Australians at War Film Archive

Edwin Crabtree (Ed) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 6th May 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/58

Tape 1

00:40 **We are just going to start with your early life. Where were you born?**

At a place called Bengworden, Bairnsdale area, on the Gippsland Lakes.

01:00 **And when?**

That's a point. 27th February, 1919.

And what were your parents' names?

Joseph Depledge Crabtree, my father, and Marjorie Alice Crabtree, my mother.

And their occupations?

Well my mother was home duties, I think you call it, and my father a head teacher at the school. Had two schools down there. One

01:30 six miles from the other. Mainly because the attendances were low and we had to go from one school to the other.

And he was responsible for both schools?

Yeah, for both schools. Some of them used to go to both schools, some of the kids. They'd live half way between, they used to travel backwards and forwards. But we had to go by buggy, or jigger, in those days, six miles. Then the horse broke its leg and we used to walk it.

02:00 Which was a long way for a kid. I think I was five then.

Yes, you would have been very fit. And did your mother have a job before she married?

No, no. She came from Adelaide from a family that came in 1839. Linklaters family, Linklaters and Isbister of Adelaide. And she was, her grandfather had the first

02:30 general store in Adelaide.

And where abouts in Adelaide?

In Henley Street. And then, in the big bust up in 1898, or thereabouts I think, big depression, he sold that up and went up to the farming property, up near Port Augusta. A place called Wilmington. And they had another one at Streaky Bay over near Ceduna. And they stayed there until he retired.

03:00 Then he came down to Brighton in Adelaide.

Well, how did your mother end up in Victoria?

Oh, well, my father was a Church of England priest in those days. And he'd been all over Europe, Vladivostok, Budapest, Riga, Latvia, England, Burma

In what period was

03:30 **this ...**

From 1900 to 1911. And then when he came out here, he got the best parish in Adelaide and the local priests said – "That's not right, you've got to serve in the country before you can get that." So they kicked up such a fuss that he had to get up to the country. And Wilmington and Melrose were the places he was preaching at. And I think he met my mother's family there. They were a fairly wealthy

04:00 family. And he decided that he'd had enough of the country, so they decided to come over to Melbourne from Adelaide. And he got out of the priest job

Do you know why?

Well because they'd given him such a rough deal. And he joined the Education Department in Melbourne. He had an M.A.[Master of Arts]

04:30 from London University, so he was fairly well qualified.

He certainly was.

Yes. In those days, it was a rarity. And of course the Education Department did the same thing, sent him all round the countryside. He first went to Ensay, down near Buchan, and he spent a bit of time there at a place called Reedy Flat, another tiny little school down there.

I don't know that one.

It's in that area anyway. And then the next school was

05:00 Bengworden and Meerlieu, that's moving closer in. We were there 1919, I think, till about 1925. And he applied for a change. So the next school was Yuring, you know Madam Melba's cottage out there? Well Lady Vestey was a pupil when we were there. And that was 1926

05:30 '27. And then we moved to a place called Chilton Valley, up near … on the railway line to Sydney. Don't know if you know that area do you, Benalla, up in that area?

Yes I know Benalla.

Anyhow, Chilton Valley, down in the boom times, when the gold mine was operating. And that fell apart, the gold petered out, so the school attendance dropped way down,

06:00 so we did another shift. Then we went from Chilton Valley to a place called Yinnar, down near the Hazelwood Power Station

I know Yournarre

Do you, oh good. Well we were there for six years, 1928 to 1934 or '35 I think. That was where I had my first flight then, with Kingsford Smith. He was doing some barnstorming in the area.

06:30 And I spent my fifteen shillings rabbit skin money going for a flight with Sir Charles Kingsford Smith.

Ah, yes, you'll have to tell us more about that. I was going to ask you, how many in your family?

Nine children, seven boys and two girls.

Now can you tell me where you are in that …

I was the third in line.

Third in line.

Yes, yes.

So what was it like, being part of such a large family?

Well, you got hand me down

07:00 clothes in those days, and the shoes you used to take off after school, because you couldn't afford to wear them out. Things were pretty grim in those days. You lived on pretty rubbishy fare by today's standards. Calves heads, sheep's heads, tongues and all that sort of offal, rabbits if you could get them.

Did you find that you had enough to eat?

Oh, yes, we had plenty to eat. My mother was not the best of cooks, but she was a

07:30 satisfying cook. She was making rock cakes. We made all our own bread. And the local people used to keep us in lamb chops and all that sort of stuff. Milk down the road and so forth.

And would you have had a vegetable garden?

Oh, yes. My father was a very keen gardener. In fact we had the best, the most improved garden in Victoria at that stage. We got cups for that. We had about

08:00 an acre of garden.

Really, now this was where?

This was at Bengworden. There's nothing there now. It's just been pulled apart. The school has gone. The one at Meerlieu is still there. They've rebuilt that. In fact I went down there a few years back and had a chat with the, Mr. Love, who is the teacher there. And he gave me some of the history I didn't know about. He had some photos there of the family that I hadn't seen. And

08:30 I sent him down a lot of stuff and a few computer bits, which he was a bit short of down there.

Oh, that's wonderful isn't it, to get that input.

Yes.

And being a member of this large family, did you find that you had, were given, great responsibility for looking after other members of the family?

No. There were only four of us, at that stage. Four boys. And I think the older boys were at school and I was

09:00 wandering around, sitting on the school steps most of the time, listening. And the youngest boy at that time, Bob, he was, I think, he must have been one and a half, I think, and he didn't move out of the house much. So, we did a lot of things together. We used to have a lot of floods, in those days, down there. We were always out, chasing around the floods, trying to catch rabbits who were marooned. Walking through puddles over our heads. It was

09:30 quite an interesting place down there. A lot of Aboriginal artefacts, down there. The old stone axes and spear heads and all sorts of stuff.

Did you actually find them?

Yes, we found them. They were just laying around in the creek beds and so forth. We brought them all up to school; we had quite a museum by the time we left there.

Do you know whether they're still around now?

I don't know what happened, because the whole place was cleaned out. The teacher at Meerlieu told me that

10:00 a lot of stuff in the Bengworden Hall, so I tried to get into that, but it's all securely locked up, and couldn't get a go at that. So I don't know. Maybe there, maybe not. But about twenty years ago, we were down there, the school was still there, no the school wasn't but the stables were still there. We wandered through them. All the cups of the school were all tossed in the muck inside the shed there.

10:30 Very disappointing, that was.

Well, where did you start school?

I started school in Bengworden. My father thought I was such a pest, sitting on the school steps, that he started me off at four.

I was wondering whether that might have happen to you.

Yes, I started early.

And he was the Head Teacher, was he the only teacher in the school?

In that school, yes, he was the only teacher there. At Yinnar, there were three teachers, I think. And

11:00 Chilton Valley I think there were two or three.

What was your father like as a teacher?

Oh, tough. We got more strap than anybody else, I think. Cause he used to think he couldn't favour his kids against the others. So we got as much as anybody else. In those days, you really got the whack on the hand,

11:30 leave welts on your hand, bad news.

So what would you get the strap for, what would you have done?

Not paying attention, or singing out of key. I was almost like the Duke of Edinburgh, that school that he went to.

Gordonstoun.

Yeah, really tough stuff. And I think people in those days thought you had to bring kids up like that, I think.

12:00 **Did you enjoy school?**

Not really, no. Not until later. I went to an Agricultural College, later on, and I enjoyed that, that was pretty good. But the state school system I didn't care much for. Kids used to pick on the teachers family, all the other kids used to … My father being English had a very English accent and the average Australian hates the Pommy accent.

12:30 In the country anyway, I not sure about … But they're used to it down here.

And so what would the children do to you?

Oh, you know, trip you over. Playing football, give you a bash or something. All those sorts of tricks.

Well how did you feel about that?

Not too good. I was pretty quiet and I was very timid. I'm still reasonably timid, I think, but in those days I was very timid. And I remember I got … I was picked on severely

13:00 by two boys from one family, and I did my lolly and went mad. Gave him a punch and knocked him out. And that surprised me, cause I didn't think I could do that. Anyhow, I was treated fairly gently after that.

That's usually, it's a terrible thing to say isn't it, but that's usually the way you have to sort it out, isn't it?

It is, yeah. Like the footballers have to do these days.

Did you ever tell your mother or father that you were being picked on?

Oh, yes. They

13:30 couldn't do anything about it. Kids would catch you down the paddock, or something, playing footy or cricket or whatever. There's nothing much you can do about it. Although, it still goes on in schools now, doesn't it. My grandson went to Peninsular Grammar, down at Mornington, and he was severely bullied there. But he didn't let on, and didn't tell his parents about it. But he was pleased to leave the school, I think, in the finish.

So when did he ultimately

14:00 **tell people about the bullying?**

After he left school, after he finished.

Yes it really is an ongoing problem, isn't it?

Well my son is having the same trouble with his boy, Andrew, about thirteen. There's a bully in the school there, and they had to shift schools to cope with that.

So the bully remains, but the …

Ah, yes. It's everywhere I think. I think university students have the same

14:30 sort of problem in the first year.

I think they do, living in the colleges.

Yeah. And we had the same trouble at Dookie College. The first year was diabolical. The senior students would pick on you all the time. Give you all the rough jobs.

Really, it's very barbaric, isn't it?

Yeah, yeah. Any boarding school is a tough place to be, I think.

Well you mentioned, playing football and cricket, was that

15:00 **the only sporting activity you had?**

Oh, we had rounders which is similar to baseball, that's about it.

You didn't do any actual physical education?

Oh yes. We used to have physical education. I don't know what they called it in those days, I can't recall now. The usual arms up and down, and jumping, spread your legs, and so forth. Do all that sort of thing. Leap frog and a few other

15:30 pursuits.

Well did your father enjoy teaching, was he …

I think so, I think so. Cause his knowledge was pretty wide and he could quote stuff right left and centre, out of all the classics. Because he did the classic literary course. And I remember once we had the Bishop of Gippsland pay a visit to the school, and the

16:00 Bishop quoted something from some part of the Bible, and my father said – "No that's not right, it's so and so and so." The Bishop looked at him and said "How do you know?" And my father said, "I was a Priest in the Church of England." And that didn't go down too well with the Bishop.

And had your father severed all contact with the church then, I mean did you go to church, did you go to Sunday school?

Yes. I didn't ever know he'd been a priest until I

16:30 was about thirteen or fourteen, I suppose. I'd known he'd been to university because he used to have the mortar board and the usual gowns, and so forth. In fact, any fancy dress ball in the area, he used to wear that, and I used to think it was just a costume. Then I woke up to that one. But priest, he had a lot of ceremonial gear. He was a travelling priest in a lot of these areas, and he had a little cross, a silver cross, and

17:00 a little satchel and communion cups and all that sort of stuff. All solid silver. Beautiful stuff. His job was really to look after the English speaking people in various outposts. He wanted to travel and that was his means of travelling, I think. And his first job was at Vladivostok. And

17:30 the Duke of Edinburgh's father, he borrowed some money from him one day, to get back to his ship. And my mother still had the card there a few years back, and written on the back of it, it says "Dear Crabtree, thank you very much for the loan of ten pounds sterling' or something, and he says, "I'm not able to return it in Russian money, you'll have to put up with sterling."

18:00 **Well, at home … so you didn't go to Sunday school or anything …**

We used to go to, yes, we had to go to Sunday school, and I used to lose my shoes, could find my shoes, so I used to dodge that as much as possible. Cause it wasn't popular with any of our family, the church bit. I went to church to get married, but that's about it I think.

So, did you have to say Grace before your meals?

No, no, no. When we had the local

18:30 Minister for lunch, we fell for that, but not otherwise.

So that's really interesting, isn't it.

Yes, it was quite a change of pace from my fathers' point of view.

Alright then, school, so what education level did you reach?

I got my Merit Certificate, with a bit of a struggle. And then

19:00 I went to, after that, I went to work down in South Melbourne. Working in a radio factory, that was during the Depression, about 1934 '35, I think. And I stayed there for about six months or so, and then they put off about a thousand workers from the factory, where I was. And I chased around trying to find another job, without any luck. And just about to go home and give it away, and got a telegram saying – 'Come

19:30 back again, we've got some more work for you.'

So you come from Bairnsdale to Melbourne …

Well no, we were at Yinnar at that stage.

Well that was a big move, to go to Melbourne.

Yes it was, boarding school down in South Melbourne. My father found a place for me to board by going to the local minister and saying … using the old school chum approach, I think. Just look after my

20:00 son, watch over him, sort of thing, find a place for him to live.

So how did you manage to get the job then, living at Yinnar …?

I don't know. I think my father must have picked it up in the paper, probably. They said they wanted process workers, I guess you'd call us in those days, labourers. My job was to make little electronic parts, because we used to make the whole radio set in those days. In fact, you could buy

20:30 a complete radio set for about three pound, seven and six, which is seven dollars or something.

And can you remember how much a week you earned?

Yes, fourteen shillings, that was a dollar forty.

And you were what, fourteen years of age?

Yeah, yeah.

Well did you enjoy the job?

The job was pretty interesting because I was interested in radio. I didn't know much about it at that stage, but I learnt to build radio sets down there, which was pretty useful later on.

21:00 **And what were your hours of work?**

Eight o'clock till about five, I think. Half an hour for lunch.

Does that mean, half an hour for lunch, well did they have a canteen at work or did you …

No, you'd take your own sandwiches. Oddly enough, in recent years, a fellow had a radio shop in Oakleigh, he said, "Do you know anything about radio?" And I said "Yes, I used to work down at the Cliffs radio in South Melbourne in 1930." He said "Did you?" He said, "Do you remember Mr. Swindle?" I said "Yes"." And we were both in the same factory at the same time.

Isn't that extraordinary, when that happens?

Yeah, yeah.

But you didn't remember each other?

No. He was in the technical department, he knew a bit about it, but I was just making bits and pieces. But it was interesting. And then after that, my father and mother decided that two of us should go to Dookie College, do agricultural science. So

22:00 they bundled us off up there, we both went together. My brother was about two years older than I was, but that didn't seem to worry … He had done his intermediate at that stage, I only finished merit certificate, so it was a bit of a struggle, the first year, cause they get stuck into chemistry and mathematics and all sorts of stuff there, that I had no idea anything about, physics and so forth. Just didn't have a clue for a while, but the science master was

22:30 very good, he gave me a lot of tuition and brought me up to standard. And I finished up getting a Diploma of Ag. Science [Agricultural Science].

Well, do you know why your parents suddenly decided that that's what you should do? Did they discuss it with you first?

No. I don't know how they arrived at it. My father had done a bit of farming when he was a kid, I think, in England, and he probably thought that was a pretty good thing to get into. I think he had

23:00 the idea of retiring at some stage and buying a farm, which never eventuated because I refused. He was going to buy a dairy farm and I said "No, not on your life, I'm not going to be in that."

Well how long was the course at Dookie?

Three years. It's part of Melbourne University now, of course, it has been for some years. In fact the university students, the agricultural students used to do a year up at Dookie. John Landy did

23:30 a year up there, about 1953. He's my wife's cousin, by the way, John Landy.

Oh is he?

Yeah. She's very proud of that.

He's one of the admired people of Victoria, or Australia.

Oh, he's a wonderful man.

Yes. And, well, did you enjoy the course?

Yes. After we got over the initiation ceremony …

Yes, tell me about those …

Well, you've probably read about this ricin, the poison

24:00 they get from castor oil beans, well we grew castor oil beans up there in one of the plantations. And one of the … if you didn't perform according to the senior students, you had to chew one of these damn castor oil beans. And of course, that had a very severe effect of your stomach. It emptied you out completely. I didn't realise that ricin was such a severe poison till just recently. Where they've been

24:30 saying it's such bad news. I think it's one of the things that Hussein was supposed to have, in Baghdad. That's a poison. But that made … the senior students used to raid the junior dormitories and so forth. You'd be fast asleep and you'd find your bed had been upended. And they'd attack us with pillows, pillow fights, and water hoses.

25:00 Oh, it was pandemonium for a while. And then I remember we were made to pull an old Cobb & Co. coach we had up there. You'd get about a dozen senior students up on the top and we'd get on ropes and so forth, and go round a circuit with this damn thing. And there was a sewer dam, our treatment plant we had for the college, and we were racing around the back end of this, and

25:30 there was an overflow ditch, and went across that and the whole thing collapsed. I got thrown clear, I was hanging on to the pole in the front there, and I got thrown a few yards away. One of the boys fell off the top and tore a great gash in his arm. He had to go to hospital. The rest got covered in muck. But that was … oh, several other

26:00 sorts of dodges, they'd throw you in a dam and all that sort of thing, swim to the other side.

So what happened? Did the lecturers, the people in charge of the college, know what was

going on?

Oh, yes. That was part of it all. They've stopped it some years back now, but it was part of the … they reckon it's sort of a levelling device.

What did you think of it?

Oh, I was scared stiff. But a lot of the boys were city

26:30 boys. Some of them were. For instance, one fellow's father was … he was the son of a big shoe chain. And David Jones, he was part of that, Lloyd Jones, he was up there. And David Wishart, who was later on the Director of Agriculture. All sorts of people. Dick Lean, whose father was John

27:00 Wren's stadium manager. You might have heard of John Wren. I've met John, he was an interesting individual. Cause I used to go to the stadium and help Dick collect the money, we used to deliver it to the National Bank in the city.

When was this?

This was after the war. But that was quite an interesting life. But anyhow, we were getting back to the college initiation ceremonies.

So tell me when you met … when did you have your flight with Charles Kingsford Smith?

About 1932, I think. It was somewhere around about that, '31 or '32.

Well, can you tell us how you managed to get this flight?

Well, he was barn storming, touring the country, raising money for his later pursuits. And he's landed where Hazelwood Power Station

28:00 lake is now. And that was quite a decent bit of flat land. And he advertised well before he got there, that he was charging fifteen shillings for a flight, anybody wanted to go. And he was pretty busy, I think he was there for two or three days before everybody ran out of money, then he moved on somewhere else.

And you'd saved up fifteen shillings?

Yeah.

That was quite a lot of money, wasn't it?

That was a year's supply

28:30 of beer bottles from the local hall and rabbit skins, and so forth, we'd collected over the year.

Well, was this when you developed your interest in flying or had you been interested in it before?

I had been interested in flying. My father did a decent thing, he bought a subscription to an English magazine, called The Boys Own Paper, which used to come out, I think, once a month. And that regularly used to have how to build

29:00 a model aeroplane. So I got into that and I built a little one, about a foot long. I gradually got bigger and bigger, I built one about three feet long, which I crashed and wrecked about six months work. All driven by elastic behind the propeller. You sort of wind it up like an egg beater, and let it go and see what happens. But I learnt quite a lot from

29:30 that. And then, Dookie College later on, there was a fellow by the name of Cyril De Kantzow, who had an autogyro, it was the first one in the country, which is similar to a helicopter, but the rotary vanes up top auto rotate because there's a propeller out the front giving it a blast of air and driving it forward.

30:00 But he had a sort of dog clutch, a handle that you pull and that'd hook the rotor up for a start and that'd wind up, get up to speed, and then he'd disengage that, and let go, and work on the front prop, and off he'd go. So, I remember asking him "What happens if the motor quits?". And he said "Oh, I'll show you what happens." So he just throttled back the motor and we just dropped straight down, we crashed into the ground. Didn't break it,

30:30 but it was a very severe bump. He said "That's what happens." he says, "When you lose a motor." I said "Oh." And funnily enough I met him again during my flying training at Point Cook, and he was my instructor. And I said "Do you remember me?" And he said "Oh, I remember you. I tried to show you what happen to my autogyro." And he said "I did the same thing about six months later, and I wrecked it." And it's now in a museum in Sydney, it's been rebuilt and it's up there somewhere.

31:00 **But anyway, just for a moment, back to your flight with Charles Kingsford Smith, I mean, what was it like going up there?**

It was the Southern Cross, and it had wicker chairs in it. You could probably see the same sort of thing up in Raffles in Singapore, the old style chairs. And they were just screwed down into the, onto the floor. And I think there was about

31:30 a dozen each time, at the most. We did about ten minutes flying, and that was it. But it was some experience. Didn't go very far, just up in the air

What would have been the height from the ground? How high?

Oh, I suppose probably get up to about fifteen hundred feet at the most, I think. He was trying to make money, not waste it.

And what did you think of him? What was your

32:00 **opinion of him?**

He was a very stern character, never smiled much, although I've got a book of him, and he seems to be always smiling in those photos, but he was probably pretty careful in those days. Trying to make money, get up and down quickly. Get the people back on again for the next hop.

Yes, I was just thinking he might have been under a lot of stress.

Oh, I think so, yes. He was having a bad time trying to raise money, I think.

32:30 I don't think too many would have been interested in putting money into aeroplanes in those days. It was considered a pretty unsafe sort of pursuit.

Well it really was, wasn't it?

It was, yeah, yeah.

But he was certainly … Well, you must have been quite excited at just meeting him. Were you?

Oh, I was. It was a wonderful thing, cause he was famous even then,

33:00 in those days.

Well, alright. Well, we'll go back to Dookie. Now, can you remember what year it was that you finished the course?

Yes. January, 1938.

Right, 1938, okay. So are you … did you listen to the wireless at home, were you aware of what was going on in Europe?

Yes, I'd built a radio set we had at home. And I built a few

33:30 up at Dookie. That used to make my pocket money, by making radio sets for the boys up there. That was the only way I could get any money together.

Well, you were very resourceful, weren't you?

Yes. I had a mechanical bent which was … proved pretty useful.

And so, had you heard of Hitler at this stage?

Oh, yes. In fact one of the boys' fathers, his father was Sir William Houtenan and Sons, big skin merchants,

34:00 in Melbourne. He took his son over for that Olympic Games, remember, I think it was 1936. And he got leave of absence from the principal of Dookie to go there. Came back and said "There's going to be a war on." Even at that stage. And I remember, we had a rifle club at Dookie College. My brother joined that, but I refused, because in joining it you had to

34:30 swear that you would go to war for Queen and country immediately war was declared. "I'm not going, I don't want to go to war." so I didn't join the rifle club. But my brother did, he got his colours and insignia, and then he didn't go to the war.

Did you have any relatives who had been in World War One?

Yes. An uncle was very severely wounded in

35:00 France. And two aunts were both nurses in the Middle East, Cairo and around there.

What were their names?

Bessie Linklater and Elma Linklater. I suppose they'd be in the archives up in Canberra. James Linklater was the other … I'd don't know what he … Light Horse or something, I think.

35:30 **Well, did they talk much about the war? Did you hear much about the war in your childhood?**

No. Usually people don't talk much about … In a group you usually talk about all the funny things that happened, you don't usually get the gory bits. I don't think anybody talks about that much. They just think it happened and that's it. But the funny things you remember. You remember all those little bits.

Well, did you hear anything about the Anzacs and Gallipoli?

36:00 **Were you aware of those …**

Ah, well I was born after the war. We used to have, on Anzac Day, we used to have the local … one of the fellows that had been to the war, used to come along and give us a bit of a talk. That's about all we knew about what happened there.

Well, we were up to 1938, then. Now can you remember, then, where you were

36:30 **when you heard the announcement that Australia was at war?**

My father, eventually, he bought a shop down at Brighton Beach. It was everything. Post Office, fruit, confectionary, tobacconist, like a Seven Eleven store, in effect, in those days.

And when did he buy this?

He bought that when he retired from teaching. Cause they had to retire at sixty five, I think, in those days. And he was at Narre Warren

37:00 North school, there, when he got to sixty five. So he put his money into this shop down in Brighton, and he suggested that I should run that, because it involved going to market, Victoria Market, three times a week, early in the morning. And we were open, I think, from eight in the morning till eight, nine o'clock at night. Very long hours, seven days a week too. Terrible business.

So you'd done all your agricultural training,

37:30 **but you weren't putting it into practice**

That's right, yeah. Never ever did, either.

Well, did that bother you at the time?

No. It's … when you say its agricultural training, it's really a jack of all trades, training there, you did everything. You worked on the farm one day and then you did classes the next day. They had a fairly well equipped engineering shop, which I got into. I developed a couple of patents there. And a

38:00 building area, carpenters shop, a blacksmiths shop. It was very, very well equipped. And we had a winery there. And all sorts … it was a tremendous course, really. And I think it was one of the best things I've done in my life, going to that place.

Well how many of you, just quickly, the tape will finish in a minute, this first tape, but how many of you worked in the family business?

38:30 Oh, just myself and my father and mother.

Okay, well we'll stop the tape there.

Tape 2

00:33 **Okay, Ed, well I asked you about whether you remembered where you were when war was declared …**

Oh yes. Well I was down at Brighton Beach running the shop. And one of my, one of our clients I should say, was a fellow by the name of Mr. Murray, who was one of the original settlers in Meerlieu where we were. His house was named Meerlieu. And I used to go past that and I think ….

01:00 So I asked him one day, I said "How did you get the name Meerlieu?" He says, "Lady says I was born down there." So I told him what we'd known of Meerlieu. So I used to chat every time I went past his place, he was usually out in the gardens, I used to talk to him. And then I think about, somewhere around December, 1939,

01:30 I said "I'm going to join the Air Force Mr. Murray." And he says "Oh, what are you going to do?" And I said "I'm going to try and get in as a pilot." And he says, "Oh, I've got a relative there in at Victoria Barracks, he's something to do with the Air Force, I'll get you an interview." So I said, "Okay." So I go into Victoria Barracks and I ask for Mr. Langslow, and the girl says "Not Mr.

02:00 Langslow, Major Langslow." Major didn't ring anything. I didn't know what ranks were in those days. So she led me into a room and there was an enormous room, and there was just a table over on the far side and there was this Major Langslow. He says "Oh, hello lad, Mr. Murray told me you'd be coming in." He says "What do you want to be?" I say "I want to be a pilot, sir." And he says "Everybody wants to be a pilot." He says "But we're not taking air crew yet." But he said "I'll tell you

02:30 what, get in the ground staff and you'll know all about aeroplanes and then you can transfer across." So

that sounds alright. He said “Do you know anything about radio sets?” And I said “Yeah.” And he said “Okay, go up to the P.M.G. [Postmaster General] in Flinders Street.” and he says “Do a trade test there with a Mr. Ivan Holland, he’ll give you the test.” So I got up there and he gives me a check of about forty words a minute in Morse which was … I could do about two words a minute in

03:00 Morse, if I was lucky. So he scrubbed me off and I went back to see Major Langslow, and he said, “What happened?” I said “Oh, he gave me Morse and I couldn’t cope with that.” “Oh.” he says, “What else would you like to be?” And I said “I don’t know, I don’t know anything about the Air Force.” He says “What about a rigger?” I said “What do they do?” He said “Oh, they look after the aeroplanes out on the front line and grab hold of them when they come in, put the chocks under and all that sort of stuff, and keep them clean

03:30 and what have you.” I says “Oh, that sounds alright, I’ll have a go at that.” So I went to Ascot Vale, which was down at the showgrounds, agricultural showgrounds, did a course for about six months there and became an Aircraft Flight Rigger.

When you … when you went in to … well how did you … after you’d said that you weren’t going to fight in any war …

Yeah. I don’t know. I

04:00 became terribly conscientious about the whole thing and thought everybody should be in it and get there and finish it up.

Well, did you think when you joined up, did you think you were defending Australia or you were fighting for Britain …

No. British Empire it was. We were all in the big lump.

So that was the … you were going to do your duty for …

For King and country, yes. That was it,

04:30 yeah.

So why did you decide on the Air Force rather than the army or the navy?

Oh, one brother had been in the Air Force, and another cousin was a pilot, in fact a third cousin was also a pilot.

What, had they been in the regular Air Force?

Yes, yes. Before the war. One got killed in a car crash, going back down to Point Cook one night. And my elder brother got scrubbed off. He was …

05:00 he didn’t finish his course. Don’t know what reason, he never told me. But knowing what he was like at Dookie College, I think he must have played up when he was at Point Cook.

Well, did he finish his course at Dookie?

Yes, yes, yeah. He did Ag. science at the University later on. It was … I’ve lost track there, where

05:30 **No, I was just asking about why you decided on the Air Force rather than any of the other services. So it was nothing … but you had that interest though in …**

Oh, I knew a bit about aeroplanes, yes. And I think I just probably followed on. I thought that was the way to go. Anyhow I wanted to fly, that was the thing.

So when you went over to Ascot Vale, what was the procedure? Once you’d decided you were going to enlist,

06:00 **where did you go to actually physically sign on?**

To Laverton, first of all. And I was there for about three or four days, then they sent a team of us up to Ascot Vale to start on a course.

Well, did you have your uniform by then?

No. Never had a uniform for about a year after. Had a pair of overalls and a beret.

What colour were the overalls?

Navy.

Okay.

06:30 **So when you enlisted, then, what did they give you? You got your overalls …**

You got your overalls and a pair of socks and shoes and a beret, and I think that was about it for quite a while, because you wore all your other gear that you wore at home.

And did you have to undergo a medical exam?

Yes. Check you right through for anything. I noticed there was a scar on my right elbow, I think it's

07:00 still there, it's noted on my medical records, which I've got. Nothing else.

So you were obviously physically fit, in that they accepted you.

Yes. Oh, going to Dookie College, that made you pretty fit. I was a weakling till I got there, and I was like Atlas, you seen that thing on television, I finished up, I was pretty good. I could lift a bag of wheat up which was a hundred and eighty pounds, and I could lift that up quite easily. There's a lot of knack in that, of course,

07:30 but still it's a lot of weight too.

When you enlisted, so did you enlist with a mate or …?

No, no. I just went on my own. And funnily enough, a chap from two streets away joined the same day I did. His number's about three away from mine.

That's extraordinary.

Yes it is. Both from Brighton.

Well, then you're told to report, are you, told to report to Ascot Vale, was there a camp

08:00 **there?**

Oh, yes. I was living in the sheep pavilion. Which, concrete floor and we had a straw, at least a palliasse, which is a … don't know if you're familiar with that term, and a few bits of straw to put inside it. No pillows or anything. And straight on the concrete, and it was in the middle of, when was it, getting towards winter and oh, it was cold and hard, terribly. You used to have an overcoat or something

08:30 for a pillow.

Did you sleep?

Yes, I was able to sleep, yeah. It was cold. When it got cold, it was bad news. I finished up on Aspro. You know the Aspro boxes, the yellow, pink Aspro boxes? Well they had a big display one just outside the pavilion and I broke into that one night and I put myself on a bed in there, and slept on that for a while, that was good news.

09:00 Not many people have slept in an Aspro box. They gave us bed boards after a while, they took pity on us, and they had three planks, two like that and one in the centre, about that wide, about a foot wide, and you put your palliasse on top of that, and slept there.

And that was more comfortable?

No. It really wasn't, but it wasn't quite so cold. And it was subject to being

09:30 wrecked, because you could just kick that little trestle on either end and … Bit like Dookie College all over again.

Well, at least you've been prepared in some way.

Oh, yes, I'd lived a bit rough. Got used to it.

Well, what sort of training did you get?

Oh, well it was all technical training. All the bits of the aeroplane, what each part did and how to repair them and so forth, and how to rig them. Rigging is a

10:00 term that's used on bi-planes. They've got two sets of wings and they're tied together with wires and you've got to adjust those wires to get the right angles to allow it to fly. So we did all that. And after I passed that, I got a distinguished pass there, which surprised me a bit, and then went over to Parafield, to work on the … there was an elementary flying training school there.

Well, now, are you in a unit

10:30 **now? Have you been posted to a unit?**

Yes, yeah.

And what was that?

That was Number One Elementary Flying Training school at Parafield.

And you're appointed there … what's your rank?

A.C.1. [Air Craftsman One] which is as low as you can get. And I was there for thirteen months. I got promoted to Leading Aircraftsman, which was …

11:00 everybody gets that just after a while, it's almost automatic. But I had a … all my relations were in South Australia and had an uncle who was a QC [Queens Counsel] he was a very useful man who I'll tell you about later, and another uncle was manager of the Royal Insurance Company and another one was manager of the National Bank at Hindmarsh, and they introduced me

11:30 to a lot of people in Adelaide. So I met all the upper crust in South Australia.

And what did you think of them?

Very good, actually, excellent. In fact I used to go to dinner with the Lieutenant Governor's son. He was in the Air Force as well. Sir Malice Napier, that was quite interesting. My uncle who's a QC he had a big share in a shipping mine and

12:00 he is also one of the council at the Adelaide University. And he used to have dinners up there and I used to stay over the weekend quite often. I used to meet all the powers of South Australia which was fascinating really, wonderful stuff. In fact I went to a big party one night up in North Adelaide. They were all Group Captains, or Majors and Colonels and what have you,

12:30 and I turned up there and I was carrying something out for the person who was running the party, and this Wing Commander at Parafield, who was my boss, he says "What are you doing here Crabtree?" I said "I'm a friend of the …" "Oh, alright." You're not supposed to mix, not supposed to mix there.

Well, when you were at Parafield, did you live out there?

Yes,

13:00 oh, yes. We had sort of dormitory, barrack style things. I think, probably about twenty in each block, I think.

And what were you living conditions like there?

Very good in those days. I've got a photo of the mess table there, all set with cutlery and tablecloths and salt and pepper, everything on the table. But it got tougher later on. That was when the air force used to run it's own messing system.

13:30 But later on it became a sort of bulk job. I don't think all the services were served the same junk food.

So the food was okay, at this stage?

Oh, it was very good, yes.

What sort of meals would you be … I mean what would you eat for breakfast, for instance?

Oh, you could have toast and bacon and eggs and all sorts of things early on the piece. But it deteriorated very sharply.

Were you provided with three meals a day? I mean …

Oh, yes, oh yes. You got three meals a day, yeah.

14:00 Very good. You got good service from the medicos and dentists and so forth too, which was very costly in civilian life.

And the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force], well people would describe that as the glamour service, did you see it as such?

Yes. The Blue Orchids we were called.

Could you say that again. The Blue …

The Blue Orchids we were called, by all the other services.

14:30 Yes, well the flying crew were certainly the glamour side of it, not so much the … although we were fairly rare, there weren't many about in South Australia, so the people used to look after us pretty well. If they saw you they would always do what they could for you. They were excellent.

So you enlisted quite early, didn't you?

Yes, I did, yes. February 5th, 1940.

15:00 Which was … I'd applied much earlier than that, but that's when I was called up.

Oh, had you. Well how early had you applied?

Well, I applied in 1939, actually.

Well, so after war was declared?

Yes, yes.

Oh, they always did take a few months, didn't they?

That's right. There was such a flood of applications I think that they couldn't process them quick enough and they'd bring people from Western Australia over here, because there

15:30 were no facilities over there and from South Australia.

Well, can you explain … talk a little more about the job you did when you were at Parafield? What were the sort of tasks that you carried out?

Well, initially, I was working on the flight line, which means you get the air craft ready for the pilots to take it out. And when they came in, you'd grab it, cause they're pretty unstable in a wind.

And what air craft were they?

They were Tiger Moths.

16:00 They're pretty unstable, they've got no brakes at all, so you grab hold. Each of you would grab a wing tip and sort of help to steer it into its resting place. Then when it was shut down, you'd put chocks underneath the wheels and check it over to see that everything was alright and get it ready for the next run.

So this was an elementary flying training school, so these were the raw

16:30 **material, the raw recruits coming in to learn how to fly?**

That's right, yes. They'd done a bit of … there was usually an ab initio [initial] training, which we had here in summers. I think the one in South Australia was at Victor Harbour. But you'd do about two or three months there, doing theory and all that sort of stuff, mathematics to bring you up to date, and then you'd go into the elementary flying school, that was the first time you'd get into an air

17:00 craft. And you just spent about three or four months on those and then you'd go onto a more progressive type of air craft.

Well, were there any accidents out at Parafield?

Yes, there were a few there. Not many, I think we had three when I was there, that was about it.

And were the trainee pilots killed or …

One was, yeah. Yeah, he finished up on the engine.

17:30 and we had the job of cleaning the engine down afterwards. Which was bits of flesh in amongst the fins of the cylinder , which is not too nice. But apart from that … I got a job off the flight line and into the work shop. Rebuilding. Pulling old air craft down and rebuilding them, that was very interesting, then.

Yes, well you were certainly getting to know the different components in the air

18:00 **craft, weren't you?**

Yeah, yeah. And I had enough engineering skills, so the engineering officer thought, so he put me in the instrument repair department for a while. I was repairing flight instruments. That was very good. Then he noticed I had a camera, so he started a photographic section, and I ran the photographic section there for quite a while. Then they called up people for photographers for the air force, and I had the job of trade testing

18:30 the photographers, not knowing much about it myself. But I had the book there, and that was what I had to ask them. So I trade tested people from the Advertiser and Adelaide Newspaper. Okay, you were asking about the type of camera. We had a quarter plate Taylor Hobson. Big sturdy camera, it was. And little bellows out the front, of about two inches. And I took it up in a Tiger

19:00 Moth trying to get some shots of the aerodrome and of course the front end blew out on me. So we came back again. And I had a Retina Two Kodak, which was quite a nice little camera in those days. So I used that. And I took all the aerial photos of Parafield. In St. Marks, they had a college in Adelaide, where they used to have training for air crew of some sort. And Victor Harbour, took a few photos of that. It was quite handy.

19:30 **Have you got any copies of those photos?**

Yes. There's one or two, I think I have, up there.

Well, when you were at the pilot training school, did you mix with the pilots?

I mixed with one because he was a cousin. Bob Thompson. In fact, he borrowed my motor bike one day to go into town. The air crew weren't allowed to have vehicles of any sort. But he knew I had a motor bike and he

20:00 put a bit of pressure on me, and I let it go, hoping that he'd get back in one piece. Which he did. That was the only time that he borrowed it. But there was some pretty … in this photographic section I had

four gallon cans from the dope shop, they'd emptied them out, and I used to fill them up with petrol and hide them underneath the shelf in the dark room, because nobody could get at them in there. Till I nearly got sprung one day, the

20:30 engineering officer wanted to do an inspection of the photographic section. So I said "Okay." And he came in, and he kicked one tin which was empty, fortunately. He said "May I ask if those spare tins are being thrown out?" "Oh, okay." He didn't kick any of the others fortunately, with four gallons of petrol. So that was … I had quite a good time at Parafield. I loved that area.

Oh, did you? Well, when you were there then, were there

21:00 **different messes for different ranks?**

Yes, yes. The airmen had one mess, the sergeants always had a sergeants' and above that mess, and the officers had their own mess too. It was always three grades in the air force.

And were you ever invited to the other messes?

Oh, no, you'd never get in there. Not while I was in ground staff, anyway. Things changed later on.

So at this stage, were

21:30 **you still wanting to be air crew?**

Yes. I used to put in an application every month to transfer to air crew. And they used to say "No, you're too important a ground staff. We haven't got enough fitters." So they used to tear my application up and throw it in the bin.

So they wouldn't even put it through?

No, no. Finally I got … I tried for promotion, and they said "You can't be promoted in this grade, you've got to

22:00 become, what they call, a fitter 2A." which is an advanced fitter before you can become eligible for promotion. So I said "Alright, can I do that course?" And they finally let me go. And I came back to Ascot Vale again, had another three months course, I think. And I became a fitter 2A as the … there are various grades, grade one through to five, five I was on, which is the bottom of the barrel. And I came out in grade one after this

22:30 course.

What sort of studies did you do there, then? What sort of subjects?

Oh, advanced fitting and handling metals and aluminium and all that sort of gear. Much more advanced than what I'd done earlier. And hydraulics, because hydraulics were appearing in modern aircraft at that stage. They did a lot of that.

So it was enabling you, then, to do more advanced repair work on air craft?

Yes, to work on later model

23:00 aircraft, yes. So after finishing that course, I went over to Mallala, which is in South Australia again. It had only just been opened up, that base, it was terrible. The dust storms, dust storms every other day and it was miserable, terrible conditions. Finished up, I had a big dose of the flu while I was there, put into hospital for a while.

And what was Mallala? Mallala's a town.

Yes, yes.

Yes, I'm never quite sure where Mallala is.

Well it's north, somewhere near Gawler and that area. And anyway, I was there for about two or three months and then I got a posting to Laverton.

Well what air craft were based at Mallala?

Avro Ansons, twin engine

24:00 heavy bombers, they were, in pre war days.

Well how many different sorts of air craft have you worked on up to this point, then?

As a fitter do you mean? Tiger Moths and Gypsy Moths which was very similar, then Avro Anson, then Airspeed Oxford, Hawker Demons, Fairy Battles, and that's about it, I think, oh Spitfires and Vultee Vengeance, I'm sorry.

24:30 **And how many people were at the Mallala base, was it?**

Yes. Oh, I suppose four or five hundred, I can't really recall that. But it was quite a large base. It was an advanced training for pilots. The next step from there was to go and do an operational training unit for

further battle training, and then off to war, from there on.

Well then spend quite a period of time

25:00 **training, don't they?**

Oh yes, it's a long process, yeah.

So at this stage, at Mallala, are you still putting in your applications to transfer to air crew?

Yes. Still not good. Oh, and then, I'm sorry I've said I went to Laverton, I went to Point Cook from Mallala, mainly to rebuild some Hawker Demons which were required down at the Bombing and Gunnery School,

25:30 at Sale, for fighter gunnery training. And they were all disassembled, in bad condition, at Point Cook, so I spent about three or four months, I think, there, rebuilding those. And then we took them down to Sale. And then stayed at Number Three Bombing and Gunnery School at West Sale for quite a while.

26:00 Still putting in my application for air crew.

Were they processing them at this stage?

They were. But I wasn't … they considered fitters were in scare supply, so they wouldn't transfer me, at that stage, anyhow.

Well how were you feeling about this? I mean were you …

I was pretty niggly about it. And I played up at West Sale. I turned an

26:30 aircraft up and busted its propeller.

Deliberately?

No, I didn't do it deliberately but that happened. They ran short of engine fitters, so I was given a job of starting up Fairy Battles and warming the motors up and so forth. And we had a very severe wind change, you know, you get a squall coming through occasionally, and I had it up into peak revs and there was a

27:00 wire across it to stop you going beyond it, which you could do, there was an ex Spitfire engine in it, and you can get a lot of horse power out of it if you went to this wire, but I'd evidently broken the wire, now holding the control column back and this wind gust hit us at the same time, and it just went … ploughed into the concrete with the prop. And that's the first and only prop, I think, anybody's ever seen with the blades going

27:30 forward instead of backwards. Usually in a crash they all bent backwards, but in this case they all went forward. And I saw the prop down at Laverton, later on, it was in a compound there with a lot of other broken props, and everyone said "Look at that. How did that happen, I wonder how that happened?" I never said a word, no I never owned up to that one.

Tell me, you didn't have your camera ready to take a photo of it?

No I didn't, no.

28:00 I should have done. I should have taken a lot more photos, but I hadn't done.

Well what happened as a result?

Oh, they wrote it off to pilot damage, in the finish. But then I had another job in balancing propellers. That was very interesting. And rebuilding some Fairy Battles. We'd pull them apart and rebuilt those. They were magnificent old aeroplanes.

Were they?

They were under powered but the air frame in it was a magnificent piece of work, I

28:30 thought. And then, what else … Oh, one night I used to … When the Japanese came into the war, we were flat chat. We were really working about fourteen, fifteen hours a day, and then on top of that you'd get guard duty for four hours in the middle of the night. And all the aircraft were spread around, dispersed round the country side, in case we were raided, and anyhow, I'd been on guard duty

29:00 for about two and a half hours, and I was dead tired, and the food was terrible down there, and there was a Lockheed Hudson that had pulled in, staying over night, and I knew they had a bunk … and it was cold, it was terrible in the winter time, so I got inside this and I put my rifle down on the bunk and laid on top of it. As soon as I … went to sleep. And I was woken up about half an hour later by the Orderly Officer who came around looking for all

29:30 his guards, you see, and there was nobody in sight anywhere, and I was the first one he caught. So he woke me up and said "Get back on the job." So I said "Yes sir." And as soon as he left I put the rifle up in the air and I fired a round off, and woke all the others up of course. And nobody else got caught.

Anyhow, the next morning I got down I think about seven o'clock in the morning, down on the flight line again, working on the aircraft, and

30:00 the Military Police raced down on their motor bikes and said "Crabtree." And I said "Yes." They said "You're under close arrest"." I said "What for?" They said "For going to sleep while on guard duty." I said "Oh." So they took me up and put me in the clink. And I thought that was good, because the sergeant was bringing me meals.

Were the meals any good?

Service. Well no, they weren't much better.

Well what did you have, when you said the meals were no good …

Oh, stew, and no

30:30 butter. You had bread and apricot jam and cheese were the main food that you got. Oh, terrible stuff. Anyway, I went to sleep on this guard duty. They woke up to me, they reckon I was having it too easy, living under close arrest. So they said "Right you're under open arrest, get back to work."

Well how long did you remain under close arrest?

Just a day. And they

31:00 sent me down … I was under open arrest for about a week, and they came down and got me and said "The CO [Commanding Officer] wants to see you." And I said "What for?" And they said "Don't know, but he wants to see you." So I get up there, and he says "Right lad, you were asleep on guard duty." He says "You're going to be court martialled." I said "Oh." He says "You can either do it on the base and I'll do it, or you can go down to Victoria Barracks and be court martialled down there."

31:30 I said "You'll do me, sir." So he says "Alright." He says "I can give you the services of a Warrant Officer, he can help you prepare your case." He says "If you know anybody in the legal field, you'd better get them to it straight away." So I thought, "Oh, my uncle is a QC and he was a major legal officer in the First World War." So I wrote a letter to him and said this is what happened. He said "Right."

32:00 … he wrote back, and he says, "Here's your defence." He says "Ask the Orderly Officer if he knows what your beat is." That was one of his and he said, "Also ask him if he knew I was asleep, why didn't he take my rifle, disarm me?" And the third one was, it's against air force regulation number so and so and so and so, that you're not allowed to do more than two hours on, two hours off, two hours

32:30 on again, not four hours straight. So I had all this prepared, we got up there and the Commanding Officer said, "Right, to the Orderly Officer, you can question Crabtree first." And he got stuck into me and told me what he thought of me.

What did he say?

Oh he said you're not looking after the rest of the troops by going to sleep on guard duty, it could have been … all this sort of stuff. And I said,

33:00 after he finished all that, the C.O. said "Right you can cross question the Orderly Officer." So I had my three causes there. And the Orderly Officer finished up being, he got severely reprimanded for not knowing his job. And the C.O. just dismissed the case. And he said "Right you're all dismissed, Crabtree I want you to stay here."

33:30 So I stayed down there, and he called me all the so and so's under the sun. He says "I'll have you." He says "I'll have you, my God … just keep a clean sheet." So I did that and about three weeks later the service police came down and got me again. I said "What for?" They said, "Don't know, but he's mad as hell this time." So I got up there and he said "Look at that." And I recognised my mother's handwriting. I'd been home in the mean

34:00 time and my mother said, I must have been looking pretty weak, she said "What's the food like?" And I told her it was pretty dreadful. So she wrote a long letter to this Commanding Officer. Oh, did that get me into trouble.

Well what had she said? Was she just concerned about your welfare?

Yes, oh yes she was, yes. She said "My son Eddie's a volunteer and he should be treated as a volunteer and not

34:30 like a convict." But she was really … she had a good turn of phase, she was a very well educated lady, and gave the CO heaps. And anyhow he got rid of me. And about a week later I got called up again. And I said "What's he want this time?" They said Don't know but he's as mad as ever." So I get up there and he's screaming at the top of his voice "Look at that." And he threw this letter. And I said "You showed me that last

35:00 week." He says "Look at the address on it." My mother had sent a copy to Airborne, just as high as you can go. So, for a week or so after that, he used to come into the airman's mess, and he'd say "Crabtree, where are you?" And I'd stand up and he says "What's the food like?" I said "It's alright, sir." I did this

for about a week and then I got a bit cheeky and I says “The food’s alright, sir, but we got no butter.” The airman’s mess never

35:30 got butter in those days. So he called out to the chef, he says “Get Crabtree some butter.” He says “I don’t give a damn if nobody else gets it, but get Crabtree some butter.” I got some butter. And of course, all the rest of the troops were getting their hats off, they reckon it was the greatest joke of all time. Anyway we got over that.

36:00 **Well how did you feel about all of this? I mean, did you think it was a bit of a joke?**

Oh, very embarrassed I was. Very embarrassed. But what can you do about it?

And the others all thought it was a bit of a joke …

Oh yes. They thought it was the greatest lark of all time.

Well tell me, had you made any particular friends

36:30 **along the way, here, I mean because I suppose you moved around …**

You do, you move around. In the air force, you don’t for very long because you get shoved around all the time. It’s like going to school with my father. You go to one school for a few years and then you move, and the next ones … so you keep on losing contact with people all the time. It’s a terrible existence, really. It’s like some of these business people that get sent to Sydney, to Perth, to all over, it’s a hell of a life really.

And well, down at

37:00 **Sale … so this was the advanced flight training …**

Training school, yeah. It’s a Bombing and Gunnery School, that was, yeah.

Well, I think I’ve read they did a lot of the … flights out over Bass Strait and …

Oh, that was East Sale, which was an advanced training school there.

Well were you aware of and, once again, accidents, flying

37:30 **accidents, pilots lost?**

I don’t think we had any at Bombing and Gunnery School because they’re all reasonably experienced pilots there. They were just flying the aircraft around for the gunners to operate out of the turrets out the back, so it didn’t really … you didn’t have pilots learning to fly.

Okay, so what were the bombers that were in use down there?

Oh, Beauforts

38:00 at East Sale, not at West Sale, we just had the Fairy Battles and Hawker Demons there. Aircraft that we were teaching gunners to … and bomb aimers.

Oh, right, so I’m getting that distinction with West Sale and East Sale. So the East Sale were the pilots doing their advanced training and West Sale were the …

It’s really a Bombing and Gunnery

38:30 school at West Sale.

And, well, you stayed there for how long?

I’m not sure, seven or eight months, probably. And I was still putting in applications, of course, still getting rubbed out. And I was posted to Laverton from there. And we were rebuilding Vultee Vengeance, or assembling Vultee Vengeance,

39:00 which were phased out later on, and then the Spitfire started to come in, in crates from England and I was lucky enough, I was put in charge of an assembly line, there. We had three assembly lines. Two were run by the Royal Air Force and one by our mob and we were assembling those pretty fast.

Okay Ed, we’ll stop there then because we’re coming to the end of the tape.

Tape 3

00:33 **So you were telling me what you were doing at Laverton.**

Yeah, that’s right. During my time at Parafield, I was working on concrete floors there, and I’d developed damaged heels in both places, both heels, and I finished up, I got a chit that allowed me to

walk down leisurely, didn't have to march down in a group, so that was

01:00 a pretty good deal. Everybody used to, be marching past me, and here I'd be, sort of strolling down there to work, which was kind of nice. My left heel is still injured and I get a part pension for that. During the Spitfire assembly there, the current practice was to get the fuselage out of the box, the fuselage being

01:30 the main body, put it up on trestles, get that ready, get the wheels on and so forth, and then get the wings out of the box and fit the wings to the body, and we'd have a sling on the wing to hold it up to get it in position. And you'd sort of get underneath and jockey it so that the big bolts would go in against the body of the air craft from the end of the wing. And I was underneath the main frame one day, with another fellow and the sling

02:00 broke up on top, so he slid out of the road and I stood there, I wasn't going to lose a Spitfire wing cause they were worth more that what all I was. So I stuck under there, holding this damn wing up until I could get somebody else to come back in and help me hold it up. But that severely strained the muscles in my back and took some years to get out of that. Part of my pension is for that too.

So what happened

02:30 **to the muscles in your back, were they all strained?**

Oh yes. I had severely strained muscles in about the middle of my back.

And what sort of treatment did you have to have?

Well, I didn't let on because I was trying to get into air crew. So I couldn't say anything about that. I got treatment for my heel, but they reckon that wasn't enough to stop me from flying. Anyway I finally

03:00 repaired my back, I think, about 1955, or so. Used to have to sleep in a curled up position, to take the tension off. But I used to have hot treatment on my back, for years and years.

Well obviously, then it took a long time to come right.

Yeah, it did. Any back problem is bad news.

So you had no recurring problem?

Oh, if I work over

03:30 a bench for a long time, I've got to straighten back up carefully.

Well, tell me, how did you find the discipline in the RAAF? Did you have any basis to compare that with say army discipline or naval discipline?

I think from what I've seen of it, navy is much tougher. I think that's the toughest discipline of the lot. The army boys, they're a pretty rugged lot, and it's not like the British

04:00 army, they'd tell a sergeant to go and nick off, or whatever, and get away with it. You couldn't do that in any British outfit at all. We got much the same I think. After you've been in the air force for a while you could tell a fellow what you thought of him and you wouldn't get into big trouble. So it was pretty easy going.

Well, you're still trying to get

04:30 **into air crew aren't you?**

Oh, yeah. Well I got fed up one day and I went to see Scott and Lee Cottee, you know the Cottee soft drinks, well the two brothers were engineering officers in the Air Force. And I went up to see him at Laverton and I said "I think I'm due for a promotion. I've been in the Air Force for nearly three years and I'm still a leading aircraftsman>" He said "Win you've got no hope, I've got fellows here that've been leading air

05:00 craftsmen for four years." he says "You're not going to jump over them." so he says "Go back to work." So, it was about December, I think it was, 1942, I got an air crew call up, I couldn't believe it. Broken through some how or other.

Right, lets see, during this time we've had Pearl Harbour in December, '41

05:30 **and the fall of Singapore in February, '42, and Darwin bombed, now were you aware of all this happening?**

I knew about the Japanese because we, down at West Sale one day, we had a fellow who had been … he got out of Singapore, he was in the air force, and we got three or four aircraft, came in from Laverton to West Sale, and he thought it was a Japanese raid, and he shot off into the bush. We couldn't

06:00 understand what it was all about, but we found out later, that he'd been in Singapore earlier, and knew what an air raid looked like, and he took off. But really, you were too busy to be worried about whether

you've … we were all flat, really, out all the time.

So you weren't aware of any … the changes or the introduction of rationing and all those measures that were brought in?

Oh, we knew about it. Because you go home and

06:30 my mother lived at Dandenong at that stage, and everything was in very short supply.

And how often would you have leave?

I think each weekend we could go home from Laverton.

And how did you get from Laverton out to Dandenong?

Train. The train service was quite good.

And you'd what, spend the day out there?

Spend the day and then go back to Laverton,

07:00 get back on the early train and go straight to work.

And what was your social life like the, did you have time for any social life?

No, no. Pretty hopeless. I was too shy to have any social like.

Oh, there were no young women on the scene, you know?

No, no.

Who were interested in these attractive men in the blue uniform?

No, they go for the pilots, you see, we were ground staff. Never had much opportunity there.

07:30 **Alright, so you get the call up to go into air crew. Well after all this time, what was your reaction, was it a letter or how were you notified?**

Oh, you just got a posting from the Orderly Office to let you know you got a posting to where ever. And my was to Somers.

This is Somers in Victoria?

Yes, yeah.

08:00 And I like that because next door was Coolart, you know Coolart, well friends of mine used to own that. The people that used to own McEwens that was their property. And I used to nick across there for a good meal. And stay the week end up in that … up in that tower up the top there, that was my bedroom. It was a pretty useful dodge. Any

08:30 way we were … all our particular course at Somers were re musters, which means that you come out of ground crew or you'd been in the army or the navy or something, and all been in the service area before, and they weren't about to be mucked about by anybody. If somebody told them what to do, they'd say "Oh, go and get nicked." and so forth. And refuse to do what the

09:00 fellows would tell them to do, the corporal D.R.'s, drill instructors. In fact one case, I was picked on because I was made a corporal in charge of our flight, which means that you wore a corporal's brevet up side down, and in fact the term was an ass up corporal. And

09:30 this fellow used to pick on me all the time, and he'd order me to do this, he'd say "Go and pick up the rubbish round this, and do this, do that." and being air crew, or training air crew, you weren't allowed to walk anywhere, you had to run everywhere you went, at the double.

Why, why did you have to do this, was it just a discipline thing, is it?

Yes, and to keep you fit, I suppose, as much as anything. So

10:00 I was racing around like a hairy goat, picking up all the rubbish, and one day he got a new pair of overalls, and he didn't sew his corporal stripes on, so I refused to do what he told me to do, which was clean the latrines, I think, on this particular instance, and I said "No, I'm not going to do that." And he said "I order you." And I said "No." And he said to some of the other fellows in the squad, he says – "Arrest Crabtree, we'll take him down to

10:30 the Warrant Officer." So they did that. They frog marched me down to the Warrant Officer. I knew him because he'd been a Warrant Officer at Parafield, Snowy something, Warrant Officer Snow, very nice man he was. And he says "What are you here for?" And the corporal started to tell him. And I said "This fellow's got delusions of grandeur, he's ordering us all around and he's got no rank at all." Snowy says "Right, you leave that squad alone." he says "I'll

11:00 look after that squad, right dismissed, go back to work." So I had a fairly charmed run from there on.

He wasn't game to touch me after that.

Well you were quite subversive in your own way, weren't you?

A bit cheeky. Well I'd been in the air force for three years at that stage and I wasn't going to be pushed around too much. I reckon I was volunteering to look after King and country and they

11:30 should treat me with a bit of respect, I thought.

I think that's a very good point, yes, that you were, yeah, you were a volunteer

Yeah, I wasn't conscripted. I offered to help and I should be allowed to help, not be pushed around.

Well, this is interesting to me, because you said you were very quiet

Yes.

But you were obviously quite prepared to stand up for your rights, though.

Yes.

12:00 Well after Dookie College where you get hammered into position there, pretty well, so I could stand up for myself much better after being up there.

Well, can you tell us a bit about your pilot training, what were you required to do? And did you feel … were you excited after all this time, that you'd now been taken on as air crew?

Yes, I was pretty keen.

12:30 I got stuck into all the paper work that you had to learn. Trigonometry and so forth for navigation purposes, radio, because we were doing Morse and so forth, all the time. And after we finished our course at Somers, I was lucky enough to get posted to Benalla, that's a Tiger Moth training school, there. And I arrived there … well, most of our course went from Somers to there.

13:00 **How many of you on the course?**

Oh, about thirty, I think, something like that. And we were all busy unpacking our bags, in this dormitory style thing, and the Commanding Officer walked in, Wing Commander Hayward, Cedric Hayward, who was boss of John Martins in Adelaide, and he says "Crabtree." And I said "Yes sir." He says – "Oh".

13:30 Came over to my bed and sat down on it and he said "Right, all the rest of you, keep unpacking." He says "Crabtree's uncle is my legal partner, in Adelaide." So that was a good start. He says "Len, if you get into any trouble at all." he says "Come and see me, we'll sort it out." So I had a fairly charmed

14:00 run at Benalla. In fact, I jumped a course. From 36 course, I went back into 35 course, they were a couple short there, so they advanced me a little bit.

So you were actually flying at Benalla, were you, actually in the air craft?

Yes, that's right, yeah. flying Tiger Moths.

Okay, can you tell us about your first flight?

You had to speak into tubes, little rubber

14:30 hoses with a funnel on the end of it to talk into, and sort of ear, like a stethoscope, sort of thing, to talk from the back to the front. You couldn't hear very well, because there was so much engine noise, and my instructor was a fellow by the name of F.O. Stevenson, Flying Officer Stevenson, and he was termed the screaming skull, he never spoke in his ordinary voice, he used to shout and scream at you. And apparently this is a common sort

15:00 of method of teaching pilots to fly, to make sure you didn't get over confident. And I nearly threw up a few times, cause you used to throw it around the country side so that I'd see if I could take it or not. And after about five hours flying, he says "Okay, you're on your own, go and do a circuit." So

15:30 he was telling this other instructor, he says "Oh, I got a good pupil here, he's terrific, does fantastic landings." So I went round and I came in and I went … frog hopped all the way across. He gave me such a roasting for that. I got a letter about nine months ago, from him, he's living up in New South Wales somewhere, and he'd seen something about me working on this Liberator down at Werribee,

16:00 cause I wrote a few articles on that, and he wrote to the editor of the magazine, Rob Fox, he said "I'd like you to know, that Ed Crabtree was the pupil I had at Benalla." he says "He's an outstanding pilot." I thought, "Oh God, he never told me that. He ran me into the ground all the time when I was flying with him."

And what magazine, this is just an aside, what's the magazine

16:30 **you wrote the article for?**

Fly Past, or something, it's a local air craft magazine.

Well, what was it like, being up in the aeroplane?

I was a pretty hesitant pilot. I didn't want to be a fighter pilot, I wasn't particularly good at that, doing slow rolls and so forth, you're supposed to maintain your height in the slow roll, and I could never do that, I'd lose about a

17:00 thousand feet each time I'd do that. And you'd do a stall, which you'd sort of pull the thing, you pull it up in the air until it stopped flying and just fall over, and you'd just drop out of the sky and go into a spin or what ever, and that was all part of … you had to learn to do that, so if you ever got into a sticky situation, you knew how to get out of it. And I was very hesitant, I never ever

17:30 did what some of the other boys … they were rolling all over the sky, that wasn't my kettle of fish at all. So all the time, they asked me what I wanted to do, and I said "I want to fly four engine bombers." Really, why I wanted to do that, was so I could get over to England and have a look about. And I knew we didn't have any four engine bombers, so I thought, well, I'll get posted to England. So I had that in mind all the time.

18:00 Cause my father came from England, I wanted to get over and have a look around.

So you obviously knew about the Empire Air Training Scheme?

Oh, yes, that was there.

So that was really what you wanted to get into?

Well, I was in it.

Oh, you were in it, this was all part of it?

That's right, yes.

So I was thinking there was something about the bomber that appealed to you, so it wasn't,

18:30 **didn't have anything to do with it?**

Mainly for travel, I think, a bit like my father. He became a priest because he wanted to travel. And I tried to become a four engine pilot so that I could get over to England and have a look around there. But I never ever made that. Had to pay my own way later. Anyway I finished up, came through quite well at Benalla. Next posting was

19:00 down at Point Cook. And I arrived at Point Cook, allotted my instructor, and looked at the name and I said "De Kantsow, I know that name". And that was the fellow I flew with in the autogyro at Dookie College.

Small world.

Yeah. Another contact again. So he trained me pretty well there.

And what were you training on there?

Airspeed Oxfords, there. We had quite a bit of fun. They had pretty good machines there, providing

19:30 they were serviceable.

What makes a good machine?

Good engines. If you haven't got good engines, you're in big trouble.

How many engines did they have?

They had two. But I remember, once we were doing a cross country flight, and we had to go to ten thousand feet, and go up to somewhere Bendigo way and then go down to Lady Julia at Percy Island, down off the coast and then come back to Point Cook. And

20:00 there was fog all the way. There were two pilots together, another fellow in training, but I was supposed to be doing this on my own. So I said "We'll go down through the fog and just see where we are." cause you do a certain leg and that's supposed to take so many minutes, and so I said "If you see anything, let me know, waggle your legs." cause he was in the nose, looking out the nose window. So I'd

20:30 been going down for about three or four minutes, and his legs started to thrash like mad, and he's screaming in the front there. And I thought, "Oh God, I'd better go up"." So I poured on all the power and got back up above the clouds again. And he came out and said "We were just on the tops of the trees." So I stayed up at ten thousand feet. We got down to Lady Julia at Percy Island, turned round there, I could spot that, it was clear there, and we got over

21:00 to Geelong and one motor quit on one side. And we had a rule at Point Cook that one class had the first half hour, the next class had the second half hour. If you didn't get in, in that half hour you had to keep

away from the drome. So I was around over the bay, going round on one motor. And the tower apparently was watching me, cause they apparently reported that I'd taken an air craft, which wasn't.

21:30 Transfer the fuel on that port, left hand side, wasn't good, so they reckoned I'd be in trouble somewhere. So anyhow, I stuck around, cruised around, and as soon as I got that half, swooped in and landed. And managed to roll up to the hanger on one motor and they came racing out and said "What are you doing, didn't you read the record?" And I said "It was signed out, it was serviceable, so I took it"." They said "Well it shouldn't have gone on a long flight because

22:00 it couldn't transfer fuel on the left side." I said "Oh, I'm back."

Did it every cross your mind that you might crash?

No. No, we're supposed to fly on one engine, so I gave it a go.

But did you have any fears of crashing anyway when you went up; I mean did it ever cross your mind?

No, no. Not really. It did on one instance, when three of us were doing formation flying and

22:30 I never liked formation flying; I reckoned it was too dangerous, so I used to stick out a bit. The other two fellows were keen as mustard, they got right in close, and they hit and went in, and killed four people. And I was pretty pleased that I wasn't flying close.

Well what sort of, what was the training you did at Point Cook that was different from what you did at Benalla?

That's more advanced. Much more advanced aircraft,

23:00 fitted with a radio of a sort, pretty, it was so bad you wouldn't use it most of the time. But being twin engine, hydraulic undercarriage that you could lift up, much more sophisticated than the old Tiger Moth.

And had you been promoted, what were you ...

No, still leading aircraftsman. Still on the bottom. In fact it became, when you transferred to air crew, it became

23:30 aircraftsman second class, which was … instead of aircraftsman first class, which was pretty well, you were at the bottom of the barrel until you got through your flying training. Another instance at Point Cook, I was … we used to have air frame next to us as well, and the corporal that was given the air frame next to us saw me turn up and he says "I know you from Parafield." and he says, "You can ask all the awkward questions." He says,

24:00 "Go to the library and read a book or something, I don't want you to ask any awkward questions." So I did that, went up to the library, and the chief ground instructor, was a squadron leader, can't remember his name, came up and says, "What are you doing here, why aren't you …" And I said "Well the corporal suggested that I should read something else, because I'd been an air frame fitter for three years." He says "Get back, get back." He says "I'm going to watch you all the time from now on." And he used to dog me

24:30 everywhere I went, he would be sort of snooping on me.

Well, getting back to the accident that you mentioned before, what effect did that have on the morale of the others?

Just made everybody very careful for a while. It's like a car accident. If you see a car accident, you drive very carefully for a while, then you get over that.

Were they friends of yours?

Well they were people on the same course but I

25:00 wasn't friendly with them, no, not really.

Well, when something like that happens, did you go ... was there a funeral service or ...

I think, I can't recall what happened there, I think there was a funeral. Yeah, must have done. Or else the family held the funeral. I can't remember what happened there. It just made you more careful.

Oh, that was good then. So you weren't really foolhardy then?

No,

25:30 not me.

And well you spent how long at Point Cook then?

It must have been about three months, I think. I think it was about nine months altogether, I think about

three months at Point Cook.

And was this the finish of your training?

It was, yes. As a matter of fact, at the finish they were all assembled in the hall and they were reading out the postings and the promotions and so forth

26:00 and they read out the sergeants, I suppose about twenty odd sergeants, posted here there and everywhere, then they read out the officers, they read out four officers to be posted to fly B24's, and I didn't get a mention at all. I thought, "God, I've been scrubbed." And then this squadron leader,

26:30 chief ground instructor, he said, "Oh, and then there's Crabtree." he says "Pilot officer posted to B24's with the 5th Air Force." I said "You miserable … oh, dear." So I became a pilot officer, from the bottom to up into office rank.

And to be posted to the 5th Air Force, okay, so where's that?

That was up in Darwin.

27:00 **So before you get up there, then, I mean, what was your reaction to this …**

In fact, I thought it would be 24's, there was a Mitchell, a twin engine air craft, and I thought "Oh God, that's nice." because they were very nippy, beautiful aircraft those things, and someone said "No, it's not, no it's not a Mitchell." he says "It's a Liberator, one of those foreign air …" And I said "Oh, we haven't got any of those." And he said "But the Yanks have got them up at

27:30 Darwin." and he says "That's where you're going."

Well would you have ever anticipated going to an American outfit?

No. But I think that Sir George Jones, who was boss of the air force then, had been over to America and he knew we were going to get some, at some stage. And he knew that the Americans had B 24's up in Darwin, so he snuck the four of us up there. Two

28:00 of them got wiped out the first week, because one had a very British accent and the Americans don't like the British at all, mainly because of the big wars they had against the British earlier, so they reckon Limies, no go. And apparently, I thought I had a bit of a English accent, but it seemed to match in with theirs and I learnt all their language pretty

28:30 smartly. Used all their rude terms and so forth, and that sort of got in pretty well with the Americans. They've got some frightful cursing terms, leave ours for dead.

Have they? Are you prepared to tell us any?

No. Terrible stuff. Terribly crude stuff.

29:00 **Well, I mean, how did you really feel about … you've been promoted to pilot officer, you're air crew, what was your reaction?**

Astonished that I'd got where I was in such a rapid time, actually.

29:30 **Were you disappointed that you weren't going to Europe?**

No. I was a bit staggered that I was going ahead as rapidly as I was. I didn't expect that sort of rapidity.

And were you given any leave before you were shot off up to Darwin?

Yes, I think I had a week or two, a couple of weeks.

And

30:00 **what did you do on your leave?**

I had some friends, Hattams, Hattams the Drapers, Jack went to Dookie College, way back in about 1921 and we were on the council, together there, for some time. So I used to stay at their house at Kalorama, they had a country house up there, and used to visit them quite a lot. They were very nice people.

And how would you have got up there?

30:30 Where, Kalorama? Oh, Jack had a car with his business.

Oh, and so some people were still able to get petrol?

Yeah, yeah. So used to visit up there. Well, you could get petrol for your business, I think. He was a draper and clothing materials of all sorts.

Well, how did your family react to your becoming a pilot?

I think my mother was quite proud,

31:00 actually, but I scared her stiff, all the time, I think. Hoping I would get through.

And you still didn't have any romantic entanglements?

No. Oh, no. I knew a few girls in Adelaide. In fact, Bickfords, you know, Bickfords that make all that soft drink and so forth, well they were pretty top class in Adelaide, and I knew Bunty Bickford, who was an exceedingly nice girl, but I was only a AC1 and I

31:30 didn't have a chance amongst all the officer types there. I took her out a couple of times. Oh and another Doctor's daughter. Doctor Gunstone, his daughter was … well his family were friends of my uncles, so used to go round there for dinner quite often. So we used to go out to the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, in Adelaide, and various other functions.

So obviously

32:00 **then, there was still entertainment available, during those years?**

Not much, but there was a bit, yeah. Everything closed down pretty early in the piece.

And were there ever concerts put on for servicemen anywhere?

I didn't see any much in the earlier stages. I think you just relied on what the civilians were doing and you went there.

32:30 **Um…**

To Darwin with the 5th Air Force. I was given a tent to share with a very famous pilot, Augustus V. Connery, who was flying one of those aircraft there, he became a Major and he was CO of the outfit

33:00 for a while. And the intelligence officer was the other fellow. And I took from a man by the name of Joe Vick, have you heard of Vicks Vapour Rub, well he is running Vicks Vapour Rub in America, that's his father's business. And Joe was promoted to an aircraft Commander, as they call them. And I took Joe Vicks place as co-pilot to the .O

33:30 which was a very nice start. The first day I got there, I was busy unpacking, and a jeep sped up to the outside of the tent and a fellow says "Crabtree?" And I said "Yeah." And he says "Get your ass down to transportation and draw out your jeep." So I dropped everything, scooted down, and drew out a jeep for myself. They had stacks of equipment, and they reckoned it was there to be used in

34:00 the process of the war. If you didn't use it, well you weren't doing the right thing.

And can you tell me how the Australian element fitted in with this U.S. unit?

Well I was the only one in this squadron, apart from a fellow I got a letter from today, who was a radar countermeasure operator, he was a specialist in tracking radar. Apart from some ground crew who

34:30 ran the radio section, that was an Australian outfit. But I seemed to fit in pretty well, in fact, I didn't have much to do for a while, cause the CO didn't fly all that much. But they gave me a few circuits and landings and practice around the country side. And I used to write letters for some of the Americans, because a lot of them were illiterate, believe it or not.

35:00 It's astonishing.

Are these pilots?

No, oh no. Ground crew of some sort. From the back woods of Oklahoma and all those areas, they're the country boys that have never been away from home. And just couldn't write or read. They'd get letters from home, and you had to read them out to them, and write letters back for them. Which was staggering.

Well had you ever been to the tropical parts of Australia before

35:30 **this?**

No. No I'd never been out of Victoria and South Australia.

And what time of year was it, that you got up there?

Went up there in October.

Right, so you were coming into the wet season?

Yeah.

So you were there in that time when they talk about the build up, isn't it?

Oh, yes. Into December, November December, gee in comes in. Inter-tropic front, it's called, technical term. And it's frightening

36:00 weather. Terrible stuff. It wrecked many an aircraft. Fellows crashed trying to get through it.

Can you describe it?

It's rough. Talk about turbulence in a civil aeroplane, it's got nothing on it, going through that stuff.

So what happens to the aircraft?

Well, there are cases of wings having been ripped off

36:30 some aircraft. You never really know, because they crashed anyway, you never caught sight of them again. But a lot of them turned back or refused to go through it, and sort of go back home again.

Well, could you see it coming? I mean, did they have weather reports?

Oh, you knew it was there. It was there every night. It'd build up at night time, and you had to fly through it. And you'd get past it and bomb the area that you were after, way up, sort of Borneo

37:00 or somewhere, and you had to came back through it again. It was diabolical. You'd be as tired as anything by the time … you see you're out for about fourteen hours or thereabouts, non stop, and to have to fight your way back through that stuff was terrible. You couldn't get above it in those days, with these air craft. Now of course, with jets, you get well above the weather. You can see it underneath, the lightning and so forth. But in those days you had to go through it. Particularly on the outward bound, because

37:30 you're fully loaded and you couldn't climb up to any great height anyway.

Now I was reading recently where it was physically exhausting to be flying these aircraft, so we'll certainly be talking about that in subsequent tapes …

Well you couldn't … you could fly automatic pilot if it was calm weather, but when you got into the rough weather, you couldn't afford to leave that on, although some fellows did try it. But

38:00 it's better travelling if you fly it manually. They're very heavy, these air craft. The earlier models that we had in those days, my first flight in one, I was up there and the fellow said "Right you've got it, do a turn to the left." And I grabbed on and I tried to hang on there, pulling, and I says "God, you've locked the controls on it." But he says "No, no that's the way they come." And he says "You've got to really pull." So I went …

38:30 and staggered and used all the muscle I had to pull it … it's just like a flying brick. Terrible thing to fly. Later models, like the one we've got at Werribee, they were all servo controlled, they were beautiful to fly.

When you say – servo …

Hydraulically assisted. Much like power brakes, power steering on a car.

And well, the uniform you wore up there, did you change the sort of clothing …

I went up in a blue uniform.

39:00 **The blue with the heavy …**

Yeah, that's right. And I think I had a couple of shirts. But the Yanks said I wasn't well equipped and so they gave me a lot of gear. I was fitted out with American gear for the most part. In fact I got severely reprimanded by Air Vice Marshall Colville, wearing American clothing. And I said, "Well I hadn't been paid since I've been here, the Americans have been paid." And he said, "What, you've got an

39:30 equipment officer down in your area." And I said, "I'm not on his charge sheet, so I don't get any pay, I can't get any equipment." And I said, "And all the radio boys are all sleeping on the dirt, so every time it rains they get wet through." He says, "That can't be right." I said, "Yes it is." I says, "The equipment officer's got eighty cots that he won't issue until he's got a hundred and thirty, so that everyone gets one." He says, "That's not right." I said, "Yes it is." I said, "You can ring him if you like,

40:00 and I'll wait around." He rang him and says to the equipment officer, "Come up straight away." And there was about forty miles or something. Told me to hang around till he got up there. And we went in together, and he says, "Is that true?" And the fellow says, "Yes, I'm not issuing any cots until I get one for everybody." He says, "Not fair." And Col says, "You get back there and issue the eighty cots that you've got, then go back to Melbourne, I don't want to see you again."

Tape 4

00:34 **Ed, I was thinking about your persistence in wanting to become a member of air crew, you obviously found the work you were doing as ground crew quite interesting, when you were rebuilding aircraft, and is this correct, it was each month you kept**

01:00 **putting in this application to transfer to air crew?**

That's right, yeah.

Now, I mean, is persistence obviously one of your personality traits, or would you say, or was it persistence that you just wanted to become a pilot so much, I mean I was just wondering if you could tell us a little more about your motivation here.

Well way back when I was a school boy, I was always wanting to fly, but never ever expecting to get a go at it, because

01:30 the cost was far too much. So I thought it an opportunity at the beginning of the war to become a pilot, which my brother and another two cousins were pilots, and I thought, well I'll follow along in their footsteps. And that's probably why I persisted. I didn't want to be anything else but amongst the group.

And was this because you'd been down in that Gippsland area where

02:00 **there was a RAAF base or was it just because of your, this interest in flying?**

There were no bases in Gippsland at that stage. This was before they were built. So it was just my inherent interest in aircraft generally, right the way through.

And have you displayed the same persistence in other areas of your life?

02:30 Oh, yes, I think so. I did much the same thing in TAA [Trans Australia Airlines], I kept on … I went in as a first officer, there, because there were thousands to choose from, and I missed out on becoming a captain, straight off, and I kept on trying to get promotion to captain. Much the same procedure, keep on asking.

Well, you know when you were actually called up to

03:00 **become air crew, why do you think it happened then? I mean, do you think somebody might have put in a word for you, somewhere along the line?**

When I started at the showgrounds, doing a fitters course, they put on a big placard on the board there, anybody who has some knowledge of shop keeping and business, would they please apply for the job of equipment officer. So I thought, that sounds good, so I had a go at that and I got wiped

03:30 out because I was eligible for air crew at that stage. So they must have had it in my records somewhere that I was air crew material at some stage.

Yes, yes. Because it's surprising, isn't it, if you were air crew material, well obviously at a particular stage, they needed ground crew more.

Yes, they did. Fitters were very, very short.

And of course, you would have been quite rare, wouldn't you, to have the capacity to do …

04:00 Yes, I was a jack of all trades. The average Australian country lad was a jack of all trades, but not the city boys, they were more slotted, I think. They didn't have the same wide experiences that the country boys got. One of our most able men in the Australian air force was Wing Commander Brill, D.F.C [Distinquished Flying Cross]. and Bar, he was a farmer from up near Wagga,

04:30 a magnificent man, he was. He was my boss at Tocumwal for quite a while.

Oh was he. So what made him so wonderful?

He had a magnificent memory. We had about four thousand people at Tocumwal and he knew the first names of pretty well everybody, whether they had a family, whether the kids were sick, or what ever. And he'd go round and talk to everybody on a first name basis. And they'd

05:00 do anything for him. He was an astonishing man.

Well, we'll get back now to going to Darwin. And can you tell me how you got up there? Can you tell me a bit about the trip?

Yes well, we were waiting at a place, I think it was Old Wesley College, or one of the school Colleges in

05:30 Adelaide, for two days, waiting for an aircraft. And finally got a note to say – proceed to Parafield and board an aircraft there for Darwin. So got out there and found it was a Lockheed Lodestar, one of Guinea Airways aircraft, which went up and down every day, I think. And most of the passengers were returning American air force people, who had been

06:00 down on rest and recreation, I think they call it, they get a couple of weeks off down in Adelaide. And they'd all been out on the grog the night before, and most of them were half drunk when they got on the aircraft, and as soon as it got off the ground, it was stinking hot, and the heater, I think, must have been jammed on, and they started to vomit all over the place. It was a dreadful mercy aircraft.

06:30 And that's the closest I've ever been to being ill in my life. Fortunately, the aircraft had perspex windows with little holes in the centre with a wooden plug in it. And I was sitting opposite one of those, and I punched the wooden plug out and stuck my nose into the air stream, that saved me from being ill. We went from there up to Alice Springs. Got out there, and it was a very, very hot day, it was about October, it was pretty hot.

07:00 And there was a little sort of mesh hut in the middle of the drome there, and they were serving snacks, and they were serving steak and eggs, of course, nobody could eat anything after that trip from Adelaide up to there. I suppose it suited people coming from Darwin, where they'd been on pretty rough food for a long while, they could get it, that would be there first good meal in a long while. Anyway, we got there and we went from there to a place called Birdum, which was

07:30 some sort of a staging camp for the RAAF, I'm not quite sure of the relationship of where it is from … its south, about a hundred mile or so, I think. Anyway we were there for a couple of days, and I can't remember how we got from there to Fenton, whether we flew up or were bussed up.

And so Fenton was actually in Darwin, was it?

No. It's

08:00 about ninety miles south of Darwin, down along the North South road, off that, near Adelaide River, between Adelaide River and Katherine, a bit further down the track.

Yes, have you been to the Adelaide River cemetery?

Yes, yes. We did that trip up there. All the Americans went up there. We took them up there to visit the cemetery and visit the old

08:30 drome [aerodrome], and went round the country side, Kakadu and so forth.

Yes, I was struck by the cemetery, when you go round and you look at the ages of the service men who were buried there. All very, very young.

Yes, yes, yes. Well I was 24 when I was flying with the Americans, which was pretty young, well we were all young.

Well see, given your persistence, this overriding desire to become a pilot

09:00 **was there, but had you taken notice of the casualties, were they recorded in the newspapers or on … the numbers of RAAF pilots who were killed …**

Yes, yes. Well particularly up in that area. The Adelaide River's full of RAAF graves. The Americans were buried there initially, then their bodies, their coffins were taken out and taken back to America.

09:30 That's their pattern, they always do that.

So, that obviously didn't deter you then, when you were hearing about all these casualties?

No, you get slugged driving a car, you think that's … you hear about accidents all over the place, and you reckon that's not going to happen to you. You sort of have faith in your own capabilities, I suppose.

Well, I'm interested in this United States Air Force

10:00 **group, squadron, what it?**

It's a bomb group.

Oh, bomb group. And well, how many in a bomb group?

Well, four squadrons in a bomb group. In this particular case, anyway. And we had about seventeen or eighteen aircraft in each squadron. We had two dromes, Fenton, which was the 528th and the 530th squadron, and Long Strip, which was about ten or twelve miles away,

10:30 the 529th and the 531st squadron. Mainly because there was only a single strip and too difficult to handle if you want to get a lot off at once.

And they were all B-24 bombers?

Yes, all B-24's yes.

Now was this the only American, U.S. Air Force group in Australia?

No. The 90th air group, the 90th bomb group

11:00 were there before us, for a short time, and they went up to New Guinea, to Port Moresby, I think, and Nadzab later on. And our group took their place at Fenton. Fenton and Katherine, because the other long strip wasn't operational at that stage, so half were working from Manbulloo, where the Tindall air base, I think, is now. And

11:30 we operated out of Fenton.

Well, we talked a little bit about the climate yesterday, but did you eventually adjust to the tropical climate?

Oh yeah. The dodge was, you'd be fairly active in the early morning and late at night. But if you weren't doing anything, you'd lay down in your cot and just sweat. That's what I did anyway. Unless I was

12:00 called for other duties, such as censoring mail and writing letters for some of the boys, some of the Americans.

Well, when you were … you were obviously replacing somebody, were you, when you were posted up there?

Yes, I was. Well the CO had checked his co-pilot out as a plane commander, as they call them, that was Joe Vick, of Vicks Vapour Rub in America,

12:30 and Joe took over Gus Connery's crew, and Gus became the operations manager from then on and didn't fly much. Whenever he flew I flew with him as his co-pilot and then when he stopped flying pretty well, Joe Cesario came in with a first replacement crew from America,

13:00 and he checked his co-pilot out as a captain, or plane commander and I took his place.

So having replacements coming in from the U.S., how come Australians were also used as replacements?

Well I was the only one that was used as a replacement there and there was one other at Long Strip that I remember, we were

13:30 the only two that stayed there for the nine months.

Well do you know why? That was obviously an exception then. I mean, mostly they were …

Well I think, Sir George Jones, who was chief of the air force, at that stage, knew we were going to get B-24's at some stage, and he managed to get a few of us up there to get some experience, I think that was the idea. You couldn't get too many there, because there was no room for …

14:00 to put in more than a couple. So two of us lasted the distance.

Well, when you arrived, what was the first thing that happened to you, who greeted you, what was the procedure?

Well I arrived. A truck went to the orderly room and the intelligence officer said, "You're sharing a tent with me and the operations officer." So he pointed where the tent was, so carted

14:30 my gear down there, and I was busy unpacking, and I think I told you about the jeep earlier, didn't I, that they issued me.

You can tell us again.

Well, I was busy unpacking stuff on my cot, and a jeep roared up to the outside of the tent, and a fellow says "Crabtree?" And I says, "Yeah." And he says "Get your ass down to transportation and draw out your jeep." So I dropped everything and raced down to

15:00 transportation and picked out a jeep. It's amazing really. They had all the equipment there, and they expected you to use it, they wanted you to use it.

So you were driving around in a jeep?

Yeah.

And you drove yourself, you didn't have a driver?

No, no. It was a very, very pleasant thing to happen, too.

Well, had you met any Americans before this?

No, I don't think I had.

Well, what was your first impression of

15:30 **them?**

Well, having watched American movies, you got some idea of what their language was like. It was a slow process. I was lucky the fellow I shared a tent with, was a Bachelor of Science, and he was a very intelligent man, and he took a liking to me, or I took a liking to him, and discussed all sorts of things. In fact I used to write to his wife, over in the States, and

16:00 she sent me a mouth organ, which I've still got. Cause she wanted her husband to play his, so she sent me one, and we used to have a musical evening together. I've still got her letters there, somewhere. They were wonderful people, really. They did everything for me, up there. Really took me into the fold,

and

16:30 I became one of them. I think I showed you that letter from Joe Cesario, but, what he thought of me, he said, “I was family.” That’s what he … and that’s a pretty big compliment from an Italian family, he was Italian.

Italian/American?

Yeah.

And so well, you stayed, and they obviously then made you very welcome …

Yes. I fitted in exceedingly well.

And you didn’t

17:00 **feel that you had to make any extra effort to fit in, with the way that they did things?**

No, no. Just went at it quietly, I didn’t … I noticed they used to complain about Australians being loud and brash people, much the same as we thought the Americans were loud and brash, so I just kept quiet and sort of gradually wormed

17:30 my way in, so to speak. Not deliberately, but that’s the way I reacted, I suppose.

So they were quite critical of the Australian way of doing things, were they?

Yes they were. On one particular case, about April 1944, they sent three crews, three Australian crews, up there for experience with our group. The Wing Commander had one crew, and two other

18:00 crews, and they were given tents and told where to erect the tents. And in about two days, they’d pinched everything that was loose around the place. Ropes, marquee covers, bits of galvanised iron, water pipe, anything that was loose around the camp which was pretty safe with the Americans. They never touched anything, they just left everything. If they wanted anything, they just asked and get it. But the

18:30 Australian boys grabbed everything. And the CO said to me one day, he said, “Your fellows, your mates, have been pinching everything around the camp, so I want you to go down and tell them to return it all.” And I said, “Oh, alright.” I was just a new pilot officer. So I went down to see the Wing Commander and I said, “The C.O. wants you to return all the gear that you’ve been picking up around the camp.”

19:00 And he says, “You can go and get nicked.” So I went back to Joe Cesario, and I said, “They refuse to do that.” And he says, “Okay, you go back and tell them, if they don’t return it today, they’re all going back down south, we’re not going to have them in the squadron.” So this stuff was returned straight away. Called their bluff.

19:30 But of course, the average Australian had nothing in the way of equipment. So if there was anything laying around, they’d grab it.

And what sort of equipment would they be grabbing?

Well, any loose equipment that was lying around, they’d just take it down to the tent and keep it. Cause we were short of equipment, the Australian air force. Had very little. As I was saying earlier, I had a 38 revolver, which was unserviceable

20:00 because it had a fault in the barrel, had the revolver but no ammunition to use, which was pretty typical.

Well, it was ludicrous, wasn’t it, to give you a weapon that …

Yeah.

Use it for bluff.

Yeah.

Well, the Americans were obviously very well supplied, what was the quality of their uniforms compared with yours?

20:30 Oh, even their average enlisted man had a better uniform than the Australian officers, I thought. But the material was magnificent stuff. We lost a few crews while … in fact we lost seventy five per cent of our group, up there. Things were very bad in the earlier stages.

And this was what, towards the end of ’43, was it?

May ’43 they got there. I didn’t

21:00 get there till October ’43. They were doing all the long range stuff, and nobody knew anything about the weather, and what the … in fact some of the maps you got of New Guinea, showed the mountains of twelve thousand feet, and they were upwards of fifteen thousand or more. So you didn’t dare go

through the clouds at twelve thousand feet, you'd never get there.

And is this why there were so many casualties there,

21:30 **they weren't being shot down by Japanese?**

Some were, yeah, some were. And a very long range stuff we were on, we had one particular run, was from Darwin to Balikpapan in Borneo, and that's a seventeen hour trip. And to get there you've got to go over numerous Japanese held positions, and you're attacked on the way there and attacked there and attacked on the way back. And you're

22:00 at the limit of your petrol supply, and some ran out of fuel before they got back, that's the big problem.

And this was a non stop seventeen hour trip?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Pretty heavy going.

What about food? I mean, anyway, you've got crew on board, haven't you?

I never ever ate anything on the … that I can remember.

22:30 You're uptight all the time. If there was food there, I don't think you would want to eat it.

So you just survived on your own bodily resources?

Yeah, yeah. I don't even remember drinking water. But you know, you didn't need it in those days.

Extraordinary. Well just back onto the personnel at

23:00 **Fenton, Were there any black American pilots?**

Oh, no. One Egyptian, Kassab, he was the Major Bratten's co-pilot. He's a lovely fellow too. I've met him in America a few times. Comes up and greets me with a great hug and just about ruins my ribs.

So, there were no black Americans up there?

No. We had a transportation group, well the

23:30 truck drivers and so forth, they were all black. And they were a very excitable group, and I remember, if you were officer of the day, which you got caught with every now and again, the job was to go down to the cook house and inspect all the chefs' finger nails, and so forth, and check for cleanliness, and so forth. And at six o'clock every evening you had to go with the transportation group and make sure all the arms were put in the armoury, daggers

24:00 and so forth, because they used to brew their own jungle juice, and they had wild sort of celebrations there. Quite a dangerous mob. They were alright when they were … during the day. They were magnificent drivers. But they were very excitable people, the negroes, in those days. I think they've calmed down. In fact they are a pretty intelligent group now. Like Colonel [Colin] Powell in America and that lady

24:30 who's … gosh she's smart. [referring to Condoleeza Rice]

Well, were you aware of any racial tension?

Well, the negroes were kept separately. They had their own camp. They were never allowed in the same area as we were, except when they were working, so it was pretty tight I think, in those days.

25:00 **So they were working with other Americans but they did socialise with them?**

Oh yes, they were drivers and so forth. No, no they kept separately.

Oh, that's interesting, isn't it, that they were actually segregated?

Yeah, yeah.

Alright then, how long did it take before you went up in one of these B-24's?

About three

25:30 or four days actually. I'd never been, never seen a B-24. I hadn't got into the flight line, cause I was busy doing other work up at the camp.

What sort of other work did you have to do?

In the orderly room, I was sort of getting myself sorted out, and going through paper work and finding out what to do and what I was expected to do, and so forth. And there was Air Vice Marshall Cole wanted to go over to Marble Bar to

26:00 have a look at the facilities there for a raid on Java. So Major Bratten decided, seeing I was a RAAF pilot, it would be a good deal to put me in as co-pilot, and I hadn't been in a cockpit at that stage. And I

get into the cockpit and he calls for this and that and I think, “Where’s that?” you know, “Where’s that lever?” and as you saw in that photo, there’s oodles of switches and instruments there. And

26:30 unfortunately we had a malfunction in one of the engines and had to come back in again, after take off. So Air Vice Marshall says, “How come you don’t know where all levers are?”. I said, “This is the first time I’ve ever been in a B-24, I’ve only flown Airspeed Oxfords before.”

That’s interesting, because you weren’t given an orientation trip …

No never, no.

27:00 Just get straight in and go off as a co-pilot.

Well, can you just describe for us, what the cockpit was like, and can you tell us about the instruments that you had to decipher?

Well, being four engines, there’s a set of instruments for every engine. Some of them were doubled up, sort of two needles on the one face. The controls are all dual, the rudder

27:30 controls, the left side and right side, control column to the left side and right side. The major controls were duplicated. Some of the flight instruments were on the left side in front of the captain’s seat. You could fly from the other side because you could see them quite easily. Except for one of basic, very basic instrument which was down low, and

28:00 just the captain could see it. The co-pilot could see it if he leant over and sort of had a look. But otherwise you couldn’t see that. But there were switches all around, over head, radio switches and panels of switches. Automatic pilot gear, that’s a big panel in the centre. Electronic controls and levers, brackets of levers, four

28:30 throttles, four mixer controls, four turbo super charger controls. And propeller controls, for pitch, one for each engine, and there’s a little flap, which you can pull the four down together, or push them up together. Cowl switches, there were four of those, they do those up and down.

So they were quite sophisticated aircraft?

Oh, very much so, very much so.

Well, do you know

29:00 **when the B-24 was first made, first built?**

I think around about 1939, the original ones … the first model came out. The English ordered them first and the Americans sold them to England with the proviso that they wouldn’t be used for combat duty, so they were used for transport, supposedly, but I think they stuck a few in,

29:30 and submarine patrol, and that sort of thing, because they had a very long range capability. They were called LB-30’s over there. We got one or two of those, I think, later on, out here, for transport work.

Oh, so they could be … well they were virtually a dual purpose aircraft, were they?

Well, if you strip them right out, you could use them, you could put passengers in the bomb bay area.

30:00 And in fact, I went over to America in one from Biak, in a converted Liberator which leaked petrol over everybody, all they way.

What sort of speed did they travel at?

Round about the two hundred knots per hour.

And, okay, you’re the co-pilot on this B-24, was there other crew with you on that first

30:30 **trip?**

Oh, yes. You always carried an engineer, a radio operator and a navigator. You didn’t need the gunners so they were left out.

So there was always five, five crew with you, if you weren’t going on a bombing mission?

Yes, that’s right, yeah. Although, later on when you got used to the aircraft, I’ve flown one with just one other person. Round Tocumwal and so forth. You got that used to the air craft, you could do everything

31:00 yourself, without getting into trouble.

Well, with the Captain and the co-pilot, I mean, you divide up the duties do you?

Well the Captain, usually always took off when you were loaded, when you were going out on a mission. And you’d hand it over to the co-pilot so you could have a bit of a rest, because it was pretty stressful. You’re loaded up and it’s like a flying brick then.

31:30 The all up weight was supposed to be fifty six thousand pounds, but we got up to, I think, seventy two

thousand on a very, very long trip. And you'd just get off the ground, you'd be sort of hugging the ground right to the end of the runway. And you'd sort of stagger into the air, and get your wheels and flaps up, and that'd help a bit. Everything would start over heating by this time, engines would over heat, but you couldn't do anything about it, you just kept on going.

32:00 But you'd stick close to the ground because you couldn't get up any height at all. Until you burnt a bit of fuel off, and then it gradually got lighter and you climb a bit better. But it had a pretty terrible performance when over loaded like that.

Well, after that initial trip, how long was it before you actually went on a bombing mission?

I didn't go …

32:30 before Christmas I think, in 1943. I went up to a place, I think, called Pomela , one of the islands up north of Australia. We did a … there was a nickel mine there, we had, and the Japs were pulling out the nickel for stainless steel and so forth. So we bombed that a few times.

And before you went off on a mission, were you given briefings, were you …

Oh, yes.

33:00 **So can you describe what happened in a briefing session?**

Well there was always a roster up in the orderly room as to who was going to fly the next day and what mission it was. They wouldn't say where you were going, but it said you were rostered to fly tomorrow. So you wouldn't sleep the night before.

You wouldn't, okay. Now can you talk about that a bit?

I never knew … well nobody knows how they're going to react under pressure like that sort of thing. So you stay awake all that

33:30 night wondering how you're going to react the next day. And then you go to briefing, of course, and they brief the gunners in a different area and they brief the pilots, navigators and bombardiers in … well we did … in separate rooms, because they didn't want everybody to know where the target was and so forth. Because Tokyo Rose used to get information, tell us where we were going. She knew

34:00 the names of some of the crews, I don't know how that happened. But they had some remarkable information from us. And so you get your briefing …

So who gives you the briefing?

The operations officer did all that, and the commanding officer.

And what rank?

He was a captain. They had very low ranks, the Americans, at that stage. They'd sent all their senior people over to

34:30 Europe, I think. And my CO was a first lieutenant of a B-24 squadron. Now in Australian terms he'd be a group captain at least. But that's the way the Americans operated. And he eventually, when he became the commanding officer, they made him a captain. He eventually got to be

35:00 a Major before he left the area. But they were very slow on promotion. They gave a lot of ribbons out but no promotion, much.

Oh, that's an interesting observation actually, isn't it? Well, when you said – your first pilot, how many did you have?

Oh, Major Bratten only flew with him twice I think. He was the group CO And then Gus Connery was the next, was our

35:30 CO of the squadron. And I flew with him for a short time, until he became an operations officer for the entire group. So he didn't fly much. And I then flew with Joe Cesario for the rest of the time.

Now, on this first mission then, that you haven't slept the night before, and your briefing is what time? How

36:00 **soon before … I mean, when do you have your briefing in relation to when you take off on your …**

It depends on … in that Pomela exercise, it was a day light bombing exercise, so I think, I can't recall the time we took off, but it must have been reasonably early in the morning. Because the air is a bit cooler then, you can get off better. I was only about a eight, nine hour

36:30 trip, I think. Reasonably short by comparison to some of the others. We didn't receive much by the way of enemy fighters or ack ack [anti aircraft fire] on that trip. And we got back, greatly relieved to get back, then you were debriefed when you get back. They want to know what you saw, what do you think the results were and so forth.

37:00 And after that, you get a cup of coffee from the Red Cross girl and then you all go over to the hospital for a shot of whiskey. Which I never drank, so I used to hand mine over to someone else.

So who else was with you on that first mission? Do you remember the names of all the crew?

Well that crew that you took a photo of earlier, that was the crew there.

And there were, was that ten of you?

37:30 Ten of us. There were always four officers in American crews. The two pilots, the navigator and the bombardier, were all officers. All the rest were enlisted men.

And can you just go through the jobs that they all did on the …

Oh, okay. Well the two pilots, of cause, they were in the cockpit. Just behind them, the navigators position, there's a wall there and the navigators just behind there. And the radio operator was in that position. The engineer floated around,

38:00 depending on where he was needed. There's a little auxiliary power unit down underneath the flight deck, which was his job to start up at the beginning of the flight, because that gave you electric power to start the engines with.

And he could move around quite freely?

Yes. The bombardier, his station was up in the nose, but he didn't get there until about an hour or so before he got anywhere near the target.

38:30 He'd have nothing to do. Then he'd crawl down into the nose wheel area and lay on his stomach and operate the bomb sight. He could fly the aircraft from there. The bomb sight was connected to the automatic pilot and he'd make corrections on his bomb sight and that would transfer through to the automatic pilot and line up the aircraft over the target.

39:00 We didn't like that much because you'd just sit there, have nothing to do and hope he'd hurry up and finish his lining up because that's the most dangerous time of the lot. You'd be a sitting duck for the anti aircraft, because you had to fly as level as you could and at a constant speed so that he could drop his bombs on the right spot.

And so the Japanese were still firing back, they still had their

39:30 **anti aircraft weaponry in place at this stage?**

Oh yeah, yeah. Oh, yes, they were well equipped.

And were you fired at, that first trip?

I think so, I can't really recall, I think I was too busy worrying about keeping the aircraft going, rather than worrying about whether there was any anti aircraft. Although we got a lot of it later on, I know. I can remember a lot of it.

Tape 5

00:31 **… the other crew of the B-24.**

Oh, okay. Well there was a crew of ten, and I think I went through earlier, the two pilots, navigator, bombardier, who were all officers. Then there's a radio operator. The engineer who went wherever he was required. Sometimes he was on the flight deck, if you had a problem with an engine. Then the gunners, there's a nose gunner

01:00 operating a front turret which had two .5 machine guns out the front. There was one up on top, another two guns there in a turret. And there's a tail turret, right down the back end. And there's two waist positions, a gun out each side, not hydraulically controlled, free hold job, you sort of held it. We used to have two guns out each side, but they broke the

01:30 stanchions away, there were too much recoil on the things, so they reduced to one gun each, out the side. Then underneath, in some of the later models, there was a belly turret, which used to retract inside the aircraft. And because it interfered with the air flow a bit, so that would be hydraulically dropped down underneath. And that was a terrible position. I got in that one day, and I think about thirty seconds was enough, I came back up out of there. It

02:00 was terrible. You're hanging down underneath looking through perspex and it was a revolting spot to be in.

What, because of the discomfort or …

Oh, it's just scary sitting there and looking at nothing. You're underneath the aeroplane. It's a very

worrying spot to be in. We didn't get too many volunteers for that job.

Well, when you ... who knows the

02:30 **target?**

Oh, the navigator, of course, the bombardier and the two pilots, would know the target. The rest just go along for the ride. Mind you …

So they give the order to the bombardier, is he also described as a bomb aimer?

Well, that's the English and Australian term. Bombardier is the American term. Which I'm using because I got used to it.

03:00 But they had another task. We used to have to do some work on planning which way they'd approach the target, because you'd get a print out of where the ack ack batteries were, and their cone of fire, and if you could you'd pick trying to get in between the cones of fire in the shortest run possible. Where they couldn't get at you.

03:30 So that was his job, to sort of plan the approach to it. We sort of provided him with the wherewithal to get there.

And what about, you know, when you've got to use the guns, they're firing, who gives the orders to start firing?

That's the gunners' job. If they see enemy aircraft, they get going.

Right. So they make that decision themselves?

Yes. Mind you, if somebody up the front says there's enemy aircraft a two o'clock,

04:00 or something, and all the rest of us wake up, and which way is it heading.

So you're constantly communicating with each other?

Oh yes. There was intercom right through the aircraft. That was very good, it was terrific. And we had throat microphones which fitted on there, so that you didn't have to pick up a microphone, you kept your hands ready for flying. And a little button on the control column that pressed the talk switch.

04:30 And you'd check all that out several times on the way up there. So you'd go right through the whole team, just to make sure all the intercom was working.

Yes, so I didn't ask you about that, there must have been certain checks that you did before you even took off?

Oh, yes, you'd check all the equipment out, go right through the whole thing.

And how many bombs, I mean, what was the capacity of the bomber, how many bombs would you be dropping?

Well on a

05:00 short run, you'd carry eight thousand pounds which was the maximum you could fit in. On a very long run, you'd cut that back to four thousand because you'd have the two front bomb bays fitted with long range tanks, which are big rubber self sealing tanks. So that's all you could get in it.

And what were your targets?

What were the targets?

05:30 Well, in Java and Surabaya there was the Braat Engineering works and munitions factories and so forth, all along the side of the river there. Pomela, there was the nickel mine. There were a lot of aerodromes we used to attack, one at Nabire in New Guinea. We used to try and destroy the strip there, it was a fighter strip and they used to give us a lot of trouble from there.

06:00 Various other islands, fighter strips, we used to try and get rid of all those. Any aircraft on the ground. We didn't go for any shipping. The Australian air force attacked quite a lot of shipping. I think the American though, that was a pretty hopeless procedure, trying to hit a ship, cause a ship can twist and dodge, it's very hard to hit one of those.

And they'd always have their anti aircraft

06:30 **guns too, wouldn't they?**

Yes, yes, yeah. I'm just trying to think of another target that we had. Oh Balikpapan, that was the oil instillations there, that painting on the wall there, is of Balikpapan, there. Made a fairly successful strike there, and set the oil tanks

07:00 on fire.

Yes that's what I was wondering, did you always see the results of your work, I mean were you sure that the bombs hit where they were supposed to hit?

I can remember on two occasions, one at Surabaya where we came in and hit the place in a severe thunderstorm in the middle of the night, and we made a pass over, we were the lead ship in there, we were supposed to light the place up, and we

07:30 missed the target on the first run over the city, and ack ack was pretty severe, so Joe says, "We'll go round again." And I said, "Oh, okay." So around we went again and I was pretty keen this time, I looked at the river and I could spot the river reflections from the river, and got us on the right track. And we dropped a complete load of incendiaries, we left a

08:00 trail of about a mile long and about a couple of hundred yards wide. And they're diabolical things, these incendiaries, they're about, from memory, about two feet long and they were double ended. The first foot was a rubberised thing which got on fire and then it would burn up to the other end. The other end was a magnesium flare, and when that burst it

08:30 sent burning magnesium all over the place. They were diabolical things, terrible things. You know, that's what we were using. And that left a magnificent trail, it looked like a runway right through the industrial area there. And of course all the other aircraft came in and followed up and bombed the pattern.

Well, these areas, would they have been populated by

09:00 **local people?**

Well I suppose there were workers there. There must have been workers in the factory because, you know, they were going day and night, producing munitions. And I guess we must have killed a lot civilians with it, but you never know. You wouldn't get any feed back. Except we had a Mosquito outfit, that's an aeroplane, the Mosquito, and they were fitted with cameras and they used

09:30 to go over the next day or the day after to take photos of the damage. They could go up pretty high, and they were very fast, so nobody could catch them. And providing the weather was right, you'd get some good photos.

Yes, and when you are on these missions, how many aircraft go up?

Well, sometimes about eight or ten, in

10:00 some instances we sent up about fifty, I think, at one stage, up in New Guinea. We were after a pretty big target at Hollandia, where we had Z Force reporting that there were two hundred Japanese aircraft.

So Z Force, what that the intelligence or …

They're the boys that we used to drop over at night, in a parachute. They

10:30 should have got a V.C. [Victoria Cross] each one of them.

They were special forces?

Oh, God yes. We would drop them, and they'd be there for a couple of months with a little radio, reporting the movements of Japanese people. And then they'd be picked up by a submarine or Catalina later on, and brought back again. And astonishing enough, they went out more than once. I reckon once would be enough. But I have lunch every two months with a group, and Laurie Black is

11:00 one of those fellows that we used to drop over, and some of his experiences were terrible. They were dropped, in one instance, right on top of a Jap camp. They made a mistake in the drop. And only by great fortitude, they got away. They lost a lot of equipment. They had to be re-equipped with another drop. And

11:30 one crew got lost altogether there, a complete aircraft went in and probably hit the cliffs, I don't know, they never found them.

Well when you came back from a mission, I mean, did you always wait around to see if all the planes would come back, I mean, you always knew how many had gone off?

Oh, yes, you knew. If one was missing you'd wait about. You knew that

12:00 if it was more than an hour late, that he wasn't going to get back.

Well what happened then? Was there any ritual associated with …

No, no. Usually what would happen in those cases, they would wait for a couple of weeks and if there's no further news, they'd auction all their equipment off. Their private stuff, that was sent back to the States

12:30 for the family, as a rule. So that was all auctioned off amongst the rest of the crews. In fact I got a pair of field glasses I got from one of the crash crews. My son, Peter's got that now.

When you say, auctioned off, does that mean that people paid for it?

Yes. The rest of the crews had the opportunity to buy any of the equipment. Because all the fellows had sub, not sub-standard, but equipment that

13:00 they brought over. One fellow had a pair of Colt revolvers with mother of pearl handles that his family had given him. He was a Chinese pilot. And they didn't want to send those back to the States, so they … I put in a bid for those, I missed out. Another fellow bought them, and he used to wander around the camp with these two pistols, and holsters around the side, and a big leather belt around his

13:30 … quite a character.

Well when … there wasn't a mark of respect or anything, when they were marked down as missing?

No, no ceremony, no. Just a happening and that was it.

Well did that bother you, did that bother anybody?

No. I think it bothered a lot of people who were very

14:00 friendly … some crews were very friendly with other crews, others kept to themselves. Cause they were in tents dotted about, you weren't in a big hall together, you were spread over a few acres, I think, in tents. Our particular tent was near the hospital which was a very handy spot. I put an electrical lead from there, so we had electric light. And I borrowed some

14:30 piping, and we had a tap inside the tent, we had quite a good set up there.

Well do you know how many missions that you went on, all up?

Not a great number, I think about fifteen, or thereabouts. Because the CO didn't go on every mission, so I … I did a lot of other flying, but not missions.

15:00 **And you said before, that when you were out of these missions, you were uptight. Can you explain how you felt?**

Well very nervous with the first one, in particular. Had no idea how I was going to react under pressure. You know, you get under pressure at various times in your life, but that sort of pressure's a little bit different. But I was kind of surprised to find that I was able to

15:30 stay reasonably calm and operate under pressure. Some of the people couldn't. One particular fellow, he was a radar counter measure operator, his first trip there a 75mm shell came through into the bottom of the aircraft, and exploded inside, and he was standing up working his equipment

16:00 and the aircraft finished up like a pepper pot, little holes all round the place. And he got a scar on both cheeks, that was the only damage he got. But when he got back, he refused to fly. And they sent him back to Melbourne for a court martial, for lack of moral fibre. Which was pretty rough really. Because some people can stand pressure better than others.

16:30 **So that's what lack of moral fibre means, you wilted under pressure?**

Wilted under pressure, yeah.

And well he was court martialled, so does that mean he … what happened to him?

Well he came back through in a Beaufort as a navigator, about four months later, which I was quite surprised to see. So they must have just transferred him I don't know what the result of the case

17:00 was. I suppose it's on record there somewhere.

And so you were quite happy, then, with the way you reacted to this …

Yes, I was surprised that I could remain calm and still operate. Because some people freeze up.

Yes, that's what I was going to ask you. Is this what happens, is it, they … what they just can't do anything?

That's right. You almost become immobile,

17:30 can't control their functions at all. But if you get hit by a Japanese fighter, you get your dander up and that seems to make them recover pretty smartly.

Yes I was wondering how would they snap out of it?

Big fright like that. If you get hit by anti aircraft fire or something, that makes everybody wild as hell,

18:00 and you get stuck into it once again.

And when you're on the bombing mission, are you in communication with the other aircraft in the formation?

You can be, but you don't normally. Unless somebody gets … lost an engine, or on fire, something like that. Usually you keep quiet because you don't want the Japanese to pick up anything. So it's only in an emergency that you would contact another aircraft.

18:30 **And when you were out on a mission, did you have time to appreciate the landscape?**

Yes, because you weren't that high. We never … usually travelling around eight thousand feet to twelve thousand, at the most. Occasionally, we got up to fifteen or sixteen, but not very often. Because oxygen was fairly scarce, and you had to use oxygen at that height. So we

19:00 stuck round at the low level.

And so what was the scenery like up there?

Pretty good actually. The airline flying, in the early days with TAA, is much the same. We used to go to Perth, six thousand, eight thousand, ten thousand feet. And you could see all the rabbit burrows almost. All the terrain all the way over, which is pretty interesting. These days, you can't see a damn thing, you're up … you know.

So what did you see up there, what was the landscape like?

Well, there was a lot of water,

19:30 of course, a tremendous amount of water, and you're very pleased to see an island. You couldn't see the islands, because there's thousands of them up there, you couldn't see them, but you could see the, well you could when you got up close, but you could see a little mound of cloud over the top of them, and you always pick out where the islands were by little knobs of cloud. Apparently the drift sends the air up and it forms a cloud over the top. So you can sort of pin

20:00 point your way around with these little clouds.

We'll just stop the tape there for a minute. Oh, yes, I had this question about … back at base, were there any aboriginal staff there?

Not there. There was at … a group at Adelaide River under the control of an Australian.

20:30 In fact, the Americans wanted to get some boomerangs, so they asked if I'd go down and see the, I can't think of what the fellow's name was, Keeper or whatever he is, to see if we could organise some boomerangs. And he said, "How many do you want?" And I said, "Oh, about thirty." And he says, "Okay, I'll get them going"." Called down there about two months later, and they hadn't finished one. Typical sort of aboriginal approach,

21:00 in those days. They didn't do much for their sustenance.

So there were no aboriginal people in the RAAF, then?

Yeah, there was one. There was an aboriginal pilot, I think we had, in the RAAF. But I don't know what his name is, I can't help you there, but I know there was one. We had a Chinese pilot too, Roy Goon, he was a remarkable man.

Was he?

Yeah.

And what made him so remarkable?

21:30 Oh, he was a first class pilot, he was a fantastic pilot. He could do anything with an aircraft.

And when you went off on your missions, you said they were always day time.

No, no, not always.

Oh, they weren't?

No. Surabaya was at night and Balikpapan, that one was at night time. It was such a long run and you wanted to get there in the dark, so that you'd get a good go at it.

22:00 If you were trying to get there in the day time, you'd get clobbered. We used to, for Surabaya, we used to take off about half past five, I think, in the afternoon, six o'clock, somewhere around about there. The idea was to arrive in Java about just after twelve, or one o'clock, somewhere around about there, a fairly quite time we hoped. We hoped that some of them were asleep.

22:30 **Ed, I was just wondering if you could describe some of the worst missions, the worst hair raising, or the most frightening?**

Probably, the first one I remember particularly, was Surabaya mission. We were originally based at Fenton, but we went across to a place called Corunna Downs, which

23:00 was about ten mile out of Marble Bar, where there was a decent sized strip that we could operate from. And we left there at about half past five, six o'clock at night, travelled all night until we got to Surabaya, about half past twelve, one o'clock in the morning. We travelled by a route … we

23:30 dodged Surabaya initially, when went round an island called Madura, up the north of Surabaya, in Java, mainly to fox the Japanese, so we came in from a different angle. Came down south over Surabaya, in the middle of a severe thunderstorm. And the place was alight with the electric light, street lights were on,

24:00 but we were getting ack ack at the same time. And we made a run of the, where we thought the Braat Engineering works was, but we missed it on the first one, first run around, we overshot. So my commanding officer says, "We'll go around again." Which is not a nice thing to do because the ack ack had got your range by this time. We came

24:30 around the second time, and the Braat Engineering works is along side of the river at Surabaya, so I picked up the river with the reflections of the ack ack and so forth, and got us on the right direction. And we went across the engineering works, and as we were the lead ship in, we were dropping incendiaries to light up the area. And we had

25:00 a trail of about a mile long and about a hundred yards or so, wide. Lit up the place considerably for the following aircraft. And we were very pleased to get away from there. We left the area and found our way back to Marble Bar, which wasn't too easy, because there's no features there, in Australia. We had a chap back at Corunna Downs or Marble Bar,

25:30 holding down a key on his radio set so that we could use the radio compass to pick out where the place was. And that's the way we all found our way back to the base.

And how did you feel when you got back?

Dead, absolutely dead.

What did you actually do when you got back then, what was the procedure there?

Well, funnily enough, the night before we went,

26:00 there was a Medical. Officer, an Australian Med officer there, and he could see I was the only Australian in the group, and he said, "I've got the only bottle of beer in the camp." And he says, "And I'll put the water drip feed over it, and cool it down, we'll have it when you get back." Now I never drank beer at that stage, I couldn't stand the taste, but I couldn't knock him back. So got back in the morning and he was waiting for me, and he says, "Come down to the tent with me and we'll

26:30 have this bottle of beer." And it was pretty salty sort of water, and got encrusted on the beer bottle with the salt and so forth on the outside of it. And I had a glass of this beer, it was Red Castle Ale. I don't know if you've ever had that in your life, but it's the worst beer. You could buy it by the ton in Western Australia, nobody would drink the stuff. And it was about the only available beer in any quantity. Anyhow, I had one glass of this,

27:00 and I said I didn't feel too well. So I went back and fell asleep.

So you actually, yeah, you were able to sleep then? I mean, you were totally exhausted …

Oh, I was totally exhausted, yeah, yeah.

And would that happen with any of the long, those long haul missions that you did?

It depended on what it was. If it was a frightening one, like this Balikpapan was, that was very, very heavily defended,

27:30 and Surabaya which was heavily defended then, then you'd be on tenterhooks long before you left to go there. And your nerves would be on edge for a long, long time and that wears you out quite a bit.

Yes, well you mentioned before that you didn't eat. You didn't eat or drink while you were on …

No, I never had anything to eat in the aircraft. I never felt

28:00 like it or anything. And I don't remember drinking. Whether we had a water bottle, I can't recall, I don't know.

And were all the missions about fifteen hours, seventeen hours?

About eight, I think, was the shortest one I ever did. And the rest … you see, we used to cover the areas that the twin engine bombers couldn't get to. That was our function. We were called a long range group. And

28:30 we overshot all the runs that the Beauforts and Mitchells and all that smaller stuff could get to. And went beyond that into stuff that the Japanese thought they were safe.

Well down to the basics. What happens if you needed to relieve ones self?

Well, some of the crews had a bucket.

29:00 But I could hold on pretty well, so that didn't worry me there. It seems strange, you get under tension and I don't think … you probably perspire that much because it's that damn hot on take off, you'd lose quite a few pints of perspiration, you'd get off the ground and you'd just be wet through with perspiration. Because it's very hot at Marble Bar, as you know, and Darwin.

Hottest place in Australia,

29:30 **isn't it?**

Yes, I'll say.

And it's not that tropical heat either, …

It's dry. And there are millions of flies there. God, it's an exasperating place to be in. Terrible place.

And when you were flying these missions, when they were planned, were they ever cancelled because of bad weather?

Yes. Occasionally they'd be delayed, I don't think we ever cancelled one. They'd be delayed

30:00 because of bad weather, or because aircraft had been shifted from the place you were going to bomb, so it was better to wait until they got a few on the ground as well. We had one at Hollandia, there, we left a bomb from Nadzab and that was, there were two hundred aircraft on the ground, we got notification from Z Force that they were on their way down. So we were waiting

30:30 round there for hours and hours, for take off, until they reckoned that by the time they got down, we should be somewhere near, ready to bomb them, because they were refuelling on a tanker. So we sort of caught them in between their landing and their refuelling. So we got about two hundred aircraft on the ground. That was a really good effort. We got a Presidential citation for that

31:00 trip.

Right. And so what did the Presidential citation say?

Oh, I've got a copy of it in there. It says – for outstanding effort, for the group, for the …

And were many of those awarded?

We got two. And the E group got another one at the Philippines after I left. So they got three.

Well you said before, I mean, you

31:30 **fitted … you were an Australian with the American, the U.S. Air Force, and you said they did have different ways of doing things, can you just tell us …**

Oh, different cockpit drill and that sort of thing. Very abbreviated cockpit drill, they had. I had to change altogether when I got up to Tocumwal, after I left there. They reckoned my cockpit drill wasn't good enough.

Oh, could you just give a couple of examples

32:00 **there of what the difference was?**

Well, the Yanks would just say – gear down, and flaps down, and pitch, fulling fine mixture, full rich and that sort of thing, but the Australian group had a sheet with about forty different items to check. Whether it needed it or not, you had to check it. So that was much more complicated than the American system.

And

32:30 **so which do you think was the most effective?**

Well, the American system worked pretty well. Whether the Australian was any better, I don't know. I don't think it really was. It was just more labour involved, more work involved to get the same result.

And the other mission I'd like you to tell us about, was the one where you lost,

33:00 **well it wasn't a bombing mission, as you explained, where two engines weren't operating, so could you tell us?**

Well we were on the way down from Darwin, with a load of people going on leave, and we got down to somewhere around about Gawler, I think, just north of Mallala, and we lost two motors on one side, on the left side, which is not too nice to be flying on sort of asymmetric

33:30 flying. And we were busy, well both of us were busy, because we were trying to transfer fuel from, we woke up that fuel wasn't transferring from one tank to another, that's the reason why we dropped out.

So we were busy trying to transfer from the right hand side to the left hand side, without any luck, we gave up in the finish. And over Mallala we passed through a formation of three Hansons doing training exercises

34:00 and a friend of mine was in one of them, I found out later. But we didn't see them. We had our heads down trying to organise this fuel transfer. Anyhow, we got over down towards Parafield, and I knew Parafield because I'd been there for thirteen months as a fitter, early in the war, and decided I knew which was the longest way in, so we crept round that way, and dropped it in. And we,

34:30 I think we had what we call an unflapped landing, because our hydraulics had packed up, which means that you do a long less angle approach, than it is with flaps. With flaps down you can come in fairly steeply, but without the flaps you've got to do a long slide in, so to speak. Anyway, we landed and got in and we ran

35:00 across the complete area, we did a wheelie down to the far end, and missed the fence. And we just got out and left it there. And we all walked over to the terminal building, I suppose there would have been about thirty of us, altogether. And I was the only RAAF character there. And Wing Commander Plumber, who was the CO a very pompous individual, so I thought, and

35:30 he came up to me and he says, "I'm going to have you court martialled." And I said, "What for?" He says, "For landing without permission from the tower, and interrupting flying training on the base." I said, "Excuse me sir." I said, "We had two engines feathered on the left hand side." And he said, "I've got news for you, laddie, those aeroplanes can fly on one engine." And I knew the group would be very pleased to hear that, because we had to struggle with

36:00 two. Anyway, that was the last that I heard of that.

Could they really fly on one engine?

I have flown on one engine, but you lose a lot of height and you're gradually losing height, doing that. But I have feathered three engines, proving to some pilots that you can do that.

Well,

36:30 **on these missions, the bombing missions, was there ever one that you felt that you mightn't make it back on?**

Yes, there was one at Hollandia, we were flying out of Nadzab, and that was the one where two hundred aircraft were on the ground, and we got up there, we were the lead ship in again, flying with the CO we were nearly always the lead ship,

37:00 and we were approaching it and I could see little dots on the ground, looking sort of like a cigarette alight, and I was looking at those, about five of them, and I didn't know what they were, and they all flashed on at once, they were radar operated search lights. And they all hit our aircraft at the same time, so I ducked my head back in, trying to recover my eye sight, which

37:30 was a bit dead at that stage. And so we were getting pretty severe ack ack at that stage, of course, because the search lights were on us. Anyway we decided to continue, and we hit the strip quite well, we dropped our bomb load there, and then we went out to sea, paralleling the coast, to watch the other aircraft come in, and we were busy

38:00 laughing at them getting caught with the search lights, and some were trying to corkscrew, some of them had been European crews, I think, no they couldn't have been, because they were Americans at that stage, but they were trying to corkscrew out of this search light cone, not having that much luck. I think the ones that just got on with it and just flew in straight and dropped their bomb, got away. Anyhow, we were out to sea about half a mile or so, going backwards and forwards, watching

38:30 the action, and we'd been there for about fifteen or twenty minutes and a stream of tracer bullets came at us from the back. We didn't realise that there were Jap night fighters, at that stage. So we turned round and came home pretty fast. But on the way home, we decided to come home the short way, through the Markham River Valley, and we came over

39:00 an aerodrome called Gusap, which was a fighter area, where the fighter groups were based, and Joe Cesario says, "God damn, I'm pooped, I'm going to take a nap." and he says, "You got it." And I said "Okay." So I'm busy flying along on automatic pilot, no trouble at all, and in and out of wispy cloud and the automatic pilot packed up, just gave up,

39:30 so I switched that off and went back onto manual flying. Flying along for about another ten minutes, and all the gyroscopic instruments went out on me, just flopped. And that's getting a little bit serious. And there's only one other instrument apart from the air speed which was still going, that's a sort of little (UNCLEAR)

40:00 but there was a turning bank indicator which was an old fashioned instrument, a sort of the last resort instrument, in front of the captain's seat. And I was busy trying to keep the aircraft stable, sort of twisting my head over the side, looking at this instrument, and I got a bit out of control. And we were in and out of cloud, if it had been clear, it would have been no trouble, but we were in the cloud. So I gave

Joe a great thump on the leg, and

40:30 woke him up and said, “The instruments are out, get on the bat and ball.” And Joe picked it up, he was a first class pilot, and we flew through the clouds down back into Nadzab. But that was pretty scary because we’re in between mountains, coming down the valley.

Tape 6

00:33 Well we left Fenton for Nadzab, a group of us, two squadrons, I think, left, and we went up via the Gulf of Carpentaria, up to Port Moresby. We carried a full bomb load because they were very short of bombs up in New Guinea. So we loaded up with those before we left. And what we didn’t know was that Port Moresby had one of those

01:00 steel matting strips, because it was fairly boggy ground there. And they’d lay a steel matting for top surface of the runway, and that makes an awful clatter when you land. We put down, but we didn’t see it because it was in the dark, we didn’t see the steel matting, or at least I didn’t, and an enormous clatter, like somebody throwing bags of stones on a tin roof, and

01:30 I thought the aircraft was disintegrating, there was that much noise. Anyway, we stayed there overnight, I can’t remember just where, but we stayed there, and left the next morning for Nadzab, which is the other side of New Guinea. And the maps we were given were showing the highest point, it was twelve thousand feet. But I’d read a

02:00 bit about New Guinea and I reckoned there were rocks from twelve thousand to fifteen thousand, anyway. So I suggested to Joe that we go out to sea from Port Moresby and pick up a bit of height before we try to cross. So we did that. And we crossed about fifteen or sixteen thousand feet. But we lost, I’m not sure how many, but we lost some aircraft going across, because they took the map for granted and

02:30 went in, hit the hill somewhere. Anyhow, we got across to the coast, and went along the coast to Lae and went into Nadzab from there. We had nothing, it was a bit of a rush exercise. And Gus Connery, I was with that day, said, “We’re not flying for a while.” so he says,

03:00 “You’re procurement officer.” I said, “What does that mean?” And he said, “Here’s a list, you go down to the quarter masters store and there’s the list of stuff we need for two squadrons.” So I went down there and I signed for about two hundred tents, four hospital marquees, forty jeeps, some weapon carriers, and knives and forks for everybody, because we had nothing. And I says, “What do I do?” He says, “Well you get all that, you sign for all that stuff.” Millions

03:30 of dollars worth of stuff I signed for. And he said, “You get the Seabees [American military engineers] to erect the tents where you want them to go.” And I said, “I don’t know where to go.” And he says, “Well the Seabees will know where there’s open space.” So we went down there, and they had it all up in a day. Fantastic, those mob. They erected the whole lot in a day, and we were all equipped and ready to go.

And the Seabees?

Seabees are an American outfit

04:00 like a construction mob, they are. Seabees I think they called them. Busy bees they were.

When you lost those … it was two aircraft that were lost?

I can’t remember how many were lost, but I know we lost a few.

And what effect did that have on the rest you?

Well you expected losses. So …

04:30 it wasn’t nice, but that’s part of the business. It didn’t have a great effect on a lot of us because we expected something. In fact my CO said … I asked him how he managed to last so long, and he said, “Well, when I joined the air force in 1940.” I think it was, he says, “I knew I was a gonner.” so he said, “I just sat back there and relaxed and waited for it to happen.”

05:00 So he says, “That’s the thing to do, just stay relaxed when you’re flying, don’t get up tight because you make more mistakes.”

Well what would you … did you have any philosophy, I mean, about …

No, no. I didn’t have but I learnt a lot from him. He’d been through the war. He went through Malaysia uprising, Vietnam, Korea, Berlin air lift, and then he became Air Force One pilot, flying the President around.

05:30 So he was a top class pilot. Fantastic pilot.

Well did you ever take a lucky charm with you?

No, didn't have a rabbit's foot or anything like that, or photos.

And religious faith?

No, had none. My father was a priest but I've got no religion whatsoever. Agnostic I think they call it, don't they? Never depended on anything but myself.

Well

06:00 **I think it's important to talk about your Captain here. Yes you obviously learnt a lot from him, what were the skills … were they skills or attitudes …**

Both. He was remarkably skilled. He could fly that thing just like you would a fighter aeroplane. He could twist it around … I would never try to do, although I had to do it later, as an instructor,

06:30 because you've got to demonstrate what the capabilities of the aircraft are to crews who are scared stiff of them. And he was able to show me how it stalled and you'd take it up like this and it'd flop on it's belly, and shudder away there, awful feeling, to me it was, anyway. Some people delight in doing those sorts of things. The fighter pilots love those

07:00 sort of antics. But to me, that's a bit scary.

So had he always flown the B-24's? What had he trained on?

Oh, he trained on something like a Wirraway, an NA33, I think it was, which the Wirraway was designed after. And they flew that, then they went on to some twin engine aircraft, I'm not sure what it was, 'cause I don't know the American aircraft too well. Then he went on to

07:30 the B-24's at , I think, El Paso, somewhere in the south-west, desert country, where there are no hills to hit. And they went on to Tucson, a place called Tucson, and then they came out. But they all had very low hours when they came out. A couple of hundred hours, which was surprising. The RAAF wouldn't let you

08:00 fly a Liberator unless you had oodles of hours, and usually they were fairly senior people. Mainly because we didn't have any aircraft, and the younger fellows never got a good go at it. They'd get a sort of crappy sort of aircraft, like an Avro Anson, or Lockheeds to fly around in. But on the senior fellows, as a rule, got a go at the B-24.

08:30 **Well how many B-24's did Australia have?**

We have about two hundred and eighty in the finish. We had quite a team. We had four squadrons, 21 23 25 and 24 squadrons. And we had a couple of special duty flights, like 200 flight, they were formed later, they used to drop the Z Force people over the

09:00 islands. And there was one other flight, I don't know what they were used for.

Do you know where they operated out of, the Liberators? What bases?

Leyburn, I think, the Z Force worked from. 200 Flights. Somewhere up in Queensland. But all the four squadrons operated out of Fenton and Long, they took over when our mob, the 380th group, moved out. They moved out to Darwin

09:30 in about July, August. August, I think, 1944. About a month after I'd left. And the Australian squadrons took over the same areas.

Oh, I see. Now, Captain Cesario, how much older than you was he?

Oh, about eighteen months, I suppose.

Oh, so you were really quite close in

10:00 **age?**

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

And so he … well he couldn't have been in the U.S. Air Force for any longer than you'd been in the Australian air force?

No, but he went straight into flying and I was a fitter for the first three years, so there was a difference there. But my training as a fitter was pretty useful in the flying side. I know, later on when I was with TAA, the ground crew used to dread me coming in

10:30 because they knew I'd pin prick and pick up all the faults, tell them what to fix. They'd say – what does he know? Not knowing I'd been a fitter earlier in the piece.

Yes, I think we mentioned that on tape yesterday, didn't we, that you were unique in that you had that other knowledge, technical knowledge?

Yes, yes, on both sides.

Well, I suppose I didn't really ask you, was being a pilot all that you imagined it to be?

11:00 More than I imagined it to be. Mainly because of the run I had, I think. I had an astonishing run from initial training through to advanced training. And straight on to a B-24, which was an enormous gap, really. No O.T.U. training as most of our people had, RAAF people. They'd go through an Operational Training Unit base, like Tocumwal

11:30 or Bairnsdale, or somewhere. Which gave you sort of battle experience before you went into action. But in my case, I just went straight in as co-pilot into an operational squadron.

How many hours did you have up?

I think about a hundred and eighty, or something like that. Not a hell of a lot.

12:00 Not enough, anyway. I was just lucky that …

But anyway, back to Captain Cesario, he obviously had a high opinion of you too.

Oh, yes. We both admired each other, I think.

Yes, well what were the other attributes of him that you admired?

He was very polite. Very correct. His dress was immaculate.

12:30 And his knowledge was … he gained a lot of his knowledge. He studied everything. There wasn't a thing that he missed. He used to look after his crew particularly well, which was a great attribute for a captain of an aircraft to foster

13:00 his crew. That's part of the system, if you don't have a crew that have complete faith in you, you don't get very good results.

So what makes this A1 flyer, or Captain?

I think just consideration for his crew, as much as anything. I think the best crews I had, going through Tocumwal, were the ones that had the best rapport with their crew.

13:30 They used to get together, and talk together. And one particular crew, I remember at Tocumwal, I got them declared the best crew of that course. Mainly because of the way they co-operated. They were magnificent.

I know that people always say that luck plays a great role in war,

14:00 **and of course, over the course of the war, I think the RAAF anyway, sustained, percentage wise, a greater casualty rate than the other services, so do you think these skills these people exhibited was a factor in them being lucky, or is luck just … I'm**

14:30 **wondering, do you make your own luck, I suppose that's what I'm trying to say.**

To a certain extent you do. If you've got a very great knowledge of the aircraft and it's bits and pieces, then your luck improves some what. But other than that, if you get shot by ack ack, well you can't avoid that, you can't do much about that. Or if a Jap aircraft attacks you, it's the luck of the draw, whether you get hit or not. It just depends

15:00 on his luck, not yours.

And how did you assess you skills as a pilot?

I thought I … well I didn't think I was that good, when I was with the Americans. But after a while at Tocumwal, I increased my skills considerably. Got more familiar with the aircraft, and able to throw it around and do what I liked with it, pretty well. But I

15:30 also had a check with the Consolidated Test Pilot, a fellow by the name of Jack Kelly, and he'd gone through the American outfit I was with, testing all the pilots, and they were all scarred stiff of him. And I know why, because he used to frighten the hell out of you. You'd take off and he'd pull a motor, cut a motor on take off, which wasn't

16:00 good, but nevertheless, you knew how to cope with it, but then he'd cut another one on the same side which was diabolical, it's very difficult to control. And then he'd put you in all sorts of desperate situations, you'd sort of put a hood in front of you and put the aircraft in an almost impossible position, and you'd have to get your way out of that. All those sorts of things.

Well, I mean, when you were with the Americans, I mean, you were a co-pilot all the time, weren't you, and how often

16:30 **would you have to take over?**

Yes, yeah. Oh we used to share the flying quite a bit. Cause it got too … if you had to fly manually, it

became too exhausting. You couldn't go through all the rough weather on automatic pilot, or it wasn't deemed to be safe. So we used to fly it manually through that, and you might be in that for an hour and a half, two hours, on the way out and then you'd do the same on the way back.

17:00 And you'd be in just a lather. Your arms would be … feel like block of lead. In fact, two of us used to fly that in some cases, it's that turbulent in those stuff.

Well what is the turbulence doing to the aircraft? I mean, it's pretty heavy isn't it?

Oh, very heavy when you get into that stuff. Severe thunderstorms. And it's like going through into a cyclone, you bounce around all over the place.

17:30 You know, wings like that and your nose pumps up and down, and you're all over the place.

So you're really struggling to maintain control of the aircraft?

Yeah, that's right, yeah.

So what would happen if you just lost control of it?

Well, this particular aircraft, I think, was reasonably stable. I think if you lost control, it would eventually come out. But whether you'd come out in the water or in the rocks, just depending on where you were at the time. But it's a

18:00 pretty rough trip.

Well, okay. Well we'll go back to Fenton now. Did you get into Darwin often?

No. I went up there twice, I think. Once when the aircraft was shot up and they landed at Darwin, put it in there for repairs. And I went up there with another pilot to bring it back. It wasn't ready when we got there. And I knew there was a

18:30 fitter I did the course with originally, working on a Spitty [Spitfire] Squadron there. So I took off my badges of rank, because they didn't look too good walking around. Finally found him, and earlier someone had seen me before I took my cap off and badges of rank off, and they said, "Oh, Jerry, there's an officer looking for you around the place." And I eventually caught up

19:00 with him and he said, "What are you going to have for lunch?" And I said, "I'm going to go with you in the airman's mess." So went down there and they're all chiacking him about knowing an officer. And I couldn't let on and Jerry, his ears were burning, he was blushing away there. And didn't know what to do. And I eventually finished that and got out and put all my badges back on

19:30 and …. The fellows all started to apologise.

Well what's the difference between being another rank and an officer? What were the differences that you experienced?

Well, you were subservient to officers, you had to salute every officer whenever you went past him.

And did you always do that?

Oh, yeah. You had to otherwise you were up on a

20:00 charge for not doing the right thing. Funnily enough, when I first got my commission at Point Cook, I'd been needled by a drill instructor there, who was always giving me what have you. And I got on the train at Laverton with my mother, she came down, and went to the train

20:30 station at Laverton, an old lady came up to me and said, "Excuse me porter, can you tell me when the next train goes?" Which deflated me considerably. Then I got on to Flinders Street Station, and there was this corporal, and I'd just got my new uniform as an officer, and I walked round and round that fellow, made him salute me each time I walked around him. Got my own back.

21:00 Sadistic streak of nature, isn't it?

Well, what did this instructor down at Point Cook do, how would he needle you? What were the sorts of things he would say or do?

Well air crew had to, as I said before, you had to run everywhere so if you stopped, they'd grab you, give you extra duties or some other damn thing or another. Black mark against you. That was their job to keep us in

21:30 fear, I think, all the time. And they monitored everything we did. It was a very severe air crew training course, really. Particularly so, if you'd come straight from civilian life into air crew. I wasn't quite so awed, because I'd been in the ground staff for quite a while, and sort of tell them to jump in the lake.

So you got a bit cheekier then, did you?

Well, yes. You do after a while. We had some

22:00 fellows from the Middle East in my course, you know, that had been in the army, and they wouldn't take any of that sort of treatment. If they did they'd gang up on the fellow and do him over or something at night time, beat him up, straighten him out a bit.

Well you spent nine months up in the Northern Territory …

Yes I did.

Now, were you corresponding with friends, family, or were you getting letters from them?

Yes. Not very often. We had a

22:30 Post Office Box, APO921 San Francisco, it was. The APO, it just meant there was a base in Australia, I think, the number. It was army post office 921. And yeah, I used to get letter, I think, about once a week or so. In fact the first … my

23:00 mother had baked a cake, a fruit cake, and things were pretty scarce, eggs and sugar and so forth, raisons were almost as scarce as hens teeth, and she sent this up for Christmas time up at Fenton. It arrived … it came … it was all fragmented by the time it got up there. But we sort of welded it together, pushed it together. And she said …. The Americans said, "You live in Melbourne,

23:30 don't you?" And I said, "Yeah." They said, "Right, you can get on the first aircraft and go home for Christmas." I thought, God, that's pretty good. So they gave me a week off for Christmas to go home.

Well, had you warned anyone? Was it a surprise to family?

No, I didn't have time. About the 23rd, I think, of December, they decided I could go home for Christmas.

That must have been fantastic.

Oh, it was. Only because I had this damn cake.

24:00 So I gave it to the Red Cross girl there to hand out to the troops. And she was very happy with that.

So how many were there at Christmas that year, at your place? Did you have it at your place?

At home, yeah, at Dandenong. Oh, I don't know. I was probably the only one, apart from the rest of the family who were still going to school, at that stage.

Right, your family, then, had moved from Brighton out …

Yes. They had

24:30 sold the business at Brighton.

When did they do that?

About 1941, sometime in '41, I think.

Right, so during the war, then?

Yeah, yeah.

And in the letters that you did get, was it just your mother wrote? Did other people write to you?

No. My mother was always the correspondent in the family.

And what sort of things would she write about? What was she telling you about in her letters?

Oh, just about rationing, and so forth.

25:00 And what little she heard of the news. Our outfit was a sort of secret base, and there was no mention of anything in the papers about what we did, really. But I used to sort of give her oblique references in my letters, which I've still got there. She kept them all, and when she died a little while ago, I was going … I was executor of the estate. Went through and discovered all my letters.

25:30 She'd kept them all.

Must have been fascinating to re read them?

Yes. Every now and again, I look at them, and wonder.

Well, what were you telling her about in your letters, then?

I couldn't tell … I just said, "You might read in the newspapers about something happening up here in the next week or so." That's all you could say, because officers could censor their own letters.

26:00 And you just wrote your signature on the outside of the envelope. But I never ever gave anything away, because we knew there was stuff getting out to Tokyo Rose, pretty early in the piece. We didn't know

how, but we think it might have been one of the station owners in the area, living pretty close by, and he used to spy on us, and transmit the stuff across, some how or other.

So Tokyo

26:30 **Rose, can you tell us about Tokyo Rose? Who was Tokyo Rose?**

She used to broadcast, much like Lord Haw Haw in the European theatre, Tokyo Rose did the same thing for the Japanese. She was a well educated lady, apparently. She could speak very good English. And she had remarkable information, sources. She'd sometimes tell us about a raid we made, and how many aircraft we'd lost. She knew some of the pilots' names,

27:00 which was rather staggering really. We used to listen to her every night on the short wave radio we had.

So, she must have tapped into your radio, then, or your communications?

She had the wrong name for the aerodrome. Where she called us Pine Creek which, Pine Creek was a railway station on the old railway line, about thirty or forty mile away. She used to say – you people in Pine

27:30 Creek, we'll be down next full moon. And give you some hurry up.

Well, with your radio, you were obviously keeping in touch with the political situation. You knew what was going on in both terms of war and (UNCLEAR)

Yeah. Well most of the information was the European theatre, and Paddy Finnegan, and so forth, knocking off so many Germans every other day.

28:00 We got all that news, but we didn't get anything about the Pacific theatre. That was all kept very quiet.

Well how … were you aware … I mean you were up in the Northern Territory, were you aware in Australia of the bombings of Darwin? Well that was early '42. Had the general population been made aware of that? I was under the impression that they hadn't been.

No. There was very little. You heard about it after

28:30 the war, I think, more than anything. But we saw the results of it, because we had some of the refrigerators out of Darwin, that came out of the houses there. Kerosene type refrigerators. We had one in our tent, that somebody had recovered from up there.

That was very civilised, wasn't it?

Yeah. Oh, yes, we had a good system going.

Well, alright. When did you leave

29:00 **Fenton?**

July 7th, 1944, '43, '44 it was.

And where was your next posting? And you were leaving because the U.S. unit was …

No, I was leaving because the RAAF period was nine months, in active service, and I went there on October 7th and I set south on July 7th the following year.

29:30 Then I came back for three weeks leave, or something.

And how did you spend that leave?

I went all round the country side, visiting relatives and went up to Mildura to see my cousins up there, and went back to Dookie College, where I'd went to school, and stayed with the farm manager, which was very interesting. Then came back home. Spent a bit of time wandering around there, with some friends of mine, the Hattam family.

30:00 After that, I was posted, actually, to 37 squadron, which was a DC3, or C47's they were known as. They were flying from Essendon up to Port Moresby delivering gear of all sorts. Some sort of transport run. The day before I went there, I got a telegram saying: "Report to Tocumwal

30:30 for instructional duties." I thought, "God, I've only just been checked out as a plane commander and I'm a B-24 instructor." Which was another sort of staggering shift. I get up to Tocumwal and find out that … they said, "You're only a flying officer, you can't be an instructor as a flying officer, so you'll be promoted to a Flight Lieutenant, acting Flight Lieutenant." They said, "We can't have a flying officer

31:00 teaching Squadron Leaders and Wing Commanders how to fly on a low rank like that."

So, teaching those senior officers … well so they're learning …

Converting on to Liberators.

Yes, well you were fortunate, weren't you, getting that Liberator experience?

Yeah. Most of the other instructors had been in the Air Force for quite a while, and been flying for a much longer time than I had.

31:30 They reckon I was a bit green, so they checked me out there, and I was carrying out the American procedure for circuits and landings, and they said, "That's no good here, you've got to learn our way." So I had to do that.

Well did anyone pass comment on the way the Americans did it?

They all thought that the Americans weren't as good as what our lot were.

32:00 Some were, some weren't.

I was wondering what you thought of that?

Well I knew what the Americans were capable of. And I was very appreciative of what they could do.

And how, when you had to leave the U.S. unit, did they have any special farewell for you?

Oh, they all came round and said they were sorry to see me go. I got a reference from the CO there. Because I said,

32:30 "I've been up here, and they've probably lost track of me." Which they had done. And I said, "Nobody will know what I've been doing." So he wrote me a couple of references there, which are very nice indeed, I've got copies of those.

That was astute of you, then, wasn't it?

Yeah, yeah. I didn't have to use it at Para because they did have a track of what I'd done.

But they still would have had to do a report on you?

That's right, yes. But

33:00 I didn't know what, and it didn't appear as though anything had been done. From my previous experience, in the first six months, they had sort of abandoned me. Just left me there to my own devices, almost. And fortunately, the Yanks took me under control and really gave me a very good go there.

Yes, I was wondering whether you had any contact with the other RAAF people up in the Darwin area, when you were there? When you were at

33:30 **Fenton, but you wouldn't have would you because….**

There was one other. There was a Radar Countermeasure Operator. In fact I got a letter from him, as I said, the other day. His job was to work a little radio set which pin pointed where any radar contact was made from the ground. So they'd pin point that, and put that on a map. So they'd know where to avoid or what to attack, later on.

And there weren't any other Australians, then, working at Fenton?

No.

34:00 Except the radio group that I mentioned earlier. They were the only people.

So you didn't feel any isolation, any sense of isolation from the rest of …

No, it didn't worry me. Quite happy.

Alright then, at Tocumwal and instructing the senior officers. Now, did you get good students?

Some good. I got one fellow, who I

34:30 better not mention his name because he's still alive, but he was a Wing Commander. And I was given him as a pupil, and I took him up and I got him going on circuits and bumps, take off and landing, and he was very slow in getting going there, but he eventually picked that up. And then after that I started to teach him instrument flying, because they are fairly

35:00 complicated instruments in a B-24, and he couldn't get the hang of it at all. Completely hopeless.

Well what was so … I mean, I know you've gone into this to some extent earlier on, but what was so different about the instruments?

Oh, much later stuff. The stuff I'd learnt to fly on was pre war material, you know. And the Americans, you just have to see the car industry,

35:30 they really produce some beautiful stuff. And anyway, this fellow couldn't fly on instruments, I tried to get him to turn left, turn right, and he made a botch of it all the time. And I finished up, I went to the Chief Flying Instructor and I says, "We'll have to scrub this fellow, he can't fly, he can't fly on instruments at all." And the Chief Flying Instructor says, "Oh, you can't wipe out a Wing Commander."

And I says,

36:00 “Well you have a go at him.” And he took him for a day. And he told me the next day “You can have him back, I can’t do anything with him, you’ll have to persevere because we can’t scrub a Wing Commander.” And I eventually talked to him one day, this Wing Commander, I says, “What’s the trouble, why can’t you do it?” He says, “Lad the last time I flew in an aircraft, was in a Bristol Bulldog, in about 1938.” And he says, “I crashed

36:30 at Bacchus Marsh, and I was up a tree for a week, with two broken legs, they couldn’t find me, I was up in the canopy.” And he says, “I was writing my diary on the side, scratching it with a nail.” or something. And they got him out and they made him a signals, Chief Signals Officer. And then he pestered them I suppose, like I pestered, and they finally sent him up to Tocumwal, to a crew

37:00 up there. Anyhow, I got made one day, and I caged all the instruments, which you can do by turning a knob that shuts them off, and I said, “There’s the bat and ball there, that’s the old antique instrument.” and I says, “Do me a turn to the left. …… Do one to the right” ….. and I said, “How did you manage to do that?”

37:30 And he says, “Well I never ever flew on anything else but those instruments.” So he was quite familiar with that, “But all this other new fangled stuff.” he says, “I don’t know how to work it.”

So what happened in the end? Did he actually learn to fly?

Yes, he learnt. He became Commanding Officer of 200 flight, dropping these Z Force blokes over. But talking to my friend, who was out of Z Force, he’s got very derogatory views. Because he

38:00 overshot and he dropped these crew in a Japanese camp. And sending them provisions, he did the same thing, overshot and dropped in the wrong spot, and they couldn’t recover the gear.

It’s a huge responsibility, isn’t it, captaining an aircraft?

Yeah. It is, yeah. Well my way of looking at it was, apart from saving yourself, cause I reckon that’s one of your first priorities, look after

38:30 your own skin, but then I always thought of the crew and their families and so forth. And that was in my background all the time. Consideration to the rest of the crew. You can’t just be gung ho and do what you feel like doing, you’ve got to consider the rest of the crew sitting in the back. Much like you do with passengers in a civil aircraft.

Tape 7

00:33 **Well, who was your best student, when you were instructing?**

A fellow by the name of Flying Officer Stevens, who, I got a letter from somebody up in Sydney a few months back, and he’d read something, an article I’d written in one of the magazines, somewhere, and he wanted to know if I knew an F.O. Stevens. And I said, “Yes.” And it turns out that a nephew

01:00 of mine, whose uncle that I actually taught in December, I think, 1944. And I remember him well, because he was the best, he had the best crew of the lot, that I ever had go through. Remarkable group. They all knitted together and operated in an aircraft, there was no fault there at all. They were terrific. But apparently,

01:30 this chap in Sydney died, and his, my nephew, was looking through his log book and he says, “God, Crabtree’s name, I wonder whether that’s the same.” So he sent a letter down, and a took copies from the log book and sent it up to him. And directed them to a book that’d been written about that particular flight that he was on. He was on a Z flight

02:00 group, and they all got shot down, somewhere up in the islands, lost the whole lot.

Did you enjoy instructing?

Yes I did. Well not initially, because I was a little bit raw at the game then, but after a while I got used to it. And I developed the skills in the aircraft. It’s just like a car, you get used to

02:30 your own vehicle, and you can put it where you want it. Which makes you feel good.

So you were always going up in the same aircraft, were you?

Oh, no, different aircraft. Which ever aircraft were servicing. You get a lot at a certain number of aircraft for each flight. There were four flights up there at Tocumwal. I was in B flight. And if an aircraft is available, you take that up. If it’s

03:00 not, you get another one, sort of thing. You change around quite a bit.

Well when you were instructing up there, I mean, you mentioned the crew, so that's the pilots you're talking about, the other crew are being trained elsewhere, or not, or are they all being trained together?

Yes. No. It depends on what the exercise is. If it's just take offs and landings, well you don't require a whole crew for that, so you just have pilots and engineer, and that's about it. If you're doing bombing exercises, of course, naturally,

03:30 you've got the bomb aimer and if you're doing gunnery exercises, you carry the full crew. If you're doing cross country run, or formation flying, you put everybody in so they all get an appreciation of what …

So they would have all been up there for that period?

Oh, yeah, yeah. The gunners have lectures, of course, on their own gear, and navigators have their own lectures, radio operators have their own. And pilots have different lectures. And then

04:00 they're welded together as a team, when you're flying.

How long would they be there, in training?

I can't recall. I think it must have been about two months. Quite a while because there's a lot to cover.

And so the pilots, as well as getting out there and being in the aircraft, they're still having …

They have lectures, yeah. It's not

04:30 all flying.

And so what subjects are they covering in the lectures, now, or then?

I don't know. I never went to any of the lectures. I was too busy down the flight line, flying, that was my main occupation there. I didn't get involved in their lectures.

Oh, so, I was just wondering whether they would have … they must have been given instructions on instrument flying, were they, or if they hadn't …

No. I think they were getting instructions on what

05:00 to expect in enemy targets and that sort of thing. What to expect in the way of fighter attacks. We used to have a simulated fighter attacks, up there. Spittys used to attack the aircraft and the job was to follow around without any rounds in the machine gun equipment. But just tracking was quite a job, with

05:30 the machine guns, you had to follow it around.

And well, how did these senior officers regard you? You were still a relatively junior officer, instructing, weren't you?

I don't think they worried too much. That had sort of group Captains going through, on course, and Wing Commanders. They were very experienced air crew, because there weren't that many slots that you could put air crew into,

06:00 when you didn't have enough aircraft. So all the senior fellows got the good jobs in the squadron. Occasionally you'd see one get through as a flight lieutenant, or flying Officer. Usually they came from over seas, they'd been on Lancasters or Sunderlands, or something, overseas and they'd come back. That's when the war had finished over there, they'd come back to Australia. And we'd

06:30 get them as conversion crews up in Tocumwal. So some of them were very highly decorated. Billy Brill was DSO [Distinguished Service Order] DFC and Bar, and another little fellow who was, I didn't know, he went to TAA with me afterwards, I didn't know he had any decorations at all. He had a DSO and DFC. Very highly decorated man and very insignificant little

07:00 character he was, Harry Lock, I think he's since died. But when we were in TAA he had a … they brought out an order that we were to put up our decorations at the back of the cockpit door, put your name and decorations … And I was flying with this fellow one day, and I saw Harry Lock, DSO, and good God, I couldn't believe it. Such a quiet individual, and you'd think, "God how could he have done all that?"

07:30 **Well, they didn't mind coming and training on another aircraft, then?**

Oh, no. They were delighted, they were all very, very happy to get on a modern aircraft, because they were just the best bit of equipment we had. Nothing to compare with. Mosquitoes were good, but they didn't have the crew. I think they had a crew of two on the Mosquito. But the Liberator had a crew of ten, and that was quite a plum

08:00 to become Captain of one of those.

Oh, so it was seen as the ultimate then, wasn't it?

Yeah, it was. The best aircraft we had.

Well, the base at Tocumwal, how was that set up? How many people were there?

Oh, well over four thousand. It was the biggest base we had. And it was built by the Americans, because that was their last,

08:30 to be their last base in Australia, if the Japs got in the north. That was built in about three or four months, I think, Tocumwal. The two very long runways and the hangers and so forth. And the living quarters were built like a village. Houses with tiled roofs, so it would look like an extension of the town, just in case any enemy

09:00 aircraft flew over, looking for what ever. So we were living in huts without any ceilings on, and just hessian between the rooms, so as divided up. It was a pretty rugged sort of existence, because we used to get dust storms there, that you couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of you, at times. Very severe dust area in those days.

Well, the Americans built it, were the Americans

09:30 **there as well?**

When MacArthur came down south, he looked at the base and he says, "Okay, we'll operate there." And I think they operated for a few weeks, I'm not sure about this, but I think for a few weeks. And then they decided this wasn't the place to be, we'd get up closer to the action. And they went up to Brisbane. And then they went to Moresby from there and the up to Hollandia after that, and then up to the Philippines later on. So

10:00 he reckoned it was too far from the action, down here.

And so then the RAAF took over the base?

Yeah, yes, that's right, yeah.

So was it purely training?

Yes. Well there was an aircraft depot, which was repair maintenance, of war damaged stuff, you know, rebuilt. And 7OTU, which is Seven Operational Training Unit, and that was all Liberators. We had a small

10:30 group of Vultee Vengeance aircraft, which towed, what we called a drogue, it's a sort of wind sock, on the end of a cable for gunnery exercises. So they'd run that out the back, and the gunnery boys would try and shoot holes in the wind sock.

Well, did you feel you were kept very busy there?

I think you would say, we were exceptionally busy in periods, December and January,

11:00 I think, '44. See, that's a very busy month there. It fluctuates … see, that's another busy month. But there were a lot of activity, except for that period

11:30 when the European war finished and then we had a lull. And we were sent down to Point Cook to learn to be instructors, which is rather ridiculous, but they wanted to get rid of us, I think. And I remember we argued like hell, with the instructors.

Did you?

Because they said, you know, "As you push the rudder pedal forward so your wiggle rise up." and all this patter that you got on initial training. And we thought, "What a lot of rubbish."

12:00 And I got into an argument with squadron leader, I can't think of his surname, but I said, "This is a lot of rubbish, and why do we have to do that?" He says, "Alright lad, take an Oxford, go and do some low level flying and knock yourself off." So I did that, did that for two days, and that was too hazardous, I reckoned, so I gave … we'd been thundering around over Avalon, all round that area.

12:30 And you'd be right close to the ground. You'd be jumping over trees and going down the other side, power lines and so forth. And I'd be going over one way, and somebody would be coming the other way. Oh, I scared myself witless there. I reckoned, "That's not good enough." So I got up a bit higher and did some fancy flying up top.

Oh, so you were really into the fancy flying by then?

Yeah, well I could do a little bit by that time. Yes, I was more mobile.

And did you

13:00 **learn, did you feel that you learnt anything on this course?**

Not really, no. We were just filling in time. Another fellow, who was a Typhoon pilot, shooting up marshalling yards and so forth, in Europe, he was out there on the same course. He just died a few weeks ago. And he had the same trouble that I had, we told this instructor to jump off the pier. And he

was told to do the same

13:30 thing, “Go and knock yourself off, go and do some low level flying.” Nobody got killed, but it’s a wonder. Cause we were all floating around the country side without any direction, you know, nobody knew where each other was. That’s diabolical.

Alright, well you finished that, and how long was that training course?

Just over a month, I think.

And so what did they do to you then. Did you go back to Tocumwal?

Went back to Tocumwal and got stuck into training again.

14:00 Became an instructor again.

And, well, we must be getting up to about June, then are we, June ’45?

If I can look … Oh, yes, well you’re instructing, yes, we’re into ’45 then. And yes, we’ve got …

14:30 the end of June, I’d say, was it, June 12th. that’s on an Oxford there, isn’t it?

Yes that’s right.

That’s that training down at Point Cook, yes

Oh right, so June then … so July …

The next page, I think, you’ll find I’m probably back into …

That’s right, you’re on the Liberator, again …

Yeah, training crews again.

And so,

15:00 **yes, and the training crew … so you’re continuing …**

Yeah, training crews.

Okay, so it’s August then, that you end up going across to United States, is it?

Yeah, that’s right. We went up to Brisbane, we were waiting for an aircraft there, and we picked up a Sky Master, I think, from Eagle Farm and we went up

15:30 to Biak, which was … they had a run from the Philippines, Biak, Tarawa, Hawaii and San Francisco, that was their standard milk run …

And how come you got all onto this, though, how did it come to pass that here you are, going to …

Well I think that they wanted crews to bring out new aircraft, and I was nominated for one of the crews. And I think about ten crews,

16:00 or more, went across. Quite a tribe of us. We went across in stages as aircraft was available. And we all landed in San Francisco. We were billeted in the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, in the middle of San Francisco, very nice. We were there for about two days, and somebody says, “There’s an atomic bomb been dropped.” And we said, “What’s an atomic bomb?” And we started

16:30 to read about it in the newspapers. And then a second bomb was dropped, a couple of days later, and the Japs, of course, capitulated at that stage. And San Francisco went mad. Thirteen people killed, and fifteen hundred seriously injured in the celebrations.

So what did people do? Or …

They went mad up and down the streets, breaking into stores, just like they did in Iraq in Baghdad,

17:00 looting and …

And well, what did you do, how did you feel? Oh, there’d been the victory in Europe, hadn’t there, in May, now how had you felt when you got that news, the May news?

Oh, it didn’t affect us much because we were still battling on out here, and the Japs didn’t give in for quite a while after.

So, when you heard that the Japanese had surrendered, I mean, what …

Oh, just didn’t know what to do. I

17:30 went down, and I joined the march up and down the main street in San Francisco. It was chock a block. There were four tram lines down the main street, in those days, two each way, and you couldn’t move

for the crowd. People screaming and shouting, throwing their cloths off, doing all sorts stupid things. My co-pilot, he decided he would climb up the front of a picture theatre, he was going to get an Australian flag to

18:00 wave, and he couldn't find one, he got a Union Jack instead, wrapped that round his shoulders and raced up to the head of the column, was trying the lead the march. But the Yanks said, "Oh, bloody Limey." And they tore him apart.

Really, why?

He staggered back to the hotel, and he had scratches all over him, not a spare inch of skin that wasn't scratched. Because they hated the Poms. Not so much now, but they did then.

Do you know why they hated the

18:30 **Poms?**

Because of the stoushes they had with the British, you know, way back …

Really, back to the War of Independence?

Yeah, yeah. I was mistaken for an Englishman, because I didn't sew my Australia badges on. I was a bit lazy. And went down to a pub with the rest of the crew and a drunk came in and says, "You bloody Limey." he says, "Not these Aussies,

19:00 they wouldn't lay down a gun, but you Limey so and so's." So I went back to the hotel and sewed them on. So obviously, that's the way they feel.

So they thought the Australians were …

Oh, we're the salt of the earth with Americans, we really are. You go anywhere and you say you're an Australian, and they'd do anything for you. It's remarkable really, they reckon that we're the most

19:30 hospitable people on earth. And I reckon they are.

Well that's what they used to say about Americans, when you visited them …

Yeah, yeah. Well they reckon we leave them for dead.

Well how did you find the Americans in San Francisco, did you meet, apart from the great celebrations …

Oh, terrific, terrific. In fact I used to go to the Emporium, which is like the Myer Store in SanFrancisco, and there's a lady in there on the hosiery counter who had a pair of RAAF wings

20:00 on, you see, I said, "How did you get …" "Oh." she says, "one of your boys came through and gave me these wings, and I've been wearing them ever since." I said, "Oh, good." So I wanted some, to get some nylon stockings to bring back home, so I used to go in there every other day and buy a pair of nylon stockings. I came back with a Mae West, you know that Mae West … and they were stuffed full of kapok, I think in those days, so I tore all that out and I filled it up with stockings, and brought it back home.

Well, see, nylon stockings would have been hard to

20:30 **get here in Melbourne?**

Oh yes, oh yes, like sharks teeth, here.

And well the Americans … you see people often complain, today, that Americans don't know where Australia is and they mistake it for Austria, but obviously on the West Coast there, people would be more aware of Australia.

Well, they do now. Particularly now since Iraq … if you go over there I think you get killed with kindness, really.

And so you didn't … were you

21:00 **invited into anybody's homes, while you were there?**

Yes, well, yes … we were walking down one of the main streets, two of us, and my radio operator who's now up in Queensland, and a Lincoln, a stretch Lincoln about fifty feet long, that sort of look, a convertible it was, and this fellow pulled up and he says, "Would you guys like to

21:30 have a look around the country side?" And we said, "Yes." And it turned out that he was a Treasury official, and he took us all round the countryside, up in the redwood country, over to Sausalito, oh, he did a remarkable job with us. And then he took us to the Bohemian Club, which was like the Melbourne Club here, or Savage Club, and introduced us in there. And really gave us a

22:00 remarkable time there. Then after that, another pilot, Bill Stoddart, I don't know whether you've ever heard of Bill Stoddart, he used to run the Mooney Valley Racecourse, here as a stud groom earlier than

that, you'd just mention a race horse and Bill could give you it's history, way back where it came from, you know, what its father was and its mother was, all that sort of stuff, a remarkable memory. And he knew a

22:30 fellow down in Los Angeles, in Hollywood, who was an Australian architect, Harry Norris, and he had been to school with a relation of Harry's, I think, and anyway he said, "Why don't we go down to Hollywood?" And I said, "Oh yeah, we're not doing anything here." Some of the boys had already gone to New York and up to Canada, we were all over the countryside there, because nobody knew what we were doing. We were getting ten dollars a day, as well,

23:00 living allowance. So we jumped on a train and went to down Achison and Topeka and Santa Fe, do you remember the tune? Got down to Bakersfield and we came across the Rockies in a car on the icy roads, sliding all round, oh, that was bad news. Get down to Hollywood, so we went down to the Hollywood Cantina's, it was known then, that's where all the troops stayed. And we got in there and we asked whether we could stay there,

23:30 and the girl looked at us and she says, "No you're officers, you can't stay here, this is for enlisted men only." And I said, "Well where can we go?" And she said, "There's an officers' club up the Wiltshire Boulevard somewhere, you can go up there." Got up there, it was a converted old home, and we're sort of straw mattresses on the floor. It's pretty good for an officers' club. And we were entertained by various state celebrities like Bob Hope

24:00 and Una Merkell and some other actress, I can't remember what her name was, she used to play the piano and sing. And I was sitting there listening and she said, "Come over her.", she says, "Sat down on the seat beside her, and she sang me a love song.

Ahh, you can't remember the name of her?

No. My face got that red, I didn't know which way to turn. She could really turn it on too.

24:30 Oh, God, that was embarrassing. She taught me a little song, it's sung to the tune of Trees:

\n[Verse follows]\n Of all these things I had to be, I had to be, no,\n Of all these things I had to be, a little dog out in the street.\n

And she finished up, it turns out she's a comfort station in the street, I think something of that nature, I've forgotten

25:00 the whole thing now. But she sang that to me as well. But we went up to … we found out that Harry Norris was living up in Hollywood, in the Beverly Hills area, so we went up there, they had a terrific place there. And he was the Australian architectural representative during the war. He had a daughter by the name of June, who was married to Irene, MGM's [Metro Goldwyn Mayer – a film studio] dress designer.

25:30 And she was a model and God knows what else, and she had a Pontiac convertible, and she was dressed to suit the car. The car was a pink car, if I remember rightly, and she used to dress in a white blouse and pink shorts, and blonde flowing hair. Really looked the part, driving us all round the countryside. And she took us here there and everywhere. And there was a place called Cyrus over there, which

26:00 was, there was the Brown Derby, which was a famous restaurant and another one called Cyrus, which was a very expensive place, like the Windsor or something like that. And just before we left to come back up to San Francisco, we decided we should take her out, Bill Stoddart and myself. So okay, we'll take her to Cyrus, and she said, "Thankyou." Got there, and it was ten dollars each to get in, and that

26:30 was all the money we had. We finished up that she had to pay for our dinner. Which she never let us forget. Harry Norris, at that time, he says, "When you get back to Australia." he says, "If you need anything designed by an architect." he says, "I'll be only too pleased to do it for you." So he designed a new dry cleaning factory for me, in Oakleigh. And got Swanson brothers to build it for me.

27:00 Got out of it very cheaply. They fitted it in between jobs, and I think they probably whipped some material from other jobs.

Well, it must have been wonderful to have been in the United States, I mean, this was all part of the euphoria of the end of the war. So it must have been an amazing time to be there.

Oh yeah, yeah. We went to a party and we got … we used to get invited to parties in Hollywood. And went to one, a big two storey place with a big

27:30 swimming pool out the back and all mod cons there. And busy lapping up the party and one of the other pilots came in, and we'd sent him off about two weeks before, he took the last aircraft out of the States, flew it back to Hawaii and got to Fiji where he had to refuel it himself, because everybody had gone on strike. And then he flew it to Amberley and he

28:00 thumbed his ride back to the States. He said, "I wasn't going to miss it." And he got a British transport group going back to London via Mexico, so he finished up in Mexico and got back up to Los Angeles, and came to the same party. And I couldn't believe it. He says, "I've been there, I'm back again." He

was John Napier, his father was Sir Mellis

28:30 Napier, the Lieutenant Governor of South Australia. Oh, he was a character, John. He used to have a handle bar moustache out here.

Well, how long were you in San Francisco, or in the U.S.?

About ten days, I think, in San Francisco. Oh, sorry, two and a half months altogether. Yes. They didn't know what to do with us, I think. We finished up, we had to go to an American base camp somewhere out the East of San Francisco,

29:00 and we got on a liberty ship there, and came back on a liberty ship.

Well, so you were just flying the Liberators back to the United States, were you?

No. Flying the new ones from there to here.

So how come you're there and you have to get a ship home?

Well, the war ended, you see. Some of them came back in the Lurlean, some of the group, which was a liner at that stage. And they were full

29:30 of war brides who were coming back, they got disenchanted with the Yanks that they'd married. Didn't realise that they were farmers or whatever, because you probably couldn't tell, because the uniforms they wore here were first class, they got first class pay, got back home again and found out they were yokels from way out the bush somewhere.

Well, when they put you on the ship, I mean, they suddenly realised that you were still there, did they, or …

Yeah, apparently, yes. We

30:00 were hanging around. Some of the boys were working at the wharf, loading coal. Because they were married boys and wanted to save up money, get home with it. So they were getting about ten dollars a day, I think, loading coal. And they'd come back to the hotel covered in coal dust, clean themselves up.

And how long did it take you to get back to Australia, then?

Three weeks, non stop.

So what was the accommodation like on the ship?

We were in the hold.

30:30 Four bunks, about … great difficulty getting into your bunk because there's no room. You'd sort of get on and sort of slide in, and creep in.

Oh, so it wasn't a luxury ocean liner?

No, it certainly wasn't, no. Terrible thing it was. Toilet was up on the deck, over the side, sort of. And cold showers, salt water pumped up from over the side. Food was atrocious. More cockroaches than food, really.

31:00 **It seems to be … you didn't do very well with food, did you?**

No, no. The food was atrocious. Well I think the civilian population had a bad run with food as well. I don't know where it all went to but we certainly didn't get it.

And so, you sailed into Melbourne, did you, the port?

Yeah, sailed into Melbourne, yeah. In fact a lot of the crews came off and we thought we were going to be done over by the Customs, so everybody was secreting cigarettes and so forth.

31:30 We found out though, that Customs were just waving us through. So some boys went back to the ship and bought great cartons and boxes of cigarettes and put them on their head and walked off.

Well who was there to greet you?

Nobody.

Did they even know you were coming back?

No, no.

And well, once you landed in Melbourne, did you have any leave?

Yes, yeah, got operational leave. Been overseas. And

32:00 I've forgotten how long it was, probably about a week or so, don't know what it was. Went back to Tocumwal. We were winding the place down then.

Well see, you were probably into, well into September … no, no you're into October, aren't we, '45 … August, two and a half months the U.S.

Yeah, that's right, yeah.

And so what activities were you involved in, in the winding down process?

32:30 We were shifting aircraft about. We eventually moved a lot of aircraft from Tocumwal to Sale. I was still flying, I think there's a bit of a record in there, I think I went across on a mail run from Tocumwal to Wagga, a couple of times, in a Oxford or an Ensign, bit later on from there.

Well that's right, you

33:00 **do a trip up to Moratai, too.**

Oh that's right, yes, so I did. We were bringing POW's [Prisoners of War] back home. People of ours that had been in Japan or some other country. And whipped up to Moratai and picked a group up there, in fact I picked up twenty eight at Moratai.

What condition were they in?

They were pretty thin, pretty thin. They'd been at Moratai for about a month, sort of

33:30 trying to pick themselves up. Get used to eating food again. And I got twenty eight, which was as much as I thought we could fit in, cause they were standing up, there's no seats or anything for take off. And you couldn't put them down the back end because they'd be out of balance, so I had them all jammed up round the flight deck there. Standing up in the bomb bay.

So how many trips did you do?

I only did the one. And

34:00 got them down to Darwin, landed there, and we stayed there over night. Had to refuel myself. An old school mate of mine was the CO there and I tried to get fuel and they said, "No, we're on strike, please yourself." So I said, "But I've got some POW's." Well couldn't care less. So we, Jock White and myself, he was a group captain then,

34:30 so we refuelled the B-24 out of forty four gallon drums, by hand pump. We were up most of the night, pumping. It was three thousand gallons, or something, it's a lot of gallons. Oh gee, my arms were just like lead weights after that lot. Anyhow, we got refuelled and I was just about to take off and a truck raced up and there were four other POW's there, they'd come down, and they were going down to Melbourne, I think, in a

35:00 Catalina. And the Catalina blew up on the dock. So they wanted to know if I could get them in as well. They were desperate to get home. So I got them in and we flew down to Gawler, non stop. And I'd called up Gawler, it was an RAAF station then, and I said, "I've got thirty two POW's here, they haven't had a good meal for a long time, can you give them a decent meal?" And they says, "Oh, no

35:30 trouble." So they got steak and eggs. Of course, they all brought it up. At least they enjoyed eating it. And then the RAAF gave me the bill for thirty two meals, which I never paid, and I haven't paid it yet, and I don't intent to either.

So that was the one off, getting … well I suppose that must have …

There were a few other aircraft doing the same thing, but

36:00 that was the only trip I had there.

Well you certainly came face to face with another aspect of the war, didn't you?

Yes. Funnily enough, I took off from Laverton to go up there, from Tocumwal to Laverton, and refuelled at Laverton, took off and they'd left one of the petrol caps undone on the wing, and I was streaming fuel out the back, so I decided to go back again and refuel and then go back up. And about three months or so

36:30 ago, down at Werribee, some fellow comes in and he says, "I went up to Moratai with you." I said, "Did you?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "My brother was up there as a POW and they arranged for me to go up and meet him, and I went up with you in the aeroplane." He says, "I remember you, you took off and the petrol came out the …" And I said, "Oh, that's right, yes." See, every now and again somebody turns up, down there, that's flown with me. I didn't know,

37:00 didn't remember.

Well it's extraordinary isn't it, your past keeps coming back?

Yeah. It's a bit strange, absolutely, it's very strange.

And just one quick question, you know when you were doing those missions, I'm leaping back in time again, when you were doing, saying the support, the Air Force was offering the

support say, in Balikpapan, did you know what operations were going on there then.? Were you aware of the other elements,

37:30 **say the naval operations or military operation?**

Oh, no, this was well before that. That was much later, I think. The Japs didn't expect us to get that far. And we decided we could just make it and get back. Only just. It was the longest, I think, the longest trip of them all, there and back.

I'm sorry to jump back to that. Well anyway, so you're winding down in these

38:00 **months, delivering aircraft, basically back to Sale.**

Well I was ferrying the Commanding Officer, I think, you might see Group Captain Barlow on the … He wanted to go down to Victoria Barracks, I flew him down to Laverton a couple of times.

Yes, so Tocumwal, so at Ascot

38:30 **Sale and that seems to be where, oh, no no, we've got …**

Oh no, that's in civil flying.

Oh right, so you kept the log, right. Well we'll get there in a minute.

But that last trip there, that 176 aircraft, that's the last time I flew and that's the one down at Werribee that we're rebuilding.

Oh right. Well that must be a very satisfying experience.

Yes it is. It's the only Liberator left in Australia, and that's the one I

39:00 flew. And the fellows down at the hanger are quite proud. They introduce me to most people that come in and say, "He's the pilot that flew this aircraft." So instead of doing some fitting, I occasionally go around with the people who want to have a look at the old bus.

And what date did you get your discharge?

Some

39:30 where in May, I think it was, '46. I've got a record there, but I can't recall.

Well, we'll stop the tape there because then … do you feel you can do, start another tape.

Yes, I'm right. Well, we've got time haven't we?

Tape 8

00:37 This is a memento given to me by the 380th bomb group when I brought them out, about 1988, I think. One hundred and seventy of them came out for a pilgrimage, return, to have a look and see where they've been. And for the families to have a look at. And this was awarded to me. Ed Crabtree, RAAF for Meritorious

01:00 service with the 530th bomb squadron, H for heavy, and 380th bomb group, H for heavy in brackets. USAAC, The United States Army Air Corp. And it's a pair of American wings and a pair of Australian wings, and it's a poem by John Gillespie McGee, who was a Canadian, a pilot, and he wrote

01:30 this which is well known through out the world. It's called High Flight.

\n[Verse follows]\nOh, I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth,\n And danced the skies on laughtered silvered winds,\n Sunward I've climbed,\n And joined the tumbling mirth,\n Of sun split clouds,\n And done a hundred things you have not dreamed of.\n Wield a sword and swung high in the sun that is silence,\n Hovering there.\n

02:00 I've chased the shouting winds along\n

And flung my eager craft,\n Through footless halls of air,\n Up, up the long delirious burning blue,\n I've topped the wind swept heights,\n With easy grace.\n Where never lark or even eagle flew,\n And while with silent lift in mind,\n I've trod the high untresspassed sanctity of space,\n Put out my hand,\n And touched

02:30 the face of God,\n

John Gillespie McGee Junior

Now is that how you felt about flying?

No. I'm not poetic.

What was the attraction of flying for you?

Well it seemed to be a very glamorous thing to do and it was a remarkable thing to be able to do. It's hard to envisage

03:00 being able to stay in the air with all that weight and so forth. I still wonder how a 747 is able to stay in the air. God, with all that gear and I don't know how many tons, about a hundred a twenty ton, or something, up in the air.

It's amazing, isn't it. I always feel as if I want to help it up a bit when it's taking off.

Yeah. And when you see them coming in to land at Tullamarine, then seem to stop in mid air almost. They're just floating on air. You don't realise they're going about two hundred mile and hour.

03:30 **Well joining the RAAF didn't take you … oh well, it did take you to the U.S. didn't it? Well really, as you said, one of the reasons you wanted to travel, and you thought you'd be going to England …**

Yes, I was dudded I think. But probably saved my life. I reckon if I'd have gone over there, I'd have been history by now.

Well, yes. The casualties were …

Yeah, pretty heavy at that stage, yes. Got easier towards the finish.

04:00 Well it was the same out here. It was very bad in the initial stages, we lost a tremendous number of crews.

So you never felt that you missed out because you didn't get to go to …

No, I was too busy, I think, here. Quite happy with what I was doing, actually. I was quite surprised that the distance I got out here, I suppose if I'd gone over there I would have been just another number, probably.

Now I gained the impression that you

04:30 **weren't discontented when you were ground crew.**

I was interested, because it was very interesting work. And it's beautiful work aircraft, because the quality of the stuff is a bit different from ours, like working on a Rolls Royce, where every part is made properly, it's got to be able to stay in the air. Whereas the average car is pressed out rubbish, really, by comparison.

05:00 You get a bit out of a car and you can't fix it, you've got to throw it away and get a new bit. But with aircraft stuff, it's beautifully made. Some of the stuff at Werribee, there's magnificent material in that. Very surprising, stainless steel and caste bronze gears, incredible. I didn't realise there was such quality in the building of it.

Well, that's very gratifying,

05:30 **isn't it, or very reassuring, isn't it? But anyway, when you are discharged in the (UNCLEAR) did it take you a while to settle back into civilian life? Were you happy to leave the RAAF?**

I was just lost, I didn't know what to do or where to go. While I was still at Tocumwal, Sir Arthur Drayford had mentioned that they were going to start a government airline. So I wrote to Drayford, and I've got a copy of his letter

06:00 there somewhere, saying that it was too early, that they hadn't got it organised, but he says in due course it will be advertised and your welcome to apply to Trans Australia Airlines when it gets going. Which I did. And I also had a job lined up, due to my Agricultural Science experience, with International Harvester. I'd been offered a job there prior to the shop down at Brighton. And the fellow was an old Dookie graduate, the

06:30 boss of International Harvester. And he said I could have a job. I'd go up to New South Wales, become a block manager, which is you look after all the International Harvester shops, or whatever, stores in a certain area in New South Wales. And sort of kept that in mind. I said I couldn't do it because my father wanted me to run the shop at Brighton. So I went back after the war to see him, he was still there. And he says, "Yes, you can have the same job anytime you like."

07:00 So I said, "Oh well, I haven't made up my mind yet." And he says, "Well let me know when you're ready." And in the meantime I got a message from TAA that I was on the next course there. And I got a telegram the same day from my old CO who is now ANA [Australian National Airlines] boss, he says, "You're on the next course." So I decided to go to TAA instead.

And had you met Lola by this stage?

07:30 Yes I think, just. I think I was wandering around foot loose and her sister came back, she was a Warrant

Officer in the WAAAF [Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force] up in Brisbane, and she came down and they decided to have a party and I knew another couple of WAAAF officers who were cipher clerks, I think, special duty stuff on code cracking and they said, "We're going to a party at the Riley's."

08:00 that was the family name, Riley's place in Elsternwick and, "Would you come along with us?". And I said, "Okay." Got along there and Lola happened to be there, so. I thought, "She looks alright, I'll aim for that."

What was it about her that you felt she looked alright?

Oh, well, she was slim and she had very nice speaking voice, looked what I was hoping for.

08:30 So that, we've fostered from there on.

And what, did you take her home that night?

Oh, no, nothing like that. No, I visited several times at the house of Elsternwick, had dinners a few times there. And then she went on holiday down at Lorne with a friend of hers and I said, "I'll take you down." I'd bought a car with my deferred pay, bought an old Vauxhall,

09:00 1936 Vauxhall I think it was. And got my mother on board and took Lola and her friend, Margaret, down to Lorne, dropped them off at Erskine House and came back again.

Oh, so you didn't stay?

No, no. And it just went on from there.

And when were you married? When did you pop the question?

09:30 About May, I think, in 1949. There was no house available because the accommodation was hopeless, so I was looking in the paper one day and it says, "Half a house available at East Millville." Which is just a few blocks up here. And I said to Lola, "Look, there's half a house available." I said, "Lets get married." So she was in it. Her mum wasn't too pleased because

10:00 she hadn't got organised. No time to get any clothing, you couldn't get much anyway. So I went to see, I said, "I better ask your dad first." So I did that, and he sort of twinkled his eye a bit and says, "Yes, that's okay." I says "Good, I've done the right thing and asked first." And we got married, no honeymoon, and went to East Millville, and I started flying, I think,

10:30 about the same time.

And where were you married?

In St. Mary's in Caulfield. A big old blue stone place there. And Lola's friend, Margaret, was in a Catholic family, and the Priest wouldn't allow her in the church. God, she was niggly about that. She had to wait outside. Things have changed a bit since then.

11:00 Anyhow, no honeymoon, went straight on the job.

So you'd done your training and everything, you were just flying now?

Yes, went down to Point Cook and did my flying training down there. And a course, an engineering course to get qualified for the C47 and the DC3 and DC4.

And was the training period very long?

Oh about two months, I think.

11:30 They were fanatical. You had to know oil pressures and all the lines, and delay and things operating. Oh gee, it was quite solid.

And so you're off flying in your DC3's and DC4's and C47's. And you spent five years with TAA.

Yeah, that's right.

Now did you enjoy the job? I mean, you'd changed one uniform for another, hadn't you.

12:00 That's strange yeah. No I didn't enjoy it particularly. In clear weather, it's nice, but you've got to fly in all weather. You've got a schedule to keep and you do it or else, sort of thing. You can't say, "The weather's no good, I won't fly today, you go." In winter time the weather can be pretty nasty. I remember,

12:30 we did a trip up to Cairns one weekend, Rocket Service we used to call that, go up Saturday and come back Sunday, and we went up, we got to Brisbane, we had to go to Rockhampton and Mackay, Townsville and then to Cairns, and we hit a cyclone on the way up, inland, and it was rough. Everybody was sick in the aircraft, terrible trip. We got up there and we

13:00 thought we'd be cunning, we'd come back out to sea, down the coast. So we did that and the damn cyclone had moved out. And we were bucketing around, and you know there's supposed to be an eye in

the middle of a cyclone, well there was one. It was about four or five mile wide, we got out in the clear and I thought, “Thank God for that, we’re out of that rough stuff.” And the other pilot says – “Have a look at the other side

13:30 there.” You could see the waves. It was calm in the middle and out the other side there were big breakers. And I’ve read about it often enough, that’s the only one I’ve been in and the only one I want to be in. God, it was terrible. Got back into Sydney, and while we’re trying to get into Sydney, one of the ANA planes got caught up in it, he went out to sea. And he was radioing that he got lost. They couldn’t hear him on the ground, with

14:00 his radio, and I could hear him and I was sort of telling him where we were. I said, “Your signal’s fading, you must be going in the wrong direction.” and I said, “You’d better turn around and come back.” And they eventually got back into Sydney. Which I thought was a rather strange circumstance.

So what made you decide to give flying away?

Oh, well I was on long range stuff. We were doing

14:30 a New Zealand trip. Their aircraft packed up, so we were going to New Zealand and back again. And then going up to Cairns and back, over to Perth. All the long runs with the DC4’s, and it’s not much when you’ve got a family.

So you had children by this stage?

Wendy was born then, yes. Pretty hopeless sort of situation so I decided I’d give it away. And a chap I’d joined up with in the Air Force in 1940

15:00 was a fitter and he had been with Brown-Gouge, the Drycleaners, before the war as a maintenance fitter there. And he said he was going to start a dry cleaning business after the war. So he bought an ex-army laundry and he ran out of money. So I leant him some money to get started. And he opened up in Oakleigh in an old shop there. And Lola’s father was mayor of Oakleigh, at the time.

15:30 So we decided we’d build a new factory. I got Harry Norris to design the factory for me.

Very exciting, wasn’t it?

It was, yeah. And Lola’s father, of course, got it through the Council. And because I’d leant him some money, he says, “Why don’t you come and join us?” So I gave TAA away and went into dry cleaning.

So you had no regrets about leaving flying?

16:00 No, no.

Did you continue flying in any capacity?

No, no, only as a passenger.

And then, you had another career then, after …

After the dry cleaning. Yes, well it was a bit primitive, dry cleaning, in those days, and I’d done a lot of chemistry at Dookie College, so I decided to get stuck into the chemical side of it. And refined a lot of the process, there. We turned out a pretty good job, there. We had a tremendous

16:30 output. When Jansen first opened up, when we got the franchise in Myers there, we had a store in Myers, and we had the Monash University, we got that. And we bought a couple of other people out, and had a couple of more shops, we were going very well. Then I got a bit tired of it, it got a bit hum drum after a while, so found a mate of mine out at Dandenong had a real estate agent’s license.

17:00 And I asked him what that was like. And he says, “Well I’ve done pretty well out of it.” And I said, “Okay.” I said, “How do you get a license?” And he says, “Apply to the Police Station, and have six house holders vouch that you’re a true and proper person for the job, and you’ll get your license.” So I did that, got a license in 1956. Without doing any course or anything. And I had a few people I knew around the Huntingdale area, Oakleigh area, and offered to manage their factories for them, which

17:30 I got. And used to go round in a dry cleaning van picking up rents.

So you were doing both, were you?

Yeah, oh yeah. Filling in, doing the real estate work when the opportunity arose. Got to know, well knew a lot of people from my dry cleaning side, so some of those were investors. And I remember, there was a little factory, which had been vacant for quite a

18:00 while, up in the Huntingdale area, and I used to go past that and I noticed that it was still empty. L.J. Hooker signs were all over it. I saw the owner there one day and I said, “Are you having trouble renting your factory?” He said, “Yeah, L.J. Hooker have had it for six months.” or something. I said “I can get you a tenant for it tomorrow, it you’d like.” He says, “Can you?” I says, “Yeah.” I had somebody looking for a small shed. So I put him in and this fellow thought, “That’s terrific.” He said – “I’ve got about

18:30 twenty odd factories.” he said, “Would you like to look after those as well?”. I said, “Yeah.” He was a

Jewish fellow. He'd come out of Auschwitz, he and his partner, and he was alright but his partner was mentally damaged. They were very difficult to deal with. But I looked after about twelve of their factories, for about a year, and they kept on needling me and they said, "You've charged five percent." And I said, "Yeah." He says, "I want you to do it for four percent."

19:00 And they kept on at me, "I want you to do it to four percent, four percent." And in the finish I said, "No, I've got enough work without worrying about you, you can have all your factories, give them to somebody else." I said, "I'm not going to do it for four percent." "Oh." he says, "That's alright, you've got to remember, we're Jewish, we don't feel we've done the business unless we've bargained." And he became a very great friend, the chap, Neumann. He wrote a book on the Holocaust which was part of the history, I think,

19:30 in that museum. And some of his experiences, oh, they were terrible. Gee they had some rough times.

But, listen, we're just starting to run out of a bit of time here, so I was wondering whether you could talk about how you became involved in the story in the B-24 ….

Oh, okay, fine. Well, I'd heard about this Liberator, I think

20:00 somebody had rung me, a chap I knew up in New South Wales, rang me, and he said, "There's a Liberator down at Moe." He says, "Nigel Apperley,who was a helicopter pilot in New Guinea, found out about it, and he'd been down to have a look at it." And he says, "Would you like to have a look?" So I said, "Okay." Went down there and found out it was 176 and it was in this fellow's back yard. He and his brother

20:30 bought it from Sale, when they were being chopped up. And they had intended to buy the lot, but somebody had nicked the engines off it. And they got the fuselage and they carted it up to Moe, in a big vacant block. And they'd lived in it for a while, while they were building a house. And they went back to get the wings, and somebody had chopped it up and melted it down. So we got the fuselage without wings. Anyhow, he had it in amongst a lot of

21:00 trees, you couldn't see it and he had galvanised iron sheets along the outside of it, to protect it a bit. The only way you could get in, was to get up a tree with a ladder, and grab a rope with a knot on it, and swing across to the top of the Liberator, go down through the top hatch. And this chap, Toye I think, and anyway, I became interested and I

21:30 found out its number, and I thought, "God that's the last aircraft I flew." So I rang Point Cook, there, and I got in touch with Air Commodore Ron Tayles, who was the commanding officer, and Squadron Leader Peter Allen, who was in charge of the museum. And I said, "Listen, there's a Liberator down at Moe, would you be interested?" And he said, "Yes, oh yes." He says, "We'll pick you up in a car." So they drove up, picked me up and we went down. I took my log book down and a bit of other information

22:00 I had on it. And saw this fellow. He wouldn't let us in the house. He's a very strange man. A bit deranged really, I think. And we agreed that the air force could get it, and we worked out how to get it out of the place. We had to chop down a couple of trees to get it out. And had a low loader teed up. Because the freeway goes alongside the block there, and they had to put it in the wrong direction, in the up way instead of the down way.

22:30 And we'd gone through all that, and then we were just about ready to go, to go down and pick it up, and two other fellows heard about it. One fellow was a pilot, and another one, and his gunner. They'd heard about it and they decided to go down and offer him some money. So they offered him ten thousand dollars for it, and of course that finished it, wiped us out. That was about two years later than when we'd been down there. And

23:00 then he refused to let them buy it. He reneged on the deal. It finished up, they'd paid him a deposit, and they took him to court and it finished up, it cost forty thousand dollars to clear the thing. So it was brought back in bits from there to Werribee. And there was an old air base at Werribee, which we used to use as

23:30 a satellite drome from Point Cook. In fact I'd flown there, doing night flying exercises. Anyway, there were four or five hangers there and Melbourne Board of Works had taken over the whole area. It was probably part of their area anyway. And they'd taken it back again. They had agricultural machinery, all sorts of hay in storage. And they got on to somebody there and

24:00 got the use of one of the hangers. So brought it back and put it up in there. Meantime, Melbourne had bought it, of course, taken over from the Board of Works there. So we're now tenants of Melbourne Water.

So how long have you been there, then?

About eight years, I think. We've been given a hanger, recently, at Tottenham Air Base. When that was sold off to a developer, that had a big hanger there, which had just been refurbished by the air force. They'd re-roofed it,

24:30 taken all the asbestos out, put new lighting and power points, and so on. And it became redundant. So the developer offered it to us. And we couldn't afford to buy it, so we forgot that. But then, all of a

sudden, he got permission to build, and he wanted to get the hanger out of the road quickly. So he gave us the hanger. So it's now in pieces and stored at Laverton, waiting for a permit to build down at Werribee. Werribee want us to stay there, because it's a

25:00 tourist attraction. We're on their tourist run, there. They go around to the Werribee Research Farm, Point Cook Air Base, the mansion down there, and the Werribee Zoo, and the B-24's part of the tour.

Excellent. Well listen, you obviously remained a member, oh you are, aren't you, of the RAAF Association? So did you join that immediately you

25:30 **were discharged?**

No. I joined RSL in Flinders Street, actually. But they were nearly all army people, and we don't talk the same language. They were talking about platoons and brigades and so forth. And I haven't got a clue as to what all that is. So I thought, well that isn't much chop. And I looked around and found the Air Force Association, which had a place in Queens Road, in those days. And a friend of mine was in there, so I joined there.

And do you march on

26:00 **Anzac Day?**

Yes. I didn't for a long, long time. But then I summoned up some courage. When I was President, I had to march, of course. I had to lead the march.

And so you are a life member now, aren't you?

Yes.

And how did you get to be life member? How many years?

You've got to serve for at least ten years in a capacity, on the Council, or something of that nature. Or put in a lot of effort.

So you've made a great contribution. And how did you feel about your

26:30 **contribution to the war?**

Oh, I feel I did more than a bit. Spent six and a quarter years in the air force. I reckon that's good enough.

And well, Ed, at this stage are there any comments that you would like to make about your war experiences, that we haven't covered?

No. I think you've covered it pretty well. There's a tremendous amount of information, of course, that you've got stored up,

27:00 and it comes to the surface every now and again, you remember something. I can remember a lot of things that happened when I was with the Americans. One fellow, in particular, he had a cockatoo that he bought in Adelaide, and this was his prized possession. He was a biologist, and he knew I'd done Ag. Science, so he was always asking me names of trees and grasses and so forth. And anyway, he bought this cockatoo and he looked after it meticulously,

27:30 and then he was sent up to New Guinea. They were bombing Bougainville, I think at that time. And while he was away, another cockatoo walked into the base, without any feathers, dreadful looking thing it was, and we switched the cockatoos on him. And he came back and he was almost crying. He was a very nice character. And he said, "What am I going to do?" And we said,

28:00 "We talked to the Doc up at the hospital and he's got something that might fix it." So he goes up there and the Doc was in the store room, so he gave him a big jar of petroleum jelly and says, "Rub this on the bird morning and night, that might fix it." And of course this damn bird would walk around in the grass, and the grass would stick all over it, it was just a moving ball of dry grass. A horrible sight. Anyway

28:30 we went across to Marble Bar, and Jeremy was on that job, and while we were over there, they switched the cockatoos back again, you see. And Jeremy got back and said, "Oh my God, my cockatoo, look at that, fantastic." And he was going to write an essay on it for the society in America. And he got all that finished and we had to tell him before he posted the letter, we had to tell him what happened. But he also had another

29:00 pet. I don't know whether you've ever seen the iguanas up there, they're about six feet long and they kill their prey by whipping their tail against a mouse or whatever. And he caught one of those, and he had it tied up between two gum trees on a sort of long bit of parachute cord, and it used to thrash up and down. You could never approach his tent in one direction because you'd get swiped by this damn lizard. So we were teasing it one day in the officers'

29:30 club, which was a tin shed, there was a concrete floor and that's about it. And Jerry got mad and he went back to his tent and took this damn iguana off the leash and brought it back and let it loose, in the officers' club. And two of the fellows went up the roof, across the beams, trying to get away from this lashing tail. The damn iguana ran up the side, went straight across and down the other side.

30:00 Frightened the hell out of everybody, that, cause they've got very severe fangs, just like a small alligator.

So Ed, do you think that your contribution to the war has sufficiently acknowledged?

Oh, I don't think so. When I got out of the Air Force, there was nothing. The Vietnam boys said the same. But I got out fairly late, I stayed in because they were very short of people, and I became Adjutant at

30:30 Tocumwal for the last few months. Not knowing anything about being an Adjutant, but that's the job I got. And it was just a funny arrangement altogether.

Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

No. I'm quite proud of the effort I put in, in the Air Force. I was pleased to be able to do it. And I was pleased

31:00 to get through it without any major damage. Because there were a lot that didn't. I lost two cousins. One was … he crashed in Bougainville in a Catalina. They were supplying troops there. They went into the jungle and they got out, four of them got out of the aircraft. They'd split into twos. Two went one way and two went the other.

31:30 And Connor got caught by the Japanese. He was beheaded, later. He got severe dysentery and they caught up with him and they just went for the big chop. Another cousin was in a Hudson, bombing Timor, and the last they heard of him, they'd left Timor in flames, I think, and went into the sea. They've never been able to discover that. I've been able to get his medals, which I've got here.

32:00 Of course, nobody else claimed them, which was unfortunate.

That's very important then, they you were able to get them.

Yes, I've got his. The other cousin, I tried to get his, but I found out his ex wife had made a claim about six weeks before I did, so she's got them in Sydney, which is the right place for them. The Yanks gave me an Air Medal,

32:30 the last trip I was over in America. I qualified for an Air Medal at Fenton, but we weren't allowed to accept any American decorations, in those days. It's been changed since then. But when I was last over, the Air Force One pilot and another fellow, who was a navigator, he was a psychologist for the Shuttle crews at Cap Canaveral, and the third one was a Colonel who worked for Texas Instruments,

33:00 he was my navigator for a while in Fenton. They got together and got me an Air Medal. They presented it to me before we left on the last trip over there, at Florida.

Well that must be very gratifying to you, to receive those sort of acknowledgements?

Yeah, very nice, yeah, yeah. Of course they gave me a pair of American wings when I was up at Fenton, which I treasure.

Yes, so there were some acknowledgements along the way?

Oh yeah, yeah.

33:30 The American group, when I went over, I asked the Chief of the Air Staff whether I could take American wings over, Australia wings rather, to America. He says, "No it's forbidden according to the regulations." but he says, "If you can get some I'll be delighted." So one of my tenants up in Huntingdale was part of Felton Textile Group, and they made all the wings for the Air Force, embroidered them. So I

34:00 went to see him and I said, "Have you got any of those?" "Oh." he says, "We've got a hundred and thirty." he says, "We did an over run." and he says, "They've been sitting there." And I said, "How much do you want for them." He says, "You can have them." He says, "What are you going to do with them?" "Take them over to America." He says, "Good." So I got all this together. I went across to a 49th fighter group reunion, they used to give us fighter cover in New Guinea, in Lightnings, and Major Bong was their ace, forty Jap aircraft I think he shot down altogether.

34:30 And I was allowed to … General Hutchison was the boss of that outfit, so he says, "You can call them up one at a time, and give them a pair of wings." And I've never seen so many people crying at once. They were all very emotional people. And Major Bong had killed himself just before testing out a Lightning Jet Fighter, so I gave his mother and …

35:00 **You mean he was killed in action, or was it suicide?**

No, it pranged, it developed a fault and dived into the deck. And I gave his family a pair of wings each, three pair, and each other pilot that was there at the time got a pair of wings. And they all wear them on their … every opportunity they get. And then again, my own group, the 380th bomb group, went across there and I had another

35:30 set of wings I got. And I gave each pilot … and I got gunner's wings and radio operator's wings and so forth, got the whole lot of them presented. Anyway, they came out one at a time, and they were crying, all the way weeping.

Amazing isn't it, what can trigger off those emotions?

Yeah, yeah. They're very emotional people, much more so than we are. I think it's probably because of the migration. We're getting a bit like that with

36:00 some of the people coming into the country now. The Vietnamese are pretty emotional sorts of people, because they've had pretty hard times.

A lot of people, I think, are prepared to cry these days, aren't they?

Yes, that's true, yes.

Okay, Ed, well we've come to the end. So I'd just like to say, thank you very much for your contribution.

You're very welcome.

Absolutely fascinating.

It's nice to get it on tape.

It is.

36:30 Thank you.