

19:30 was generated by coal. I don't know where the coal came from, but they used to have it on barges. Big barges all piled up with coal. The heat was so intense that a lot of the barges caught fire with the hot air that was given out by this ammunition ship. And they were drifting around the fire all on fire. They had broken loose.

20:00 I've never heard an account of how many people were killed there but that was the biggest explosion I've ever seen. Then they…

And once again the noise?

Yes, the noise. Tremendous. But it was only one noise.

And how tremendous are we talking?

It was just one noise. When you're firing guns the noise is

20:30 continuous while the planes are there. They're going off. But with the…after the initial….I remember standing around the flag deck, things quietened down. The German aircraft had gone.

21:00 There was no gun fire from the town. I remember standing on the flag deck and there was a Turkish ship in the Salamis Roads about a 100 yards away, and while I was looking there, there was a great explosion

21:30 in this Turkish ship and when the explosion occurred there was an upsurge of light, and there were three parachutes. What had happened, one of the mines when down the hold of this Turkish ship, and it's the only time…it's a terrible thing to hear men screaming from the blackness of the sea.

22:00 Everything was blacked out, we had no lights. The mine went into the hold and exploded. The ship went down and these men were screaming. The call went along the ship, "Man overboard!" That means, anyone…the people closest to the life boat must man it in a naval ship. When the word goes man overboard, you don't look for a crew. The nearest men get into it, rowing.

22:30 Anyway, they pulled away with the life boat and they picked up 8 Turkish seamen. The Turkish ship was there to clean out the Turkish bank in Athens. They must have got word that the Germans were coming down, so they went in there and cleaned out all the money. For five hours after that explosion in the Turkish ship, the air was full of bank notes

23:00 up in the air. The funnels from the Perth…we had the boilers turning over…the heat from the funnels… five hours later there were still bank notes flying around and they were laying all over the water. The Turkish Government had sent the ship there to clean out the Turkish bank and take the money back. I don't know how many Turkish fellas were killed there. But I can remember them screaming. Bloody terrible.

23:30 You can't put a light on. You can't sort of pick them out with a search light. No lights.

What was your instinct to react to that?

Well you can't do anything. I'm a signalman. I'm there to do a particular job. I can't leave my post. The life boat is manned by the nearest people. Normally there's plenty of seamen. Well you've got 680 men there.

24:00 So they manned the life boat and of course it was all oars, not a motor. But there's no light showing. You don't shine a light on these fellas screaming in dark. They picked up 8. I don't know how many got killed.

What happened after that encounter?

What time was it? The Orion which is

24:30 a light cruiser with eight six inch guns the same as the Perth, she had remained in the harbour. She had damage done to her. Either one or two of her lifeboats were blown clean out of the davits. That's a 7000 ton ship and she was across the other side of Piraeus Harbour from when the Clan Fraser blew up. She also had a lot of our fellas who had been on leave.

25:00 They came back during the air raid and went onto the HMAS Orion. Their ship was outside. Anyway, in the early hours of the morning, the Orion came out of the harbour to where we were in Salamis Roads. I was sent down to the stern of the Perth with an Aldis Lamp. I had

25:30 to shine it on the stern, because we were anchored, we had dropped the anchor. And the idea was to let the Orion know where we were so she wouldn't foul us or run into us. It was a very dark night. On the front of the Orion as she came out, she had two fellas with machine guns firing into the water at things they thought might be a floating

26:00 mine. Then she would come out a little bit more. She then made a signal. I remember reading the signal by lamp about the damage and what needed to be…she needed these repairs….requirements, life boats gone and everything else. So of course we picked up our own men the following morning. They came over by boat and then we got out of there.

26:30 The German Army came down through Greece when it wasn't fighting anybody. Fifteen hundred planes they brought down there. Tanks. In 1941 the allies had …not in general terms, in concrete terms, they had nothing. No aeroplanes, no tanks.

27:00 Bugger all. But it's never been printed because they never printed anything bad. It would be a natural reaction to the enemy to say to the enemy, oh no we haven't got this and we haven't got that. So they kept quiet about it. The other thing that's important. The Battle of Crete. In three days to the west of Crete 2600 odd British sailors lost their lives there.

27:30 In 3 days!

The Battle of Crete?

Yes. German aircraft. They sank…

The evacuation fleet?

Well this was the invasion. They invaded Crete first.

The allies?

Yes. No, the Germans.

Ok but the allies were evacuating their troops by then weren't they?

Well we did an evacuation out of Greece. A lot of the soldiers who were evacuated were deposited in Crete.

28:00 Time marched on. The German paratroopers invaded. We had to evacuate them out of Crete. But the casualties in Crete in the army were something like 1400. But in three days there were over 2600 English sailors to the west of Crete bombed under with the abundance of German aeroplane.

28:30 **Can I ask you, after the evacuation of Greece, wasn't it the Matapan Battle with the Italian cruisers?**

Chronologically you've lost me? I can't think of the day.

It's not that important. We can go back to that specifically. Let's look at the Battle of Matapan now and then we can go back to Crete

29:00 **later. With the Battle of Matapan can you walk us through the event where there was the first engagement of Italian ships?**

The date escapes me. It was 8 o'clock in the morning. I had the four noon watch, 8am to mid day. I went up on the flag deck and I was told we're going to action stations, there are

29:30 three ships on the port quarter. While we were talking the bugle came on, action station on the bugle over the loud speakers. So I had to run all the way the length of the ship to get to my action station right down aft. Up the ladders to the platform where the 44 inch search light is.

30:00 The Italians were 8 inch cruisers with a 13 or 14 mile range. The British cruisers, 6 inch, had 12 mile range. So the Italians with the four cruisers in line ahead, had a great time trying to lay one on us from 13 mile away,

30:30 and we couldn't hit back. They straddled the Perth. Shells fell both sides where I was standing - in the water of course. In the background was the Italian battleship the Vittorio Veneto with 16 inch guns. We

never did see her. She was out of sight, but the Italian cruisers were relaying the range to

31:00 their friend the Italian battle ship, and the next thing that happened was, over came these tremendous shells from a ship that wasn't in sight of us. Anyway, one of the photographs there…the bows of the Perth there, and there were three spouts there and three there, and they went up about 150 feet, and it was at that time that the signal flag came down the four ships, duff baker.

31:30 You like that one don't you. Duff baker, proceed independently. In the vernacular, get the buggery out of it. And that's what we did, 34 knots and we got out of it. We were very lucky. Very lucky. But that was 8 o'clock in the morning. This, 8 o'clock until about 10, went on and then the Italians apparently turned away and we had a couple of aircraft on Crete who

32:00 sent…went out and sent a couple of signals. So the four cruisers were sent out as a search force. You know in the army when they're going down a jungle track and they've got a leader out the front, that was the attitude, or the tactic of the ships. The four cruisers were to go out and find them and say here they are. We know where they are and signal back to the main heavy ships.

32:30 We went up there…it was a really dark night and the word was passed around, don't make any noise. I don't know if you've got any connection with the sea but sound will carry a great distance over water. So the word was whispered around, no noise. Now there's not many people in the open. You've got the four inch gun deck people.

33:00 They would probably have 50 men. The four inch guns…they had two four inch in the one mounting. Four there and four there on the port, and four there and four there on the starboard. So you might have 50 men, but they're all waiting there holding shells ready to feed the gun. Everyone's very quiet. We're not going very fast. We had the radar going

33:30 which the Italians didn't have. It was a very dark night. No stars. Everyone's whispering. Then there was a shout from the four inch gun deck, from one of the Gun captains, "Alarm Port. Load, load, load." That was the drill for guns. And you could hear the breaches of the gun slam shut. Steel on steel.

34:00 And where we were with the commander, you shut your eyes. You're waiting for the fire otherwise you get blinded. Anyway, the guns didn't fire. Up the voice pipes came a whisper. Stand easy. So we're all waiting. We don't know where it's going to come from. You've got 360 degrees right around. They could be anywhere and the gun fire could come from anywhere.

34:30 Not like a trench. You're facing…you know the enemy is somewhere there. But at sea you don't know. Three hundred and sixty degrees, it could come from anywhere. Anyway, we go creeping up, and apparently the radar picked up the Italians, three of them at about two mile range. And it's in the book…the plot. The plot that was taken. The black page with the white line showing what happened. We turned away

35:00 and we signalled back by radio to the battle ships coming up. The battle ships can only do 22 knots and there were 3 of them and they were labouring their way up to where we had pinpointed where the enemy cruisers were. So we turned away, sent the signal back and we kept going because we were very close towards Italy itself. As you see with Matapan, it's quite close to Italy there.

35:30 Anyway it was…what time was it…anyway, the battleships came up, and at two mile range they opened fire and either one or two of them exploded. It was just like the sun coming up. We were some few mile ahead

36:00 from the battleships. But I can remember a bloody great sun coming up over the horizon. And I thought poor bastards. There were 2600 odd Italian sailors died that night. But I remember going back later on in Alexandria, some of the Royal Navy fellas who were there in the other ships,

36:30 Royal Navy ships. I remember one of them saying, it was murder. It was murder. I was a bit astounded. But he felt for the enemy. The way I looked at it was bloody hell it could have been us. That might have been a selfish way of looking at it. I take my hat off to this English fella feeling sorry for the enemy.

37:00 He said murder, murder.

Did you feel sorry as well? I mean, even though it was the enemy, did you still feel sorry for them when you saw that people were dying in this?

Well I think there's an affinity between people who serve in ships. Two days after that we kept coming across bodies. Some of them were alive and some of them…they used to have an ad for the Michelin Man.

37:30 The big…some of them were not in the water, they were floating on it with gases. Floating on the top. For two days we kept coming across them.

They were floating with what, sorry?

They were dead but the gases in the body made them swell up. So they weren't in the water, they were sort of on top face down. For two days we kept coming across groups of them. And some of them were standing up waving

38:00 to give them help. But I take my hat off to the Admiral, Admiral Cunningham. He sent a signal to the Italian Navy Authorities, granting free 'pratique'. That's a naval term, or a sea term. Free pratique means free passage for their hospital ships to come into latitude and longitude to pick up these Italians sailors

38:30 who were drifting around in the ocean. And that was done. And it was good politics. From a morale point of view, the Italians would appreciate the fact that they could have killed those men with a machine gun or anything, but instead of that they sent a signal saying we give free unrestricted passage to a hospital ship

39:00 to pick up the survivors.

Tape 7

00:35 **We were talking before about the Cape Matapan Battle. You mentioned in your book an account of that and there were some aspects…I noticed you repeated on a few occasions that it only took two minutes. Why did you repeat that in the book…you did that a few times. I was curious about…**

Yeah because the battleships only fired twice.

01:00 It took them two minutes to fire two broadsides and it was over.

What's a broad shot, I'm sorry?

A full broadside is when all the guns on a ship are fired at once.

Oh broadside!

Yes a broadside is when all guns fire. A salvo…if you've got a turret with two guns, and you've got two turrets with four guns, one gun in each turret fires. That's a salvo.

01:30 When you fire the four, they all fire, that's a broadside. All the guns fire at once. So the two minutes refers to the time it took…those shells are about five foot high and about four foot in circumference. They weigh about a ton. It took two minutes for the battleship to fire once, reload and fire again. In two minutes it was all over. The Italians

02:00 never had an opportunity to return fire at all.

Which ship were you on at this stage?

In the Perth.

How many guns did the Perth have?

Eight six inch guns.

So four on each side?

No, two in the bows, two turrets there. And two turrets aft. There was A turret and B turret on the fo'castle, X and Y turret on the stern at the aft end of the ship. They're always named the same in all

02:30 navy war ships, A turret, B turret from the bows, X and Y on the stern.

What were the other supporting ships around? They were all next to you as well?

Yes. There were only two Australian ships there. One was the HMAS Stuart a destroyer. The captain of which Hec Waller was killed when the Perth was sunk in the Sunda Straits.

03:00 captain Hec Waller was a very much admired man in the Royal Australian Navy. He was a friend of the captain Dusty Rhoades. Very close friend. He was an Australian, Waller. He was very liked and admired by the Australians he commanded.

03:30 He went down when the Perth went down.

So the Perth did have strikes on the Italian ships? It's know that their shells struck the Italian ship?

The battleship…the three British battleships were firing. Three of them. So they would have about 18 guns

04:00 all firing at once.

The Perth didn't fire?

Oh no. We'd gone on further. We were the seekers of the enemy. We found the enemy then we brought up big brother.

Oh I see. You were the reccy patrol were you?

Yes we were out looking…there could have been the Italian battleships…the Italians had five battleships. The Italian Navy had twice or three times the number of naval war ships

04:30 than we had in the Eastern Mediterranean. They had at least five battle ships. About 20 or 30 cruisers and 40 or 50 destroyers. We were out there in case they were out there to help their friends.

Which they were?

No, they weren't.

Right, so they were retreating were they? Or you were just…

We didn't know where they were. We found the three Italian cruisers and we called up our battleships to deal with them

05:00 and then we proceeded on in case there were further Italian ships in the area. We could have stumbled on their battleships. They could have had their battle…it was a very dark night. And of course the Italians did what the British did. Never use radio at night at sea. Never use radio because you could be located on the direction finding. It's where the American Navy got very badly hurt.

05:30 Continually using the radio chattering away, and the Japanese were saying, there he is and putting a cross on the chart. The British Navy never used radio to transmit a signal at sea. That's why the signalman…all signals in the fleet all went up by flags and lights. We never gave away our position by using radio.

06:00 It was one of the sights to see a whole concourse of British Navy with about 12 destroyers in a V shape, and the big heavy ships in behind, and the destroyer screen protecting the big ships, and all manoeuvred by flags. It's a tremendous sight. All the flags going up, the destroyers, and you can see them. Very colourful. Never used radio.

06:30 If the fleet wanted to make a 180 degree turn it was all done by flags, and it was all laid down in the signal books, and the captain would ask the signalman. The officers didn't know anything. They didn't know Morse code. All the movement at sea was done by signalmen, by the use of flags and lamps.

So you were an expert in flag

07:00 **waving?**

Oh sure, 15 months. You'd learn a bit wouldn't you.

And there's a certain style in it also isn't there. I've noticed from other signallers who we interviewed beforehand, that they'd do it with a certain grace of movement?

Oh you mean semaphore? I'm talking about the hoisting of flags and the knowledge. See in that ship there, we went down, with the second reinforcements of American troops,

07:30 down to Algiers. There was a large concourse of British ships too escorting, I think it was 30, or 40,000 Americans on the way to reinforce North Africa where they were fighting there. Somewhere out in the Bay of Biscay, one of the Royal Navy war ships detected a vessel by radar. We couldn't see it.

08:00 They ordered us to go out on a certain bearing. That ship and the Relentless…a similar type…they ordered the two of us to go and investigate. They gave us the bearing and we went out in the Bay of Biscay and it took us quite a while before we could see right in the distance, a very faint smudge. It was a ship. Captain Rhoades

08:30 ordered me to make the signal to stop this ship. The signal was an international signal. WBA. Dit dar dar. Dar dit dit dit. Dit dar. It meant, "Stop, do not scuttle, do not use radio, failure to obey I will fire on you." Now, we couldn't catch this fellow because the sea was so rough.

09:00 We got up to 26 knots and it was so rough that each wave when you hit it, it was like hitting a brick wall. The ship would stop. The ship was capable over 33, 34 knots. We could only get up to 26. Anyway, for 20 minutes I remember sending this signal with the big lamp, the 40 million candle power, WBA, over and over again. I can remember…it's out on the side of the bridge

09:30 and the wind…the tears are running down your face as you're standing behind the lamp making the signal. We must have been at it for a good 20 minutes and he wasn't stopping. All you could see…you know when you see a rabbit running? You can see the white tail. We could see that and he was going hell for leather to get away from us. It wasn't very clear. It was a bit murky.

Did you know what the ship was?

Well I'll tell you in a minute. Anyway

10:00 we got closer up to him because at 26 knots we would have caught him anyway. It was a ship like the Romulus or Remus, they were Italian motor ships that used to run on the coast there before the war. One of them was captured. And the Italians build a nice boat. It was a merchant ship. Anyway we finally got up close to him and the captain fired one round over

10:30 the bow. The other destroyer stayed back on the starboard quarter. And we came up on the port quarter. The captain on the bridge…and I went down on the flag deck armed with the International Code and the Lloyd's Register of Shipping. The captain gave an order to the reserve yeoman who hadn't had the training on signals

11:00 that I'd gone through. And the captain gave the orders down to him down to him and down the voice pipe to me on the flag deck. Order: "Ask him - what ship?" Up went the flag hoist. I had the other five signalmen. I gave the orders and they pulled the flags out and hoisted them up. "What ship?" Back came the answer. I've got it in the book there somewhere. The other order came down, "Ask him -

11:30 where bound?" These are all two flag groups. What ship was two flags, where bound was two flags. The reply for that was, "Buenos Aires." "Ask him - where from?" The reply came back, "Lisbon." Portugal see. In the meantime the other destroyer that was over there, the Royal Navy destroyer, he was watching the flags

12:00 go up and reading them. And he sent a radio signal to Whitehall in Admiralty. This ship…I forget the name. This ship name so and so…what's the word? We have stopped the ship (giving it's name XYZ), please check. So we're sitting there for half an hour. Stopped in the water…the three ships you know,

12:30 very slow roll waiting for the Admiralty. Anyway the destroyer sent…I read the signal, the light signal. This is not the ship XYZ. He'd given a wrong name. He was flying a Swedish flag. Anyway at that…I got the signal down the voice pipe to tell him…(phone ringing).

So you were saying you got the message back from

13:00 **Lloyds saying that this ship was not the ship?**

Well from the Admiralty actually. The ship…it was not the name it had given us.

Before you proceed with that, can you tell us the location at which you roughly were?

Oh it was some 500 mile out in the Bay of Biscay, on the way down to Gibraltar. The convoy with the American troops had gone on with other ships escorting them. They only sent us out on a sideline to check on

13:30 this unknown ship. So that's what we did. We caught up with him. We discovered he was not what he said he was, and the last thing the captain ordered down through the voice pipe was to tell him to lower a boat and send papers. When that happened…he would only be a 100 yards from where we were . But we were on the starboard quarter…no, the port quarter down here. And that ship was there. The idea was of course

14:00 you don't go up there. Because we lost the Sydney like that. The Sydney went up broadside and the ship was an armed cruiser. When the Sydney went up there, this ship here, the Kormoran, dropped all its camouflage and boom [HMAS Sydney was sunk by the German disguised raider Kormoran off Western Australia 19 November 1941 with the loss of all 646 crew] So we kept here on the port quarter. If he did have concealed guns, we could just swing in behind him where he couldn't get us. And we could fire our forward guns. But

14:30 the captain didn't…he stood there like a piece of stone. He never took his eyes of that boat…that blockade runner. Anyway when the captain ordered to lower a boat and send papers, that called for a bit of work on the International Code book. The groups were different. Anyway, up went the signal, lower a boat, and

15:00 where I was standing…on this ship, the blockade runner, there was a gangway that ran from the bridge, all the way along the top of the ship right down to the stern where the Swedish flag was. While I was watching there was a fella left up in the bridge superstructure running full pelt right the length of this ship and pulled down the Swedish flag.

15:30 And when he did that, up on the bridge they hoisted up a white sheet. And I realised on the flag deck that we had caught a blockade runner and he was surrendering. But what happened was, at that point I left the flag deck because we had established the identity and I went up to the bridge. And Captain Rhoades was standing there like a block

16:00 of stone. He never moved. He was watching that ship all the time. If it made the slightest move that it was going to uncover concealed guns, he would have been on top of it. Anyway, when I went up there the captain was saying in a voice with a bit of irritation, "Somebody tell me what the white flag means?" Now the reserve yeoman…because he hadn't had the training. He had

16:30 four or five signal books on the chart table and he was turning them…he just didn't know. And the captain said again without turning his head… "Will somebody tell me what the white flag means?" And of course the normal thing in naval format, it's the senior person answers the question. The yeoman

who was a reserve yeoman, he was a senior man.

17:00 But it was obvious when he was looking…he was looking for something that wasn't there. He just didn't know. Anyway I said, "It must mean…" there's no white flag in any of the signal books, "it must mean the normal thing, I surrender." Anyway, they lowered the boat and the boat rowed over to us from the ship and we took 8 prisoners there, Italians together with the Chief Officer

17:30 or Purser with a big suitcase full of money. And they brought the purser fella up on the bridge and Dusty Rhoades was talking to him there and he opened the suit case and it was all full of this…I don't know what type of money it was. I never got close enough to it. But anyway, we had 8 prisoners and the other destroyer took the rest of them. About 20 Italians were picked up by the second destroyer.

18:00 Anyway in the upshot we took them…the other destroyer was a senior man, and Dusty Rhoades had me make a signal to this destroyer: I suggest we board her and take her into Gibraltar. Like a prize see. It was carrying half a million pounds of machine tools bound for

18:30 Japan we found out later. Anyway what Rhoades wanted to do, he called away the boarding party… you've got a big board with what you're duties are. I was one of the boarding party with pistol and signal stuff. And there were fellas with cutlasses and rifles and everything. So you get in the boat, go over there and take control, and take the ship into Gibraltar. Anyway this other destroyer fella

19:00 sent a signal: "I will not endanger my ship by sending away part of my company." So he was the, say, he was the senior man, so that was the end of that. But Rhoades would have put the boarding party on and tried to capture it and take it down to Gibraltar. Anyway with that the senior fella said in a signal: "Stand back and I will torpedo her." We were a bit miffed about this.

19:30 We had done all the work so we should have had the quads of doing the business with the torpedo. That was the feeling on the bridge. Anyway, this fella on the Relentless, the Royal Navy fella…when you're firing a torpedo, there's the target there and you come up on the quarter and as you turn that's when you fire. That's the classic attack. You come up, fire it and then you go.

20:00 Anyway…because the Quickmatch is on the port quarter, where this evolution. Around he comes, comes up and nothing happens. Anyway, this Royal Navy captain said…he sent a signal. He said, "Sorry about that, I have mislaid the firing key." We all burst into bloody laughter because we reckoned we should have had the quods to take the ship down.

20:30 Anyway he went round again. He made another run and this time the torpedo hit it right in the middle. I tell you what, no one cheered. Everyone was silent. Terrible thing to see a ship go down. There were half a dozen on the bridge, this ship, and we just stood there. And down she went. Anyway we then had to chase after the convoy with the American troops. We had to chase after them to catch up with them, which

21:00 we did.

So that was a very sad moment was it?

Well it is to see a ship go down. But the Italians would build a ship that looked nice. They were very good designers. The Remus and the Romulus, they started to catch one of them when the war started here. It scuttled itself. Sunk itself. But the other one, I forget which one, Remus or Romulus, they captured one of them and it

21:30 was renamed and it was used…it was used in Australian waters during the war because the Remus and Romulus were two wolf cubs that were the beginning of Rome. If you're with your history.

Yes, yes. So they evacuated the Italian crew from that ship before they sunk it?

Oh yes, we took them all. In fact, we had one of them in our mess deck. He did

22:00 all the dirty work, washing up the dishes and all that for us.

How many of them were there?

We had eight in the Quickmatch, but about 20 or 30 picked up by the other destroyer. Something took place there because when these Italian fellas found out that we were Australians, the fella we had, fell on his knees. The Italian newspaper had been

22:30 telling them…because the fighting was going on in the western desert there. They were telling them that the Australians were cannibals. Yeah! To make them fight! But instead of that it took all the fight out of them altogether. He was going… "Oh, oh mama mia." The propaganda that the Italian government was putting out…because they were surrendering in the thousands in the desert.

23:00 And they were trying to bolster them up by telling them…they thought they might fight better, but they didn't. So they reckoned the Australians were cannibals.

Do you think the Australians were by any chance?

Well…when we got into Gibraltar and I think it happened with the others…we loaded them up with tea

and soap and everything. He wanted to stay. He wanted to stay. Because you couldn't get soap in Europe and tea you couldn't get,

23:30 they all came from outside. And we loaded them up with these things. "Oh, oh, grazi, grazi."

Were they nice people the Italians in your view?

Well that's a general statement. They didn't want to be in the war. They didn't want a bar of it. It was that megalomaniac, Mussolini. It didn't come to nothing did it?

24:00 They're home lovers Italians. They don't want to be running around with guns and bayonets. They didn't want to be in it. But they were ordered weren't they. They were forced. They didn't have a choice.

What about the Italian Navy. Were they seen as an efficient navy?

They had beautiful ships. They built ships that were beautiful to look at. Very well put together.

24:30 They…I would say they were the best war ship designers. Apart from other…they built a lot of merchant ships, but they had a feeling…a ship, apart from being functional, it was pleasing to the eye when you looked at it.

25:00 All their war ships were like that and they were very well put together.

Is it considerable in navy condition to sink an unarmed ship? I know they've changed a lot in World War II though because the Germans were doing a lot of that. But destroying that ship. You said everyone was silent. I mean, apart from

25:30 **not liking to see that ship go down, were their people who were rather upset about that event?**

Not really. I mean, there were no people on it when it went down. The crew had been taken off. No one was hurt. But you couldn't allow half a million dollars of machine tools to go to Japan to be thrown back at you and your comrades.

26:00 But the thing about taking it as a prize. It didn't occur in this war, but in the Great War they had prize money. If you captured a ship, the value of the ship and its cargo was distributed among its crew. That went back to the days of wooden ships, prize money. If you captured the ship…the Spanish galleons and all those. They were all captured as prizes

26:30 by British man o' wars, and when they captured it all the goodies came back to the captain and the crew. It didn't …it wasn't endorsed in the Second World War. But I remember, I did get prize money for a Japanese ship off the Inland Sea of Japan. When we went up there on the Hobart, there was a Japanese merchant

27:00 ship broken down outside in the sea and the Hobart went up and we took it in tow. It was on the fringe of a typhoon or something up there. Very rough. The Hobart took the Japanese merchant ship in tow, and to do that they had to take all the chain…or a lot of the

27:30 …the anchor cable is big links…you've seen it. That's up in the forward part of the ship and that had to be brought all the way down to the stern, and connected onto this broken down Japanese merchant…I think it was a tanker. Anyway we were out there several days to get this thing in. It was very bad weather. Some years later, I don't know how many it was, it might have been 7 or 8 years

28:00 I got a cheque for 7 pounds 16 shillings and 8 pence salvage money. It happened in peace time. There was salvage money. Probably paid by Lloyds [marine insurers] or something, insurance.

Did you get a chance to stop in Algiers?

Yes, I got ashore

28:30 in Algiers, yes.

What this is during this invasion?

Oh no, only for a few hours. The Americans had moved on from Algiers then. When we went in there we were given…because Algiers is an open port, and it's possible for U-boats from way out to fire torpedoes right into the harbour. There's no wall. So some of the shories had done it too…

29:00 so we were given the job for a week. Five mile up and five mile back, up and down with the Asdic [anti-submarine detection device] going with the ping, ping. Sentry, in case there were U-boats out there or Italians to prevent them firing torpedoes into the harbour. That was a terrible job going up and down, five mile up and five mile back. You had to keep watches all the time.

It was very boring?

29:30 Oh…it's like being a soldier marching up and down on one spot for a week. You'd get bored I reckon. But it had to be done though. See lots of harbours in the Mediterranean are not protected harbours by any means. Particularly with the…see some of those U-boat torpedoes could run for many miles. Not

just a few hundred yards. They could travel a few miles. They could be fired off five mile away.

30:00 **And they can be accurate?**

Oh well, they put them on a bearing and it goes on a straight line. And if you've got an open harbour then you could fire four or five in and hope one would get through. It would be a lot of damage because you were full of American troops. Their trucks and their aeroplanes being offloaded. There were ships galore. You've got petrol and all that sort of stuff in there.

Did that actually happen in the harbour?

30:30 Not in Algiers it didn't. But it happened in other harbours. In fact…there was one down there, I forget the harbour, but one of our destroyers went in there. He was ordered in the signal: "Shoot up the harbour." That was the signal. And he went in there and fired off 3 or 4 torpedoes. I forget what harbour it was. It was on the North African coast somewhere.

Casablanca was it?

31:00 No, that's on the Atlantic coast. Casablanca.

So you got a little bit of shore leave in Algeria?

Well everyone…there was no leave given there, but I used to go ashore to the signal office which is run by Royal Navy there. They had a signal station.

31:30 **What was Algiers like?**

Oh I was only there a few hours. I couldn't go far away. I couldn't go a mile or something into the town. I just stayed around near the signal office there. It was full of American Jeeps and that running all over the place.

Was there a lot of battle scars on the town? You know buildings with bullets holes…

No, not really. Well the

32:00 invasion didn't take place at Algiers. It was other parts. They landed in Casablanca of course…like the initial invasion. The other ones I don't just recall…no, but Algiers wasn't knocked about.

Now there was something I wanted to go back to before, and that was Crete. The evacuation of Crete.

32:30 **When the Germans did invade did you actually see the airborne landing?**

Oh yes. They were all around us. They were all around us.

So you were in Northern Crete were you?

We were between Crete and Greece. Crete is a long narrow…like a sausage. And we only had 17 ships in the Eastern [Mediterranean] fleet. They were split into three groups. One at the east, one in the middle

33:00 and one on the west for a water-borne invasion. And what happened there, the 17 ships were split into three groups to try and cover invasion by water. The middle group, one night about 18 mile off Heraklion, which is about the centre

33:30 of [the northern coastline of] Crete, they encountered this group of caiques [long narrow skiffs]. Caiques were like a schooner with two masts. They're very common in the Greek waters. They were carrying something like three thousand German troops coming by water.

An amphibious landing?

Well …I'm sorry?

Were they going to land in Crete?

34:00 Yes. They came from Greece to land in Crete. And the centre group encountered them and went round them like the red Indians going round a wagon train, with the search lights on and with the guns going. Sunk the lot of them. They reckon there were 3000 went down there. I don't know if that's true or not. 3000 Germans. But the following days

34:30 the Fokker 52s with three engines and corrugated sides, like corrugated iron, with 19 paratroopers. They went past us all day towing gliders. All round our ships. But we couldn't fire on them because we were being continually attacked by the air. There was just a constant stream. Every time the ship moved another line would be coming. These planes

35:00 were flying, they were only about 500 feet up. The Fokker 52 with the three engines towing a glider. And there seemed to be bloody hundreds of them. Wherever you looked. Just a tremendous sight.

And your ship was being attacked?

Well we couldn't fire on them. The gun fire was preferred for protecting ourselves. But anyway, when they got over…

35:30 we could see them dropping over the island. See them falling. The parachutes had different colours. They had different colours for supplies, and different colours indicating what was in the package. But they got chopped up very badly…the Australians and the New Zealanders. They chopped them up while they were in the air. In fact the German general protested…this will give you an idea of German logic,

36:00 he protested that you shouldn't shoot them while they're in the air. He wanted them to land and then shoot them. I could never understand the German mind. He reckoned it was unsporting to shoot them while they were still floating. Anyway, it didn't pay off for the New Zealanders and the Australians.

What happened?

36:30 **What happened to your ship that is? I know the New Zealanders and Australians had to retreat.**

We had bombs all over the place. Sticks of bombs up the port side, up the starboard side. Bombs flying over the top between the masts, and the tactic there…we would be doing 14 knots and we could see these planes banking around. The whole lot of them, might be 10 or 12 of them, all following each other. You'd see them banking

37:00 around, and they always tried to come at you from astern. At the appropriate moment on the bridge, the captain or navigator steering the ship would call an order for a turn 90 degrees to port, and then clap onto 28 knots. But you had to wait until the right moment and when the ship began to turn, you'd see the plane coming in like that, and then as you began to turn you'd see

37:30 the German plane bank and he'd be skidding around to come at you from astern. He'd come right at you from the back. Time and again the tactic worked, because when he released the bomb it would fly over the top. But it wasn't just one bomb. There could be six or seven or eight, depending on what they were carrying. I can recall standing there where my action station was. I'd see the plane coming in and I'd see the door open and then there'd be

38:00 five or six more, probably less, dots, just black dots. They were the bombs, and when you saw them as black dots they were coming straight at you. But gradually as they came you'd see them begin to elongate because they weren't coming straight at you. While they remained as black dots they were coming straight for you, and time and again you'd see the black dot begin to elongate.

38:30 Sometimes if they were right off the target you'd see the whole length, like a cigar, the shape of the normal bomb. But some times they wouldn't fully elongate. They'd just slightly elongate. So you knew it was going to be close. I don't know…the Naiad, another cruiser there, later told us they turned around three times to come and save us.

39:00 We were that hidden with the water spouts all around the ship. We were there on our own. We weren't there with the other ships. I don't know how we got out of that really.

What else happened in Crete?

In three days in that same period of time, in three days to the west of Crete, there were 2600 odd English sailors in three days.

39:30 Their ships went down. I think there were three cruisers and several destroyers in three days. There were more lost in three days there than the 1400 lost on Crete. That's not generally know. Not generally known. The thing with navy people, there's no little white crosses. They're all below. You never see them. You never hear about it. That's what gives me pleasure here. Just pointing out the things that happened.

40:00 It's not been publicised. I've never seen in publicised.

It's unfortunate isn't it. That sort of recognition.

They're getting recognition now about it. But the German Air Force…there was up to 12 Messerschmitts always over the fleet. In line of ahead. Twelve of them like that. They were low down in the water

40:30 and they'd come along…you've got a V shape like that with the destroyers…you might have 12 destroyers in a V shape. These Messerschmitts would run right down the line on one leg of the V firing canon and everything.

Tape 8

00:32 **You were saying that you lost a ship.**

The HMAS York was what they called an anti aircraft cruiser of about 4000 ton. Anyway it was in Suda

Bay which was a refuelling place for the eastern Mediterranean fleet…

01:00 for them to call in for fuel. There was always an oil tanker there. Anyway the Italians again…this was before the episode with the battleship Queen Elizabeth and the frogmen, they devised a sort of outboard motor boat loaded with, I think it was 500 pounds of TNT [Trinitrotoluene - explosive] . The pilot would sit in it…it had no superstructure,

01:30 just a hull with the explosive up the front which would explode on impact. Italian submarines brought five of these out to the entrance of Suda Bay, and they were released at the entrance of Suda Bay, and they ran into Suda Bay and one of them struck the York at 5 o'clock in the morning. She went down. She didn't sink altogether because it was

02:00 pretty shallow. A part of the superstructure was still above water. It was actually used later on as an anti aircraft. She fired her guns while it was sunk. Anyway a signal came across from the York that they required the services of a diver. The diver from Perth was sent over and this was in the days when they had the big helmet, leaden boots. He was to go down and examine

02:30 the damage and see if they could fix the hole up. We left Suda Bay and it was two or three days later that we came back. I remember the signal came over, this was from the York: "Regret to announce the loss of diver Joe Bloggs, lost at sea on the date…" so on.

03:00 What happened was, he'd been down inspecting the hull, and in those days you had a diving boat. Sort of a large boat where the diver would get on the ladder and go down. The Germans began to bomb the area in the harbour. They pulled the diver up and they got him on the

03:30 ladder…you see, the boat's about that far out of the water and the ladder goes down. They got him on the ladder, and the normal routine is that they take the diver's helmet off while he's on the ladder. But at that point the boat was capsized by the bombs landing in the water near the York, and he got drowned. So we had to send a signal back to Navy Office Melbourne, regretting the loss of diver so and so,

04:00 or seaman so and so, lost on such and such a day. It was one of those things.

So just going back to the speedboat loaded with TNT, when that hit the York did the driver…

No, it was apparently designed…you get the boat aimed…they would travel fairly fast…they would get the boat aimed

04:30 so they couldn't miss and then they had a lever where they dropped off the back. They'd slide off the back of this boat. So you had this explosive with 500 pounds and boom.

Was that German or Italian?

No, Italian. There were some brave men there, don't worry. I don't know if they got trapped there, I wouldn't know. They might have been captured.

A good design as well.

Well you know…

05:00 there were some courageous Italians, don't worry.

Were they used often?

Well, that was the first occasion it came up and I think it sort of triggered people back in the United Kingdom about these submersible boats, when they tried to get the Turpid. They had these three-man small submarines that went up into the fiords there to have a go at the Turpid

05:30 which was anchored in there. The Italians were the innovators, particularly the thing like a torpedo with two seats on it, and they could steer it. It was like riding a torpedo. They were very good innovators of something new in warfare. It didn't cost many men, even if they failed. I don't know what happened there.

06:00 It was said there were five boats released, and I think there was only the one that actually struck. You see, the thing with an explosion, if you're in the water, is that your lungs can burst because you're hollow there and you can be in trouble. We did some time in Syria,

06:30 towards the end of our first stay in the Mediterranean. We operated out of Haifa [Palestine, now in Israel] and it's the only port in the Mediterranean where you got milk, fresh milk. You never get it anywhere else. And you could always get oranges there. But very small harbour it was, and the Vichy French [pro-German French forces] were

07:00 there in Syria together with the French Foreign Legion and they put up a battle there too apparently. We had the VC [Victoria Cross] winner who became Governor of New South Wales…what's his name? Had one leg? What's his name? Anyway he lost his leg there and got a VC.

Roden Cutler?

Cutler [Lieutenant Arthur Roden Cutler, awarded VC, Syria, June/July 1941] He was there and that's where he lost his leg. It was

07:30 the first historical case when the three Australian Armed Services had operated together. There was the HMAS Perth at sea; the 7th Division [AIF] on the coast; and there was an RAAF Tomahawk Squadron [3 Squadron] of 12 aeroplanes. We did a couple of operations operating together. The

08:00 modus operandi was, the Perth would leave Haifa in the morning, together with a couple of destroyers, and we'd go up along the coast, up near Damour. Just before Damour there's a river called the Litani River. And at the foot of the river there was a, more or less a forest area there, and the Australian Army had been held up there

08:30 by machine guns in this wood, right on the mouth of the Litani River, facing the Mediterranean. So there was a van [vanguard] ashore with a Navy observation officer, a battery operated observer. So we'd go up there when we were about four mile out, and the observer would radio the Perth about targets.

09:00 We went up there one morning and we were given this target of this small forest at the mouth of the Litani River which was causing a bit of trouble with machine guns hidden in there. Anyway, I don't know how many six inch shells were shot in there, but it was all covered in dust, and I think that stopped them there.

You're saying you fired on them?

Yeah, six inch guns into this neck of the woods near the

09:30 Litani River. They then…they had…the French had these French 75s, 75 millimetres and they opened fire on the Perth, four mile out. They were 75 ml, I mean they were a pretty small shell, and you could see them plop in the water. Anyway the captain decided he wasn't going to take a chance and be hit

10:00 by one of these…they were hidden there, we couldn't see them but they were firing these French 75s. So we backed off of there and then we went up there one morning. It was a nice sunny day, sunny weather but not activity from the enemy on the water. So anyway, there was no enemy ships there and everyone was walking around in a pair of shorts and it was nice and warm. The next minute, these Tomahawk

10:30 fighters…I think it must have been the whole squadron, 12 of them in line ahead. And in the wireless office, and Len Grinter would know this, they were getting the signals…these RAAF fellas are reporting an enemy convoy. They were reporting us and they were coming to have a go at us. Anyway, apparently they're coming in line ahead, low down, about

11:00 five hundred feet. One behind the other, all loaded with bombs and what not. In the wireless office, they heard the leader of the group calling out: "Friendly ships, friendly ships." He'd realised or recognised… we used to have a canvas that was laid out with a particular diagram

11:30 which would be spread out on the quarter deck indicating you were British and not German. Anyway he must have recognised that and he called them off. And Grinter would know, he would have heard the RAAF fellas talking on the radio.

So they spotted the canvas on the quarter deck?

I don't know…but they had reported us as a convoy.

12:00 We're watching these fellas come up and we suddenly realise they're coming for us. But something happened. I don't know if we sent a signal to them or they realised their mistake. It wasn't uncommon to be bombed by friendly aircraft.

I'm sure.

I remember, we actually sent a signal off…actually I think the first one, one

12:30 of them may have dropped a bomb or so, because I remember we actually sent a signal off to the RAAF people ashore the next morning, something about being fired upon by RAAF aircraft, and something about,

13:00 it's only sort of in recompense that we've opened fire on friendly aircraft. That was the gist of it anyway.

It's interesting with this talk of friendly ships and friendly aircraft…I'm wondering about the term now, friendly fire…did you use that term

13:30 **or hear that term in World War II?**

Oh yes. All aircraft were warned never to fly over the top of warships. And they were told if they did they were liable to be fired on. Never took any chances. Any aircraft, they had to keep away, don't fly over the top of them or near them. They were given warning after warning. But the same thing happened, friendly aircraft did drop bombs on…not on the enemy, on the

14:00 same side.

So once the misunderstanding had been sorted out, it must have been good to be working with the other Australian forces, the airforce and the army as well?

Well quite honestly it was unique as far as I can understand, that the three arms had worked together. The Tomahawks…

Was there

14:30 **much communication between you?**

No, not operational. We actually got attacked by the French planes in Haifa Harbour. They were outfitted with Glen Martin bombers. I don't know where they got them from. They're American. But they had a cluster of Glen Martin bombers.

15:00 I can remember two occasions they came in over the harbour at Haifa. They didn't drop bombs. They dropped mines. There was one night there I can remember, a Glen Martin bomber…it would only have been fifty yards away when he went…it was at eye level where I was on that platform. He went right across, just a black shadow, boom. He went up over the hill, and then he went up over the hill where the moon

15:30 was shining. But they would be French pilots, the Vichy French. And of course all movement would stop in the harbour because of mines dropped in there. I reported one that I saw dropped from that particular plane. I saw the splash when it went into the water. I reported that back to the bridge, and then the next day they had special boats to detect them.

16:00 To go out…the whole port's got to shut up. You can't travel on the water. But it was twice they came down there when we were in the harbour. The thing was, in the Syria thing we never sailed at night, we were always home. Home in the harbour at Haifa. We were never out at night time. But the French put up a …the French Foreign Legion in particular were very stubborn. The

16:30 Australian 7th Division had a bit of a problem getting there. Getting through them. Oh, and there was another occasion…just north of the Litani River they had a …the French Army, the Vichy French had a wireless station there and it was a great…just one tall slender column with dozens of wires holding it. Very high and tall. Anyway,

17:00 we went up one morning and we had a report by the name of Ian Fitchett. Ian Fitchett was a war correspondent and he travelled on the Perth on a couple of occasions and he was with us on this day when we went up. The Naval Observer gave the target of this wireless aerial being used for military traffic. Anyway, I think we would have been about five mile off. Anyway,

17:30 that was the target and the thing is, what you do is fire a ranging shot. You check, you say well the distance is so many yards, so you fire a ranging shot to see if you're on. And if the ranging shot falls within the perimeter, then you give it the lot. Anyway, this Ian Fitchett, an Australian war correspondent, he was with me where I was on my action station

18:00 and he…we got the target. X and Y turret were just there and they fired and he went white. He had never heard gun fire before. It shook him. It's very noisy. You're up here and the gun's there and whoom! I didn't say anything, but you think, how about that, these civilians.

18:30 Anyway, we fired off there and in the distance we could see the men running out of the hut, the size of ants running away, and then whoom again, and gees to see them running. Any they did the right thing. They didn't run up that way, they ran sideways. For gun fire run at right

19:00 angles. Don't run in the same direction. Because of all the wire stays they had, it actually took a bit to bring it down. It was like a column, a rectangle, not cylindrical, but just a frame work like mesh, and it was all held up. It was pretty high. It must have been over a hundred feet or more. Anyway, we brought that down

19:30 which interfered with their army communications. Yeah, Haifa…

At Haifa did you ever meet with the other…the airforce or the army when you were on leave?

I had a comrade, a signalman, Keith Scarr. His brother was in the 7th Division, and Keith was a signalman on the Perth.

20:00 He went ashore with permission and located his brother. I don't know if his brother survived the war. But Keith became the man in charge of the Repatriation Department in Hobart. He had an injury when he came back and that put him out of being a signalman. He got the job in the Department of Repatriation and became the head man.

20:30 But Keith is dead now, but one of his sons is a doctor down in Hobart, Scarr.

But other than that there were no meetings or no one got together for a drink with either the army or the airforce?

No, no. You were too busy doing the job you had to do to go meandering around for a day. You only had

a few hours ashore. There was never

21:00 overnight leave. You had to be back at 9 or 8 or something. There was never overnight leave. You all had to be back because the ship might be called out to go to sea. There was no overnight leave. No never.

So were there any other operations around Haifa that all three were working on?

No, no. Just on the coast. The circumstances

21:30 were propitious for the three Australian services to be on that strip. When the army worked further back in land of course, they weren't together. You might have the airforce there, but that was the first occasion when the three services were cooperating in the one area of a war.

22:00 That might be a mistake…I don't know if they did in the First World War…

No, as far as I know…

You wouldn't have ships mixed up with…ships mixed up with aeroplanes in the First World War, no.

And that was around '43, 44?

No, that was '41. Oh yeah. This was in the six months the Perth was there [HMAS Perth's shelling of the enemy positions at Damour was on 2 July 1941 as part of the 7th Division's successful Syrian campaign]. We were up and down all over. Very active.

22:30 **Ok, I've got a few questions that I just want to go back on. Earlier on when you…after you were on HMAS Australia, you spent a lot of time in the desert in Alexandria. Around two weeks or two months, what did you do other than getting bitten by lice. How did you spend your days?**

23:00 We didn't do anything because we couldn't do anything, because we didn't have any money. There was one time, my friend, Kildare and I, thought we'd hitchhike into the desert and meet up with the AIF somewhere up near Benghazi [Libya]. Anything. It was absolute boredom being in a barracks. We weren't in barracks, we were living on the sand. Food,

23:30 don't mention it. Water…you know, it was…there were no showers or anything like that. It was hard living. You didn't have any money, but we thought if we could hitch a ride on an army truck we could get something. We would go up there and fossick around and we might get a few souvenir Lugers or something.

24:00 Just to do something. The food was crook. We lived in tents. Eaten by the lice. There were fellas walking around there with bandages from there up to there. They looked as if they were in the process of being mummies. I don't know what it is, but I had a sleeping bag, one with a zip on it, but they used…every night before you went in you'd turn it inside out and go through cracking them in the seams.

24:30 It didn't help. Two o'clock in the morning the buggers would be…they always seemed to bite you on the leg. And because of the sand over the generations. I mean Napoleon's army had been there. All the armies had been there. The human processes going into the sand. There were lots of creepy crawly bugs.

25:00 You'd get a bite with these lice or fleas and it would get septic. There were fellas with bandages, both legs bandaged. They looked like they were about to be put down as mummies. They didn't have the things you've got today. Things to kill those sorts of things, to spray them. That wasn't available then. You've got in perspective the great advance in weedicide and pesticides,

25:30 which weren't there. They hadn't been invented. There was nothing. Nothing to prevent them.

There would have been a lot of flies as well?

Oh yeah. And on occasion when the air raid was on in Alexandria, five miles away. Some of the shells would not explode, the anti aircraft shells. They're supposed to go up on a time fuse and explode in the air and spray out the shrapnel. Sometimes they'd fail to do that and they'd whistle over

26:00 the top of the camp. And you'd be standing there and you'd see all the fellas all falling down, laying down. And it would pass over the camp and explode somewhere outside. Ki-tibish, Ki-tibish was the camp.

So when you and your mate decided to head off to Benghazi did you make it?

No. We gave it up because we had to go down

26:30 and look on the sheet on the notice board indicating which people will now take the train to Suez, on the way to the United Kingdom. There were a lot of sailors there from the Royal Navy who had been out on that station for five years. Fellas from submarines had been there for years. They had been rotated and they were on the way home. They were there every morning to look at the list. If they were on the list they'd pack their bag

27:00 and get on the train and off they'd go. At that time there would be a ship waiting at Suez to take them on, and transport them further down. It was '41 and the materiel, the army and the tanks and all that, it wasn't there. It just wasn't there. And you saw anything published about it. As I said before, it was bad news and you don't publish that

27:30 during a war. It was an indication to the enemy that they were getting on top of you. You know there were something like 40 Royal Navy submarines lost in the Med. Nobody knows where they went down. If they never turned back, the report was: 'submarine did not return'. No one knew where they went down. But I…there were submariners who

28:00 travelled with us in the train to Suez to get the boat to the UK. And they told us about the things they used to do in the submarines. They used to come up near the railway line at Brindisi and Bari [Italy] and open fire with their guns on the railway. There would be trains going up and down because the railway runs right alongside the coast there, the eastern coast of Italy.

28:30 They had a lot of daredevil about them. A lot of them didn't come back. The Mediterranean, a great deal of it is very shallow, and very observable from the air to see something underneath. The deepest part of the Med is to the east of Crete. It goes down over 10,000 feet there. But a lot of other parts of the Aegean Sea

29:00 is quite shallow. The submariners had heavy losses there. They had great gains too. There was one story told to me about…the traffic used to run to supply [German Field Marshal Erwin] Rommel from

29:30 Sicily and that, down into Tripoli. They got information. It was all hushed up of course. It only came out in later years. The code breakers who broke the Enigma code at Bletchley Park. Anyway, it had to be kept very hush, hush so the enemy didn't realise that the traffic was being read. Anyway on this occasion,

30:00 this was in '41, they got information that there was a convoy of ships coming from Italy down to Tripoli. They had the number of ships, the numbers of the escort and the message was: 'They expect to be reinforced by a certain number of destroyers in a certain position'. That information was passed on to the destroyers through Admiral Cunningham I suppose, in Alexandria,

30:30 and five British destroyers went down there. In the dark they saw this convoy and I think there was three destroyers in line ahead and their five British destroyers tacked onto the end of them. They're all sailing along, three Italian and five British. And the merchant ships there, and then the leader of the five said, that's it.

31:00 Boom boom and sank the lot of them.

The British sank the Italian ships?

Yeah, in the dark. Yeah. Sank the entire group.

Very clever.

Oh yeah. They did some daring things, the British destroyers. I've always liked destroyers. The small ships rather than the big ones.

You mentioned

31:30 **the differences in your book…perhaps you could tell us about some of the differences now. The differences between the corvettes and the destroyers and what it was like to take over a new ship?**

They're only 700 ton, and they carried four inch gun and the

32:00 Kingcup carried about…I think it was normal, about 200 depth charges. A lot of weight. There was no refuelling. You've got 3000 mile to go from Londonderry to St John's. And then you've got to come back. So you carry over 200 depth charges. That's a lot of weight hanging on the back there. I was the only Australian there, and

32:30 I palled up with a fellow who came from Oxford, the town. I had to do that because I could never understand what these fellas were saying. They came from all over the United Kingdom and one of them would say (unintelligible). I'd say, "What did they say Frank?" Absolutely, I never understood them.

33:00 But Frank did and he'd tell me what they said. Because of being a permanent navy fella, I became the senior man there. There were six signalmen and me. You have two signalmen on for four hours. Four hours on and eight hours off. But I was six for four days. I couldn't move. I was sea sick. The captain kept sending for me and I was absolutely hopeless.

33:30 **Why were you so sick?**

The movement. See from 7000 to about 700 ton and they…they reckoned they rolled on wet grass. That's what it's described like. I mentioned in the book, I take my hat off to these fellas. They had been there for two years doing this. It was a funny…not a funny thing,

34:00 it came pay day and of course you go up to the table and the officer's there giving out the pay. You take your cap off, put it down and he puts the money on and then you put your hand on it so it doesn't blow away. I went up there one day. These fellas in front of me were getting… "Able seaman Smith, ten shillings. Able seaman Brown, fifteen shillings,"

34:30 all in this…anyway, when I came up he said, nineteen pounds. Well that wasn't my pay. That was an accrued amount of pay that hadn't been paid to me for a long time. So they gave me buggery. They came up…they wouldn't talk to my face, they'd be at the back and they'd say, "Bloody Australian, nineteen bloody pounds. And we're doing the same bloody job." And they'd go on and on. And I used to say, "Well boys you'd better change your

35:00 prime minister." They didn't like that. But I don't know. I don't know how they did it. You'd sit down for your meal with your oil skins on. All the walls and the deck would be streaming with water. They weren't welded ships, they were riveted. So there was movement and there was always leakage.

35:30 So you're sitting having your meal. You've got sea boots because you've got 2 or 3 inches of there, and when the ship rolls all the water runs that way and then it runs that way. I don't know.

This may seem like a stupid question but how do they stay afloat?

Well you know what [British Prime Minister Winston] Churchill said about them? When the corvette class, when the word corvette was used, Churchill said

36:00 "They're cheap and nasty. They're cheap to build and nasty to the enemy." That's what Churchill said. They would keep going forever. They only had one propeller. You would get about 12 knots which would be about the top. They did a marvellous job. Strangely enough I was reading about

36:30 the Frenchman [diver and adventurer Jacques] Cousteau, he actually bought a corvette. That was the Calypso. There was an article in the paper only a few days ago. It's somewhere locked up in France all deteriorated and falling to bits. But originally it was a Royal Navy corvette. That was the Calypso. They did the job they were built for, but there was no comfort for the

37:00 people living in them.

So what was the name of the one you were on?

Kingcup. They were all Flower-class [corvettes]. They were all called after flowers, dandelion, petunia. All flower class they were called. The Flower-class corvette.

How did you come to be on that?

There were about 250 of us in a camp

37:30 outside Portsmouth waiting for the destroyers to be built in Cowes. The yards in Cowes kept getting bombed. The commissioning of the ships were delayed and you get fed up with sitting around because there was nothing to do. My mate and I…they had a notice on the board calling for volunteers for home duties only.

38:00 So we thought this will be alright. We might get in one of these motor torpedo boats up around the coast. I didn't expect to end up 3000 miles away in St John's, Canada, Newfoundland. Anyway, Kildare and I we went by train all the way up from Waterloo or whatever, up to a place called Stranraer. Up in the north of Scotland.

38:30 That's where the ferries take off to go to Ireland, Larne. That's the narrowest part of the Irish Sea. Anyway we get up to Stranraer, and we get on the ferry. All the engines are all revved up but you have to wait for the ok from the airforce because it was a favourite place for the U-boats waiting on the traffic between Ireland and the UK. So the

39:00 airforce would say, all clear and boom off she'd go, full speed right across to Larne. Then we got a train from there up to Londonderry and there's no barracks there so we were billeted out with a Mrs Miller in Mountjoy Street. Dear old soul. So we were billeted out, Kildare and I there, waiting for this corvette group to come back. It was away. We were detailed to go

39:30 in them, but she wasn't there. She was on a journey. So Kildare and I…we used to wander around Londonderry…we had no money. There was no food. You couldn't go and buy a meal. You couldn't buy an egg or a scone. It was terrible. The women in Londonderry used to go over the border into what would it be…Eyre I suppose to bring back goods,

40:00 and they'd have it all stuffed in their bloomers and everything or whatever, to bring back. Smuggling it was called.

Tape 9

00:33 **Ok, so tell us more about your adventures with the Kingcup?**

Well yes. Mrs Miller, Mountjoy Street. There was her and her husband, and of course in Londonderry the houses are like terraces. They're all the same. The only difference is the number on the door. I mean they all look the same. You open the front

01:00 door and you're on the street. Anyhow, she had a son. I think he was about 12 and his name was Hercules. And he had the whitest skin of anyone I've ever seen. Over the following years at odd times she would send me a letter or I would send her a letter.

01:30 And she told me that Hercules had died. He had got pneumonia. Anyway, Kildare and I lived there and every morning we were supposed to report down to the Naval Barracks at nine o'clock, and we'd all get out the front door and Mrs Miller would be there with her apron, waving her apron saying cheerio now. We would go right up to the corner and we'd give her a last wave and she'd wave with her apron. Dear

02:00 old soul. Anyway. What happened with Kildare, he was supposed to relieve a Royal Navy wireless telegraphist. But he came back. So Kildare left me and went back to Portsmouth and then I was the only Australian to go into this corvette. So we had to wait there several weeks because they were still away on an

02:30 Atlantic trip. So we used to wander all around Londonderry. It was snowing so it must have been round about Christmas time. We used to have snow ball fights with the kids, the young ones. Anything. We had no money, what can you do. Anyway, Kildare, and in came the corvette and down I go

03:00 and I join up with this group of Royal Navy fellas. The captain had been a merchant officer on the China coast. I don't even remember his name. I never wrote his name down. But I understood him. They reckon there's a dialect in England

03:30 where they identify you as London English by your accent. And it was sent to me and other Australians that if you're talking to English people with all these different dialects, well you speak London English. Well Frank, the fella I palled up with, I had to, otherwise I wouldn't have understood what they were saying. Frank was the one who would tell me what they were saying.

04:00 I never got to know the captain. He's got his job to do and you don't have any sort of chitter chatter. "Yes sir." You take the log. Signal log down at 9 o'clock every morning. "Signal log sir." He'd take the log and read all the signals that had come in the last four hours.

Could you understand the captain alright?

Well yes, as I was saying

04:30 he had London English. But anyway, he was in charge of a group of five. The corvettes were broken up in groups and there was one officer in one of the boats who was in charge of the five. So he operated as a unit. Anyway before we went out of course, I wasn't sick then, I went through the books and

05:00 signal logs and all that. And I asked where the fifth one was. And they told me it was the Canadian corvette called Spikenard. They'd lost it on the last trip. And they told me it was a German U-boat speaking English. The configuration of a convoy…you might have 28 ships in 4 rows

05:30 of 7. That covers quite a bit. It might be 2 or 3 miles. And the escort is round the perimeter.

You did mention this story before and the German's asked in English for a…

A direction bearing yes.

I wanted to ask you about that because…did this happen often?

06:00 **Have you ever heard of it happening?**

I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know.

Have you ever heard of it happening at all?

Well it is what's called a…I don't know how you pronounce the French, but it's le guise de guerre: a ruse of war. A ruse of war in English. The convoy was 28. The had a plan, and different things for zig zagging.

06:30 They didn't go on the once course right across the Atlantic. Every half hour or so there was a detailed… all the signal books had all the zig zags. There were numerous zig zags. There were symmetrical ones, there were ones which were not symmetrical. But you could imagine 28 ships, all of different tonnage, and different screw size, when they altered course, they didn't all act

07:00 uniformly. All around the circumference there might be six corvettes as a screen to protect it. corvettes would get out of station in the dark. So one corvette would call up another one and say, "Spikenard, Spikenard give me a bearing." So Spikenard, the wireless fellow would pick up and count from one to ten and nine to one slowly.

07:30 The fella that's calling it has got his direction finder going, boom. That's where you are. I know where you are now. I'm not going to run into you. The Germans of course, I mean they're intelligent warriors. They're listening into chit chat in their submarines. So he used the same thing…speaking English, "Spikenard give me a bearing." The fella said one to ten

08:00 and the German U-boat, the torpedo is right in the nose of the submarine. So he alters course with his compass and boom, fires straight down his compass. There was one survivor I was told.

So were they using radio telephone? Were they using Morse code?

Yeah. TBS [Talk Between Ships]. A hand phone. Actually

08:30 the time I joined the Kingcup, when I went through the signal files, there was a signal there from the Admiralty about excessive use of the TBS. The constant talking.

Well it would be easy to imagine there would be a lot of chatter.

Well it was wrong you see. There was too much.

Because the enemy could pick up that chatter and get a position.

09:00 Yes of course. That was the reason for the signal. There had been too many talking and it was a dead give away. But the other thing was, if you went down there, the water was so cold, survival time was 7 minutes. You wouldn't be injured. Just the intense cold would drive all the heat out of your heart. Of course, when I joined I go through all the signals, and

09:30 I said, "Where's Spikenard?" and I was told what happened. I thought this isn't too good. But there were several occasions when ships in convoy collided. That was common. That happened quite often. And in the night you haven't got any red and green port and starboard lights. You had no lights at all. So it was essential to be there, watching up here.

10:00 It was one of the things with the signal branch, we always reckoned that if there was anything to be seen, the signalman would see it before anyone else. Never mind the fella up the top in the crows nest. The signalman always saw it. I think that was quite true actually.

Why did you think that? Because you had your eyes out for the flags…

It was the fact we spent four hours, whereas

10:30 lookouts did an hour and they sat in a steel chair with binoculars on a bracket, clamped on. They sat in this swivel chair for an hour then they got relieved. But I think what often happened, the fella would sit in the chair with his eyes up there, with his eyes closed. But, whereas a signalman, we did four hours and we had movement, walking from that side of the bridge to that side.

11:00 The other thing was, we could rest binoculars on the combing. Up in the crows nest there was always a tremor and you can rest your binoculars there but it's trembling with the vibration. On the flag deck, on the bridge, you had a steady platform to put the binoculars there and it wouldn't shake.

What is the combing again sorry?

When you're standing on the bridge

11:30 there's no roof. You've got a steel wall running around with all the push buttons and the telephones and you've got a ledge on the top of it. I might have the wrong name there. But it's a place where you can rest the binoculars so they're not shaking. But we always…I think it was acknowledged that if anyone's going to see

12:00 something the signalman will see it before anyone else.

I guess you had the codes and the signalling to keep your mind active.

There was never any conversation on a bridge at night. There was never any talk. Never any chit chat.

I wasn't saying that. Because you were doing other things, your mind kept active whereas the lookout just kept looking so he could fall asleep or drift off.

Oh yes.

12:30 I know when we came up with these three destroyers and the five tankers out of Venezuela. We were two or three days I saw right out on the horizon what looked like a stick. We were very flat, calm like a mill pond on the outskirts of the Caribbean. And I called out, "Bearing

13:00 Red, four, five," or whatever it was without moving it, and object. And the captain or the Officer of the Watch said, "What's it look like?" And I said, "It looks like a stick." He said, "A periscope?" And I said, "No, it's right out on the horizon." Anyway there were 2 or 3 others locked on it then. Up came the Navigator and he said, "That's 25 mile away and it's a navigation spar on one of the other reefs

13:30 of the Caribbean." So I chalked one up.

You must have had good eyes?

Oh well, but you had good binoculars too. The great 1900A Royal Navy binoculars.

Did you get sore eyes?

Oh well, you get salt coming over. But it's all clean stuff anyway. Clean salt air.

14:00 **Did you ever mistake a signal, either the flags or lights, get the signal wrong?**

Make a mistake? No the training drilled that out of you.

It's hard to imagine as you say, watching Morse code on a little blinking light and not to miss a dot.

No.

No? It was always perfectly

14:30 **clear?**

Well you did so much of it. And the thing is watching a lamp making Morse. Never look at the light. You look over there and you get it in the corner. Because if you look at it, it's a psychological thing, your mind will go blank. It's what's used by hypo…what's the word?

Hypnotists.

Hypnotists. Looking straight at a blinking light you sort of go off.

15:00 So if the lights there, you're looking over there out the side of your eye.

Do they teach you to do that in training or is that something you picked up?

Oh yes. We did a lot of that. Did a lot of that. At the Naval Depot there they had two masts, one at the extreme ends of the parade ground. There were two masts with masthead lights and below was a little telephone box with

15:30 a key. And they used to send off…you used to read Morse code exercises. A jumble of figures and letters. You never forget it once you've got it. Morse code. I know, there was one time we experimented by bouncing

16:00 Morse code off clouds to see if we could reach a ship that was not in sight. Over the horizon. If there was enough cloud there you could direct the…see the 18 inch lamp was 40 million candle power. You trained it on a cloud and transmitted, you could get 30 or 40 mile, if the condition was good. We were trained on the heliograph.

16:30 Now the heliograph in India, they had transmitted signals over 90 miles, just by the sun shining on a mirror. It's a very old thing Morse code. It's not in general use, but if you learn to read lamp signals, there will always be Morse code. It's still around. I think they teach it in the scouts, I think. It's still handy if you get marooned

17:00 on an island and need to send an SOS [distress signal].

So when you experimented with the cloud did it actually work beyond the horizon?

Oh yes. The ship reading it was not in sight. And he could send back another signal back to you. It was only a gimmick because it was never used in war time. That's a dead give away isn't it.

17:30 If there were any enemy subs or boats around you never went flashing lights around. But it worked in a sort of peace time area.

Ok, just a quick question, you mentioned before about nicknames. How did you get yours?

Well I'm not going to tell you. But if you had a common name.

What is your nickname?

No, I'm not going

18:00 to tell you. Now, Peggy O'Neil, was a leading signalman. He's the fella who read the signal when I made the damage report in Malta to St Angelo's Signal Station. Peggy O'Neil, I was with him, we were always on watch together for 12 months. I never knew his first name. I saw his

18:30 name in 'Chin Up', the publication for the TPI [Totally Permanently Incapacitated] people. His name was Harry. And I rang up Colin Pike in South Australia. He's a solicitor in Gawler. He was a signalman in the Perth and I said, "I've just found out Peggy O'Neil's name." I said after 12 months he was always Peggy. Anyway Peggy passed away.

19:00 But Miller was always Dusty Miller. Williams was always Buggy Williams, I could go on and on. But

there was never a first name. Wilson was always called Tug, Tug Wilson. No first name.

Alright. What about…

19:30 **so after the Battle of Cape Matapan, where did you go after that?**

I'm trying to put it in order. It was Crete and Greece came after that, must have done. After Matapan.

Oh ok, I thought that was before. So after Crete then?

Well of course we got hit

20:00 with a 500 pound bomb. We went into Sfakia. Have you been to Crete? Well that's on the south coast. The army people had to walk 35 mile over the 8000-feet white mountain along the centre of Crete. They had to walk 35 down to Sfakia. Very small. It's about the only place you could get small boats in.

20:30 It's very rugged on the south coast. There's only two places where you can actually run a boat up onto the sand. There were quite a few thousand taken out of there, the army in that small bay. We went up on two occasion and they had to shuttle the Army people in small boats out to the cruisers and the they had to climb up to get on.

21:00 It didn't matter how many we picked up. Three am was the deadline. We had to leave there at 3am to get far enough away from the German aircraft. It was always 3am. You'd hear them shouting, that's enough, we're finished, we're off. You could hear the voices, no more. And off we'd go. It was about 11 o'clock, 8 hours. After 8 hours we got hit.

21:30 We had the Glen Eagle and there were 2 or 3 other ships, I can't remember who they were. Probably 2 or 3 destroyers, and we were the tail end charlie of this concourse of shipping taking these army fellas to safety in Egypt. We were the tail…three times German aircraft came over and they always attacked the Perth. We were

22:00 right on the end. But I think the reason for that was the Germans were at the length of their endurance with fuel. They weren't flying from Crete, they were flying from Greece. So they had to…when they attacked us they had to have enough fuel to get back. So they came at us three times and the third time was the one we got hit On the aft conning tail was the Commander,

22:30 he was standing there when…boom boom boom boom…a whole string and the last one in the string hit. A strange thing we never heard…we didn't hear…he must have been high up through the clouds. He didn't dive on us. Anyway

23:00 there was a great mass of steam right up near the bridge…you've got two masts…the mast right up near the bridge. Great masses of steam coming out of there. You could hear it. The roaring of broken steam pipes. We had about 700 troops and the orders to the troops were to keep out of sight.

23:30 So they were al crammed in, because if they were in the open air, the aircraft would make a determined effort to kill all those soldiers. So they had to keep out of sight and they were all jammed in there. Anyway, with all the steam coming out…as I looked forward, the mast whipped like the tip of a fly anglers rod,

24:00 and right on the top of that was this big triangle. A two inch piping in a diamond shape about five foot high. That was the DF [Direction Finding] loop. The direction finding loop. It was right on the tip of the mast. The mast flicked like that and very slowly in slow motion it broke loose and I thought Jesus, I hope nobody's under that on the flag deck. It went down of course. It smashed down. It was later found the mast was three feet

24:30 out of plumb.

So it was out of line?

Yes. All the phones were out. The first thing I did was check to see if our phones were on to the wireless room, the engine room and all the apparatus for communications. And the phones were out. I said to the commander. "All the phones are out, sir."

25:00 I said, "Perhaps I'll go forward and find out what's happening." And he said, "Yes Sheedy." So I climbed down and walked the full length of the ship, and there was a soldier there on his own and he was trembling from there to his toes. Shock. And I said to him, "Are you alright mate?" And he said, "I was round the other side with my mate, and I came round here to have a look."

25:30 Fourteen of them had been sitting on a steel ladder and they had been severed through the steel rungs in bits. I didn't see that of course, because when I spoke to this sailor fella who was in deep shock, I returned back along the full length, past the 4 inch guns, back to my action station

26:00 and the phones had come back on. I rang the wireless office …just to check all the phones and they were back in order. The whole ship is engineered with the repair groups to fix damage, action damage anywhere on the ships. There are groups of men detailed off and they did the job very well. They got the phones back on.

26:30 Some years ago I went to Fiji. We do every year. To Castaway Island off Fiji. And I got talking to a fella there and his name is Bill Bell. He runs a tourist agency in Tahiti. The normal thing you say, where are you from? He said, “I’m a Kiwi.” I said, “A few Kiwi’s

27:00 in the Middle East in ’41.” He said, “My dad was there.” He said he was brought out of Crete in HMAS Perth. And I said hang on a moment and I had a couple of copies of the book in my case, and I went down to the bureau and I came back. And there’s a photograph in there of New Zealanders walking off the gangplank, taken by the ship’s photographer. Not George. The ship’s photographer …they had these sun topees on. Not the ice-cream

27:30 cone hats, but solar hats. And they’re all walking off the gangplank of the Perth after we brought them from Alexandria. Bill Bell looked at the photograph and he said, “One of them could be my dad.” Anyway he took a copy of the book and about…some months later I got a letter from his father, Bill Bell, 5th Machine Gun Battalion, with the New Zealand battalion.

28:00 He wrote me a three page letter. I’ve got it there somewhere. He told me he was sitting on the deck very close to where the bomb…see the bombs don’t exploded on impact. They’re, what they call semi armour piercing. They’re designed to go deep into the ship before they explode. And he said in the letter… “I was sitting on the deck and I heard the thump

28:30 where it went through the different decks and when it exploded,” he said, “it threw me three feet in the air,” and bounced him up. And he wrote underneath that… “I was shit scared.” But it was good to get feed back from someone who had been there because there’s not many of them left now. They’re all fallen off the twig. But Bill Bell…yeah.

29:00 Anyway the thing that happened, all the other ships went on of course and the Perth stopped dead. I can remember standing up at my actions station. I was on the 4 inch gun deck. They had an inflatable life vest and you had to blow it up. And they’re all down there, 20 or 30 of them all puffing away. They reckoned it was over. The ship was dead in the water with great masses of steam coming out and they thought they’d be in the water at any moment.

29:30 We got going in the end. We got into Alexandria and of course there was a hell of a lot of damage done down there. Actually the bomb…there was only one steel plate between the inside of the ship and the sea. And what happened was, the bomb struck the…there’s a platform on the flag deck where they had a mechanical semaphore. It had steel arms on it and you worked it with two handles, and it was on a little

30:00 platform. Colin Pike was standing right near it and the bomb struck the railing of this mechanical semaphore on the flag deck. It struck the railing and was deflected through the blacksmith shop underneath the flag deck, and it went down further into the ship. When it blew up it threw Colin Pike onto his back, and there were all punctures come up with the shrapnel,

30:30 up through the flag deck. He was very lucky but he told me he didn’t hear anything. He only saw something out of the corner of his eye, and it’s the old thing you know, you never hear the bullet that hits you. He was very lucky. He was very lucky. But there’s a photograph in the book somewhere of all the rubbish that was put on the wharf. They had to clean it all out, and because

31:00 the ship wasn’t fit for sea we were put as the guard ship up against the levee, or the bank facing the open ocean right near the boom gate in Alexandria. The idea being, at least we could use our guns if there was some threat coming from the sea. We could open fire there, but we weren’t fit for sea. But we used to watch them on the flag deck…all the ships coming

31:30 back from Crete. We used to watch…we would watch with the glasses, watching for the masts before they appeared. You could see the horizon and if the masts were upright, you’d think she could be ok. But quite often they would be tilted and you’d realise they’ve had some damage. The biggest one that struck us was the Orion.

32:00 That’s the article there that I wrote about the bodies. The Orion from way out…she had two masts. They were both upright and they looked unharmed. As she came into the gate she’s straight on to the harbour and when the boom opens the ship turns broadside on, and I was the first to call out, “She’s missing A turret.”

32:30 Two six inch guns and the turret had been blown clean out of the ship. Carrying 1200 soldiers and there was something like 500 dead. The article I wrote there, about the 200 bodies towed out, all wrapped up in hammocks…they were towed out through the boom into the open ocean and buried out there. They took the ship, the Orion to the United States

33:00 to San Diego. It made it under her own steam. All the water tight doors were not touched. There were still over another 200 bodies in there when it got to America. They had drained in the oil because the oil tanks were in that part of the ship. And all the water tight doors, when an explosion occurs, you can’t open them by hand. The steel twists. You’ve got a door there but you can’t open them.

33:30 Out of the 1200, 700 of them never made it. And the strange thing, years later I met a fella, he was an American. He was a lieutenant Commander in the US Navy, in Dandenong. He was getting a yacht built there. Up in the Dandenong area. He told me, he had been in San Diego, he didn’t know where I was

from or what I was concerned with,

34:00 and he was telling me about this ship, this British cruiser that came in with all these sailors who were drowned in oil. He was talking about the Orion.

So when things like that happen, the terrible horror and death is all around you, how did you feel? And did it make you question your own mortality?

On no.

34:30 It's just sadness I suppose. The fortunes of war.

Did you stop yourself from thinking it might happen to you?

Being alive is always a risk, isn't it really. I was telling you earlier about the Legacy war widows. I had quite a few of them on the books. I only had

35:00 to pull up two of them to stop them from getting in that mood, that mind mood. Of how badly off they are. "Mrs Smith, life's a bugger at times but it's the only one you've got." It gave them a jolt.

Do you believe in God at all?

No, I don't.

Would you all yourself a fatalist?

I would call myself a Buddhist. Nobody's responsible for

35:30 my actions. Whether I do good or bad they're myself. This is what the Buddhists believe. The Buddhists don't have anybody up there or down there. The Buddhists say whatever I do good or bad, I'm responsible. Nobody else.

Is that how you felt then?

Oh no, this is later on. When I used to go up to Thailand. For quite a number of years I used to go up there for three months.

36:00 I think the first time I went there I went out to the cemetery where I knew there were Perth people buried there, out of 1400 there were 18. It's very, very rarely you'll find that fellas who served at sea with a little white cross and a bit of grass growing around them. That's whats given me pleasure here. Putting it on record. All those fellas …

36:30 there was a fella called Dave Burrell who dives on the Perth in the Sunda Straits. He's a South Australian. He's got one leg. He did it all with his own finances. He went up there several times with the fishermen. And the fishermen had located something on the bottom. The currents of the Straits run at six knots and when the Perth went down, a lot of them

37:00 got in the water and they were swept away into the Indian Ocean because of the current. George Osgood who I went back with in '91 to Greece and Crete, he and his wife. (You out of tape?)

We've got about five minutes left. Maybe, as there's only about five minutes left and this is the last tape, if there's anything that you

37:30 **think is important to say for the record, or something you want to pass on to future Australians, or just something you feel you've left out, now's the time.**

Don't forget the boys in blue. And remember the Australian Navy during the Second World War had the highest losses of men in ships pro rata to its population,

38:00 then any of the navies in the Second World War. I think to do justice to them that should be remembered somewhere down the line. There doesn't seem to be any echoes from Anzac Day about the chaps who went to sea. And I thank you people for putting that on record anyway.

38:30 **That's alright. We're merely here for you, and for all the other people who are involved. We're just here to document. So I guess for the blokes who didn't make it back, if you think there's anything you think they would want you to say, or any stories that you have about them, you could say them as well.**

39:00 No. I think I've exhausted my memory.

I've made you draw a blank.

Yes, things pass. They used to have big things in Navy Depots.

39:30 Big words that said, a ship is kind…no, 'The sea is kind to a well found ship but it is terribly unforgiving to any carelessness or neglect'.

Yes, I guess, I thought about in reading your book,

40:00 **something you said about there was a different kind of mateship that happened on the ships that you would get in the airforce or navy. Like you say, you were all in the same boat.**

The most difficult thing, it's impossible to explain to anyone who wasn't

40:30 there or hasn't the experience, it cannot be put into words. If you imagine the fellas who do the bungy jumping in New Zealand and ask them their experience, they can never put it in words. Only someone who's gone there…and I haven't put it in words because you have to be there. If you jump off yourself after the bungy fella and do it yourself and you come back, you won't be able

41:00 tell anybody. You can't tell them what you experienced. It's something very personal. Not personal, but unexplainable in words. I do a lot reading. I've read Joseph Conrad's books, and all that, and perhaps Conrad is closest to talking about ships and men at sea because he's a wordsmith. He knows how to put them together.

Well I think you've come very close to explaining it to us and I appreciate that. Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS