Australians at War Film Archive

Oswald Tolhurst (Ossie) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:37 **Ossie, could you give us a quick summary of your life to date?**

Well, I was born, I was a Depression kid. I was born in 1925 in the suburb of Hamilton. I've lived in the Newcastle area all my life, except for the service, and

01:00 after I retired we had four years in Coffs Harbour, but we came back and we've been here for about 15 years. Worked for many people, served an apprenticeship as a joiner, or part of it. Then went to sea, came back finished my apprenticeship with the help of the Repatriation Department, who looked after me pretty well,

01:30 and then worked for quite a number of builders until I decided I wasn't real bright so I went back to school of a night for seven, eight years and finished up being a commonwealth public servant until retirement.

Well that's good. Thank you for such a succinct summary. Sometimes we'd got summaries which have gone for a considerable length of time and don't need to,

02:00 **so that's really great, that's wonderful. So now you were born in Hamilton? This is Hamilton a suburb of Newcastle I believe?**

Yes, yeah.

What are some of your earliest memories of Hamilton?

Well, it's a funny thing. I can remember the house we were in. We lived in several places at Hamilton but one of the earliest ones was a semi-detached house in Webster Street

02:30 and I can remember we still had gas mantles for lights. Did have a few electric lights in the place but sometimes there wasn't enough money to pay the bill and there was no lights, but we could always find a penny in the slot for the machine and turn that over and light the gas mantle and they weren't a bad light. But I can remember we ate during the Depression very, very well.

03:00 Dad would tie the prawn net along the frame of the bicycle, put me on the frame, hang a kerosene tin on the handle and we'd go over to what they called the Basin over at Carrington, which is on the part of the Hunter River. It's now filled in with wharves but in those days there was a bit of a sandy sort of a beach and I was just big enough to hang onto the

03:30 end of the net when Dad went out on shark end and did a couple of sweeps. We'd get half a kerosene tin of prawns, an occasional crab. When we got home, my mother would have the copper going. They'd go straight in and we ate so many prawns and crabs that my Dad made a table just to eat prawns off. The prawns would come out of the copper straight onto the table and

04:00 we were into them hot, and when we're finished out in the yard, put the hose on it give it a scrub down. It was put aside till the next lot of prawns. Then he'd other days on the bicycle go out about 20 miles, I suppose, from there out to Pelican, which is on Lake Macquarie, and we used to fish for blackfish, luderick as they call them now. And

04:30 on the way home, we'd call at the pig farm and we'd swap a few fish for a little flitch of bacon; call at the bakers and we'd swap some fish for a couple of loaves of bread. And all in all we ate very, very well. And I grew to like cold fish, and

05:00 I'd take a, when I started to go to school I'd take a plate, knife and fork and a little cold darky, little twist of salt and pepper. I'd sit down while the other kids ate their sandwiches. I'd have a nice cold darky. They're the predominant things. We never, ever really went hungry. Dad had a job but the firm he worked for didn't have any work, so there was no

05:30 pay. The Dad's boss, we'd come up, we'd come down now and then to see him and say, "You'd better

come up and sharpen the machines, Len." So Dad would go up and he'd spend half a day sharpening machines and the old feller would give him a pound. About a fortnight later, although the machines hadn't turned once, "You better come up and sharpen the machines, Len." And it was

06:00 his way. It was charity without being charity I reckon. He was a real good boss and he's the feller who eventually got me to go in there and serve an apprenticeship with my Dad.

What sort of work was your dad doing?

He was a joiner. He often used to tell me about how good our machines were. They were a bit primitive, but where he served his apprenticeship out at Parkes they

06:30 had a saw there that was driven by a horse on a treadmill to break down their big logs. That was, you know, as far as they were concerned that was good. You didn't have to do it by hand in a saw pit. So we didn't do bad, but…

07:00 **Ossie, can you tell us precisely what a joiner does?**

Well it's in the building industry but the joiner, in the days I'm speaking about, used to do the fine detailed work, interior work.

07:30 The firm where my Dad and I both worked, 95 percent of their work was hotels or banks and they used to make, in the days when they made the great big wooden counters that were French polished, we'd do them. We'd make, we'd build the staircases from go by hand;

08:00 the windows, the doors and all of the detailed work. That's basically it.

And this was made in a workshop before being taken to the building site?

Yeah, this was in the joinery shop and a lot of machining and in the big joinery shops the work was segregated. There'd be

08:30 people who would set out… Well, people would first get a list. They'd get the timber out and they'd size the timber. Then it would go to the chap who did the setting out and he'd set it out and that would go to the machinist who would then drill the holes and make the mortars and tenon and all that sort of thing,

09:00 which is where the doors fit together, and then it'd go to the bench hand who would put it together and clean it up. Then it'd go to the polishers and such, but in the shop that we were in we did everything, right from getting the timber out of the racks, and we'd have to draw the job up ourselves and, you know. Even if it was a staircase, well, we'd go out and

09:30 actually measure the hole where it had to go and so that you set it out the right steps, the right go and all that sort of thing. So I think that's about it.

Very, very different to the job of an average carpenter by the sounds of it?

Yes, and we did our own machining and in fact where again in the big shops they send their, they have a specialist

10:00 who sharpens the tools and that sort of thing and they send the saws to a saw doctor, well, we did all of that. We used to re-gulleted our saws and swage-set them and sharpen them and we did everything, mainly because my Dad was such a dab hand. He could do everything and wouldn't let anything beat him. I'm afraid I

10:30 got that from him and I'm a bit the same way. I hate anything to beat me and now, of course, I've got to give in a bit. I find that I'm not physically capable to do a lot of things I did, but again I like that job. But when I left Davis's, that was the firm, work was getting a little bit hard to come by.

Well actually,

11:00 **look we'll deal with this later because I'd just like to keep our focus on the early 1930's period for the moment. Can you tell us a bit about your father's personality?**

Well, he, how to put it? He was liked everywhere. His philosophy was,

11:30 "Want to have a friend, you've got to be a friend." And that was really him all the way through. Everybody come to Lenny for anything they wanted done. He never, ever knocked anybody back. Everybody called him Len or Lenny, even the snotty-nosed little kids

12:00 that run around the street. When we were asked to leave the place we were in, in Hamilton in Webster Street, the feller that owned it used to come around with his rent book and, no money, so he'd write in red and he had pages of this red where he just didn't have anything so he said to Dad one day, "Len, if you can get out by the end of the week we'll burn the book."

12:30 He said, "I've got somebody who will come in and they can pay me." So we were gone and we went out to New Lambton. Now it was not all that long after that, say 18 months after that, that things started to pick up a little bit in the building game and Dad had work. And after that we lived in a fairly long street,

Wallawar Road, and there was

13:00 a cross street, Thalabar Road, and there's lot of kids about but every kid in those two streets, Christmas Day – down to our place. Dad had a tree up. Every kid up to 14. Dad had a tree up on the front verandah and there was a present on that for every one of them.

This is in New Lambton?

That was when we went to New Lambton, yeah.

Did the move to New Lambton involve going into a smaller house?

13:30 No, it was about the same size but it was, well the rent was cheaper. I remember it was 10 shillings a week, one dollar. And my grandmother, my mother's mother, came and lived with us and I think she got a pound a fortnight pension. And

14:00 Dad, he got a bit of a garden going and he sold a few tomatoes now and then and there was a bit of a dole payment, I think, seven and six a week or something. That was to keep four of us. But he scrounged around and so my grandmother paid the rent on the week that she got the pension, Dad paid it the other week. And my sister and I

14:30 used to go in the tram over to Lambton to pay the rent. And the people there that owned the place had a dairy farm, so come in and they had a refrigerator, oh, big time. So they sat us down. We'd have two or three ice blocks and then they'd give us a quart of milk and a few other things for us to cart home with us.

So they had a proper electric refrigerator did they?

Yeah, yeah one of the those ones with a big, you probably see 'em, the old

15:00 Kelvinators I think they were, with a great big round evaporator up on top of the fridge. It was part of the fridge but it sat up there, this thing.

That's right, it looked like small space ship?

Yeah, and only had a little freezer cabinet like that, but they had ice blocks and we fixed 'em up, too.

I bet you did.

And we saved our penny the tram fare each and we walked home and we had a penny to spend.

15:30 **Just staying with your parents for a moment could you describe your mother's personality for us?**

Mum was not very outgoing. Although she had emotion, she didn't display emotions very much. In fact I can really only remember one real display of

16:00 emotion. That was much later when I'd come home for a short leave and when I got on the train to go back to the ship she broke down then, but other than that Mum seldom showed very much. She used to get involved in things, ladies clubs' and that sort of thing, but

16:30 she did one good thing that I can remember, one real good thing. That's – I've got a little reputation on cooking at the present time and a lady only a couple of months back said to me, you know, "Where did you learn to cook?" And I said, "Well, who taught you to cook?" was the question. And I said, "Nobody." And I said, "Yes they did. My mother taught me to cook because she used to say to my sister and I, "I'm going out for the day, get yourself something to eat."

17:00 So we did, and I assume that that's why I cook.

Learning by necessity?

Yeah.

And I mean you've described your father as a fairly gregarious, outgoing, generous sort of person, how did you mother compare with that in terms of being a formative or nurturing influence on the family?

Well she did all that was necessary

17:30 and she had to be a good manager because she managed the household bit and it had to be pretty worrying. Like, I until I got to about 5th class in school I never had a pair of shoes to wear or anything like that, and I guess these things were pretty worrying. She also had a

18:00 fairly hard upbringing. Her parents were both on the old Tivoli circuit. My grandfather was a musician and my grandmother was in the chorus line and she used to do a couple of odd skits and that sort of thing.

Were her parents well-known performers?

18:30 No, I don't know. I never was able to see them. But in other ways they must have been because they had 14 children, seven boys and seven girls, and they ran quite a large boarding house over at Raymond Terrace. And of course all the kids in their turn had to give a hand at the boarding house. They

19:00 were scullery maids and housemaids and goodness knows what. It was almost what today you'd call a hotel. It was quite a few transients and things. Building still stands over there but, though I guess that would have sort of knocked a fair bit out of my mother.

So you're describing a fairly quiet sort of person by the sounds of it?

She was, yeah. She could be…

19:30 Well, in later life my Dad got involved with the Western Suburbs Australian Rules Club which was over New Lambton way, and he did everything. He was, you know President and Manager and all that sort of thing and Mum never missed a game. She sat up with Dad on the Friday night they cut up

20:00 heaps of pineapple. Instead of giving the blokes oranges at half time or quarter time whatever, Dad cut up pineapple and he threw heaps of sugar on it and of course when they had a piece of pineapple they got sticky hands. It was like a magnet when the ball came to them, and that was his theory, anyway.

And that was the reason for giving them pineapple?

Yes, yeah. That besides and the sugar because of the energy, and it

20:30 was, well, I didn't mind it myself.

That's a wonderful story, actually.

Yeah, but he was their masseur and God knows what, and…

He was the footballers' masseur was he?

No, he was for those fellers. He was into that sort of thing and he looked after his team. He did everything he could for them and they loved him and they did the same for Mum, too, because she was just as involved.

Now you've mentioned the Depression here

21:00 **and you've talked about going without shoes and you've talked about on the other hand never going without food because you had plenty of fish, but you've also spoken about moving – having to move house – and your father's unemployment. What other ways was the Depression evident both within your family and within the broader community as far as you could see?**

That's a hard one.

Did you want for anything else for instance, I mean?

21:30 Well, was a pretty what meagre Christmas. They used to, we'd save up and have what we thought was a bang-up feed. There was always plenty of plum pudding. They'd find a few sixpences and threepences to scrub up and put in the pudd and

22:00 you could…I don't know. If somebody in the area got something special they were held in awe. Like if somebody could go and buy a motorcar, my God, you know. 1936 – who was it? I remember a fellow came. He was a Water Board inspector and he built a block opposite built on a block opposite us where there had been a tennis court. Nobody could afford to play tennis,

22:30 so the area was sold and this fellow built a house and, oh, the talk of the town. He was spending a thousand pound on it and it was a big solid brick house, you know. They'd laugh at you today like, "A hundred thousand? Oh, no that house – two hundred thousand at least." But he was one of the few people in the area that did have a job. I can remember

23:00 the feller Minter was down the corner from us. The tram run past or nearly past our door. It was just down the end of the street, but Minter, he was the local coal man. He worked like a galley slave carting his bags of coal on his back. Another chap, Chapman, he came to the area and he did ice deliveries.

23:30 There was an ice works just around the corner and he'd go and buy the ice and he had a billy cart first. He used to cart it round the streets and sell it because people had ice chests. We didn't. We had what they called a coolie safe which comes from Coolgardie safe. It was a frame with hessian hanging down the, fastened on the side

24:00 a door that was hessian and then the top was a water tank about so deep, and right round you hung strips of felt in there and down the sides, and it kept the sides damp. Any little breeze – you put it where there was a breeze and the breeze came through, kept your stuff just cool.

So was there an intended very slow leakage from the

24:30 **water tray?**

Yeah.

So that would feed the velvet and the hessian, would it?

Yeah, the velvet would bring that by capillary action round and it would hang against the hessian. And of course there'd be no drips because the wind had dried it before it got to the bottom. But only brought out of that tray the amount of water it needed and but the cool breeze; it was the same principle for the water bag that they hang in the shade and

25:00 didn't make anything cold, but at least you didn't have to drink the bit of butter that you got now and then.

Sure that made a difference particularly during the summer. And did you have any brothers and sisters?

One sister yeah older than me, and we always have had and still have a magnificent relationship.

25:30 Even now at least once a month I give her a ring and say, "Righto, we'd better do lunch." And we go somewhere for lunch. Until very recent years we never missed a decent show that came to town or I think the last one we went to in Sydney, we went down to see Oliver when it was on not long ago – bus trip but; we do these things together.

26:00 In fact, very often we've been going in and into a show and someone's made a remark. "Oh, you know, we're not married. We'd better rephrase that. This is my brother but we get on very well."

Very good. It's nice to have that sort of lifelong close connection to a member of your family?

Yeah, but there's only the pair of us. In fact it seems to have gone through as my parents had a…

26:30 We had a girl and a boy. My daughter turned it round, she had a boy and a girl. My son had a boy and a girl. They've been, not that bloke, my grandson that's got the great grandkids, he's broken the chain. He's had two sons.

Sounds mostly a case of very regular genetics?

Yeah.

27:00 **Now could you tell us about your education?**

Well, I started at the Sacred Heart School in Hamilton, where again something about the Depression. At least twice a week, I don't know whether you've ever seen the big old copper that

27:30 people used to do their washing in and boil their clothes up in? Well down at the school at Sacred Heart the mothers and fathers would scrounge round the town. They'd go to the local ham and beef shop which we now call a delicatessen. They'd scrounge some bacon bones as such and go to the greengrocer and get a bit of carrot and celery and potato, whatever, and they used to boil it.

28:00 Pea and ham soup, great big thick stuff in this great boiler. At 11 o'clock, oh, they'd get the stale bread from the baker and you'd get a nice big thick piece of bread and a mug of this thick soup and I loved it. And with a lot of the kids, that was the best feed they got all day. And at least twice a week that was on and that's what sticks in my mind of that school. I can't remember much else about it except being

28:30 lowered by one of the nuns out through a window to go and say good day to a cousin of mine who was a music teacher nun.

Why did you have to be lowered out the window?

Well otherwise I'd have had to go out and walk about half a kilometre to get round to go in the gate into the convent. Instead of that, she'd drop me – just lower me out by the hands. I was too small to jump out. It was so high.

29:00 And then I'd go over and see the cousin for a couple of minutes, or my mother's cousin, and come back and she'd lift me back in. But they're the main things that I can remember there.

So that's actually in infants' or primary school?

That was first class.

First class?

Yeah, and then we came out to New Lambton and I went to Saint Teresa's Convent School there

29:30 and I guess I enjoyed it in a way, but I parted company with the school system when I was about 14 and I went and got a job. A little bit illegally – I think I should have been 15 – but anyway. And I worked as a

30:00 milk boy for the Newcastle Cooperative Society. They had some 23, 24 milk runs and that was hard work. Used to have a three gallon can, a two gallon can, a quart measure and a pint measure and you pick 'em up and you ran. Run it down, pour out the milk it, serve it, pick 'em up, run. It was hard work. I was as

30:30 fit as a mallee bull when I did that. Then I went to D Goldring, yeah. He was a wholesaler of haberdashery, stationery, toilet goods and all that sort of thing to small shops in the area as far as

31:00 Cessnock or a bit further and round locally, and I was offsider to the van salesman. Then it was about then that I went down to Sydney and worked with, stayed with an aunt.

And how old were you at that point?

16.

So why did you head for

31:30 **Sydney?**

Well, to have a look at other horizons, I guess. There was no consciousness about it. There was lots of work down there and I just about had enough of this van boy bit so I went down there and I went to Marrickville. I went to this canister manufacturer, Morris McMahon,

32:00 and I only worked there for about a week and one of the fellers said, “Oh, down at Eta Peanuts they’ve got a canister department and they’re paying more than they’re paying here.” I said, “Right, we’ll go down.” So a couple of us went down. We got jobs in their department. It was a whole five shillings a week more and that was a lot of money, so

When you say canisters, what sort of canisters were they?

Well they were tin containers. They were making them for

32:30 biscuit manufacturers and I don’t know who else for, but it was cake tins and larger containers.

Oh, I see, with an easily removable and replaceable lid?

Yeah, yeah. Well then down at Eata they were making them for their, they used to do peanuts in tins and seal, like a jam tin and

33:00 smaller of course, but they used to seal them. But I worked there for a little while and because I was the newest hand and the most useless, you wouldn’t want to know – they were short of a van boy. They had their vans going out, so they sent to the canister department for someone and so I was the least productive so they sent me over. Anyway, I went out with this fellow and I was to be two

33:30 days with him. And the idea was, you go with him into the shop, he gets the order, writes it out in quadruplicate, tears a page out, gives to you. I’d go out then into the van, get the stuff, bring it in with the invoice while he still chatted to the customer. I’d then take the books and I’d go out and sit in the van. Anyway,

34:00 late in the afternoon… There was three different books and they were all in quadruplicate. Anyway, in the afternoon he got his book out to go in and he had a look at it and he said, “You been changing this carbon over?” I said, “Well, you know, don’t see anybody else.” “Why would you do that?” I said, “Well, it’s the natural thing to do. You’ve got to use the book at the next place.” He said, “I’ve had a boy with me for 18 months

34:30 and I can’t bloody teach him to do that yet.” So anyway, I go back to the canisters for a couple of days. Next thing they send for me again. They ask for me to go over. So I went. The fellow, his name was Lyall Wald, and he said, “Heard about you. So can you go away?” “Yeah.” “Well go and get a bag. We’re going to have a couple of nights up in the mountains.” So I went up there.

35:00 When we came back, the manager of the van salesman and a good name to work for Eata – his name was Salter – and he called me in and he said, “Well, look, how would you like to come and work here permanently as a van boy?” I said, “I can’t.” “Why not?” I said, “Well, over in the canister department I get 35 bob a week. Your van boys only get 30 bob.” I said I couldn’t afford to

35:30 be without that extra five bob because I’m living away from home. “Well, if you don’t say anything, I won’t. We’ll pay you the 35 bob.” So I said, “Right! beauty!” But I wasn’t allowed to tell the other van boys, so I didn’t mind. So I finished up the van boy after all after going to Sydney to escape it.

I just wanted to ask you about the carbon angle. What

36:00 **was the story? You were supposed to move the carbon every time there was a new order was there?**

Well, he’d been doing it all the time, except when he picked the book up I’d already done it and because it was natural. He had to use the book again.

Yeah, and so he had to reinsert the carbon behind another page?

Yeah, you put the carbon in the page and another sheet of carbon a page.

So why was this a problem when he discovered that you’d been doing it?

No, it wasn't a problem. His problem was that he couldn't teach the feller that

36:30 had been with him for 18 months to do it.

And he was impressed with the fact that you…?

He kept telling him to do it and telling him to do it and all of a sudden here's a clown jumped in alongside him and he's doing it.

Doing it automatically?

Yeah.

Yeah, fair enough.

But it's natural. I suppose, too, the fact that I'd been with Goldring's on the van and I did it there, but it was natural. You don't have to be told simple things like that.

That's great. So you stayed with the van job for how long?

37:00 Would have only been…wouldn't have been any more than six months, because I got a telegram from home: "Get yourself home. You start your apprenticeship next Monday." So home I went and into the joinery

37:30 shop.

Who had organised your apprenticeship?

Well, this feller that I spoke of that kept giving Dad the pound to sharpen the machines, he just wandered up to Dad in the shop one day and he says, "When are you bringing your boy in, Len?" So Dad said, "I'll bring him in Monday." "Righto." That's how I got my apprenticeship. It was

38:00 just it was very, very much a family sort of a thing, the firm. The bricklaying foreman, his son was working there with him and cause the old feller I'm talking about, his son was then running the firm and there was

38:30 a lot of it. And, in fact, when they got their first big job soon after the Depression was – I can't think of the name of the hotel but it was a hotel in Newcastle they were going to build and they came and saw Dad and said, "Righto, Len, you'd better come in and start. We've got this job." And Dad said, "Better look for a couple of joiners or whatever."

39:00 Gus was this bloke's name. "Oh," he said. "You won't mind coming out and wheeling a barrow of bricks for the brickies or you won't care if a couple of lads come in and they tail out on the machine for you?" "No." "Well," he said, "what about we keep it in the family?" So they built this pub with about eight people. They were all, you know, becoming multi-skilled.

Tape 2

00:33 **So what was the name of your and your father's employer?**

It was JC Davis & Sons as it had up the front 'Builder and Contractor'. The old feller, Jess, was virtually out of it. He still had the interest but didn't work. His son Gus and his brother Jess were

01:00 actually running the firm when I served my time. Gus preferred to be called Gus. His name was Rudolf Augustus. It's like me with Oswald; call me Ossie.

Sounds German actually?

Yeah the Davis though is Welsh, isn't it?

Yeah, yeah Davis doesn't sound too German?

No. Actually he brought himself a new car – a 1937

01:30 Chev, a black one – and it used to get a bit dusty when he'd go to the jobs and check things, you know, and someone with their finger wrote 'Gus' on the boot in letters about so big; never ever got it out. It just as though you'd done it with a piece of sandpaper and admittedly they never tried to cut it out with cutting compound, but ordinary polish wouldn't bring it out

02:00 and that sign was always there.

Certainly not the sort of car you'd want to pinch, too distinctive?

Yeah, yeah.

So this hotel contract was the big contract after the Depression?

That was the kick along that they got and then things started to pick up. They got a couple more and the first job I worked on when I started was also a hotel. It was the Queen's

02:30 Arms up at Maitland which, despite what we did, it's still standing. This old Jess, he was a straight-laced straight-faced feller – would never say anything funny. He said, "Oh, hope it stays there till we get paid," but that was about his only bit of humour.

That's the closest he got to hilarity was it?

Yeah, yeah, yeah although he did crack a funny.

03:00 He had two canaries hanging on his back wall and a feller served his time [apprenticeship] with me – Freddie King. He used to… Fred bred show canaries. He just happened to say to him, "How's your canaries?" Said, "Oh, got rid of them. Why?" "Couldn't afford to have them eating their bloody heads off and not doing anything."

It's another world isn't it?

Yeah.

03:30 **And so you began your apprenticeship. For how long did your apprenticeship last?**

Well it was a five-year apprenticeship but I broke that, or broke the period. Just before I turned 18 I went to sea, went into the navy, and I had put in enlistment papers but

04:00 before they were processed I was called up in the natural draft and I was a bit worried. I wanted to go to sea and I was a bit worried that they would just bung me into the army, but anyway when we got down to the recruiting depot in Sydney they just said, "Right, fellers that want to go in the air force over there, the blokes for the navy over there, the rest of you stay there." So there was about six or seven of us

04:30 went over to the navy and they sent us straight down to Loftus Street. What'd they do there? That's right, they sent us home for two days.

Now look, before we get too much into enlistment and recruiting, I just wanted to ask a couple of other questions regarding pre-war life. Did people that you knew talk very much about World War One?

No, no. The only feller…

05:00 I think there was two that I heard. One was a mate of Dad's, Harry Wood, and he was a railway man and I know they had him driving trains over, well, wherever he was, Palestine or wherever he was, and he'd come back and he'd gone back into the railways in Newcastle. And the other one was that

05:30 Chapman feller, Jim Chapman, the ice man feller. He opened a little corner store just diagonally across from us and he used to have a few things to say. I can remember him saying something about bayonets. I know he said there were that many bayonets lying around they were using them for tent pegs and…

Sorry, bayonets?

06:00 **Where were the bayonets?**

Well there was that many available, as I say, laying around, but probably in a store somewhere. But there was that many of them and they were 18-inch bayonets so they were good tent pegs in the sand. So that's…

Once again, in Palestine?

In Palestine, yeah, but I can't remember anybody specifically

06:30 talking about the war other than those couple of little things.

Had your father served in the war?

No, no.

And no relatives that you knew of that were talking about it?

No, not really. I can't, oh there were a few of my mother's brothers but I didn't know much about them either.

And yet World War One seems to have

07:00 **cast quite a shadow over that entire generation following the war?**

Well it did. There was a fishing mate of Dad's, Tommy Marsh, he came back. He was pretty badly knocked about with gas and, what would it be? Eight or 10 years it was. No, it was after we went to New Lambton. I know that Tommy got a sort of relapse attack from this gas and

07:30 he died. He just sat up and in bed and he said to his wife, “I’ve gone, Tilly,” and bang. And that was from the gas. But he didn’t talk about the war either but you could see, you know, the ravages. I don’t know whether you know the figures, but we had more than 60,000 killed and that was from a community of, what were we then? About five and a half, six

08:00 million, and that was a hell of a what’s a name? A toll. Nearly every family in Australia was affected. And I got the figures out there – it’s in one of the Anzac addressed I gave down at Echuca a few years ago.

Looking once again at the 1930s, how important was Anzac day?

Is the which?

Looking at the 1930s,

08:30 **looking at those pre war years, your formative years, how important was Anzac Day within your awareness at that time?**

I don’t know about importance. We never seemed to place a lot of importance on it. It was

09:00 for the young people. The older people seemed to… We’ll go into the march and that sort of thing, but I guess I was a bit young for it to register with me. I went in and I waved a flag with other people. Actually I was… In those days the local show march was of more interest.

09:30 Well, it used to be a big thing. They’d have this procession from up the top of town out to Broadmeadow. It was a hell of a long thing, but they actually threw samples out to people as they’re going along, you know, and there’d be…maybe there was a local ice cream company, Victor Ice Cream, and they’ be throwing out ice creams.

10:00 And I don’t know whether you know or not, but Arnott’s biscuits started in Newcastle and that’s another thing too about eating. We used to have quite a lot of biscuits. Thursday mornings there’d be a line-up of people at Arnott’s biscuit factory with pillowslips and sixpence. Great big scoop of broken biscuits

10:30 or two, depends how the feller felt. And lots of them only had little chips off them that sort of thing. I found out later from an Arnott’s manager who came round to the joinery shop to get something or other, and he told me that he used to be called in of a night by Arnott. There wasn’t enough broken biscuits. They’d spend a couple of hours breaking them so that there was enough for the people, yeah.

11:00 **So this was a Monday morning thing, was it?**

No, Thursday used to do it.

Thursdays?

Thursday morning, yeah.

So this was a real kind of goodwill and PR [public relations] thing?

Yeah, and nobody knew. I didn’t know about this and people would say, “Oh no, that didn’t happen.” But it did.

That the biscuits were deliberately broken if there weren’t enough?

Yeah, Arnott would… I can’t think of this feller’s name now.

But is this a kind of Depression era?

This was Depression.

So this was their way of helping out the community?

Giving

11:30 something to the community, yeah.

For how long did that last?

I don’t know, while the Depression was on.

So they’d literally fill up a pillowslip?

Well, he didn’t fill it, but he had a great scoop like that about so long with a handle on it. One of these big sugar and flour scoops, and you’d get one or two of them for your sixpence. Depends how you looked, I guess, but

12:00 what reminded me of that, though, was the show business that for months before the show Arnott’s used to make up miniature packets of their biscuits. They’d make a smaller biscuit and put it in a packet about so long, and these are what went into the show bags.

I see, so they were literally samples?

They were samples and they sold them for a song.

12:30 Other manufacturers worked the same way, but the one that sticks in my mind is Arnott's. And their old original office is still standing in Union Street in town, and that's now used by the Adult Education Association; it's an office.

That's amazing. I hadn't known that Arnott's had actually begun in Newcastle?

Yeah.

Now looking at

13:00 **other aspects of the 1930s, how important was the notion of the British Empire at that time?**

Mate, that wasn't… it was, God you know. People even people born in Australia would talk about one day they're going 'home'. Like the people who had emigrated were always talking about, "Oh yes, we're going to go home," and that sort of thing, but people born here, never seen the joint,

13:30 yeah, "Oh, must go home."

Why was Britain so important?

I don't think I was old enough to say but it was the only thing that was known you know, empire. It was there in front of you at school. Every school, every room had a great bit map of the world on the Mercator

14:00 principle, the flat one, and half of the world was coloured red. That was the British Empire and it's everywhere, so it's like Microsoft today.

I've often wondered whether it was that Australia was so far away from everywhere else apart from South East Asia, and it seems to be that it was our way of connecting to places that meant something to us?

14:30 Well, yeah, but you know what'd it be now? I don't know really what it meant. I guess I am still a monarchist, getting quickly disillusioned with the way they're going at the moment, of course, but just seemed to be the thing, you know. It's like

15:00 most servicemen that enlisted, you ask them, "Did you do it out of patriotism?" They'd all say, "No, not me." It was just the thing to do and I think you know that's how nearly all of us felt.

Did you enlist because of the Empire or because of Australian security or what would the reason have been?

15:30 Well, in the long run, I didn't enlist. I was called up in the natural draft.

But how, you're clearly, okay, let's just take a step or two back or forward or sideways to look at the outbreak of World War Two. Can you remember where you were when you heard that World War Two had broken out?

Yeah, I was in the yard at

16:00 Nut Foods Proprietary Limited, Eta Peanuts, when they spoke about it, and one of the van salesmen there, he was straight down to the recruitment office, you know, within a few hours and…

So what did you actually hear?

Well, I did hear on the radio Neville Chamberlain's [Prime Minister of the United Kingdom]

16:30 famous 'peace in our time' bit and the bit about the negotiations that were going on between Chamberlain and Hitler and such, but I think every… Well, the discussions that I heard, I wasn't in many of them but I think nearly everybody realised, "Well, right they've given in to this bloke. He won't stop." I think we all realised that

17:00 and it just sort of all of a sudden I think… What was Churchill's [Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom] words? "No, Menzies." [Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia] Yeah. "It is my melancholy duty…," I can remember. That was the start, I think, to inform the nation that we are, "In a state of war with Germany". Something like that. And, sure enough, we were but there wasn't any statements like the

17:30 First World War where our masters of the day came out with a statement that we will defend the Empire to the last man and the last shilling. This time like Australia was taken into some of the… Well, they were getting some of the intelligence what was going on and they were prepared. They weren't pitchforked into the war like they were in

18:00 World War I, but…

So, do you say that Australia had more ownership over their own decision to enter World War Two?

Yeah, yeah. They went without hesitation, but they weren't in the decision-making, but they were kept informed and never thinking, of course, that it'd come so close as it did

18:30 when the Japs [Japanese] entered the war.

Just before we get as far as that, you mentioned the chap that went straight down to the recruiting depot. What response did the news of the outbreak of World War Two have on you? You know, what affect did the outbreak of World War Two have on you?

I don't know about a

19:00 specific affect. I think I thought at the time, you know, oh, you know, "What an adventure." That's right, yeah, I did. "I wonder if it'll last till I'm old enough."

How old were you when World War Two broke out?

16, well just about yeah.

19:30 Yeah, I was 16.

And so you were fairly keen to get into it by the sounds of it?

Well, you know, boys' adventure. No realisation of what it would or could be about, just that all the adventure stories I'd read and all that sort of thing. Here's a chance to be in an adventure I s'pose. I don't know, but

20:00 I do remember thinking to myself, "I wonder how long it'll last," you know. I don't think that there was any disappointment when they all said, "It'll only last six months," and that. I thought, "Oh well, that's that," but…

So you've got a couple of, how long was it before you enlisted? How old were you when you actually did enlist?

Well, when I put the

20:30 papers in I hadn't turned 18. See in the navy they had what they call 'boys' time'. You could go in at 17 providing you had parents' consent.

So just before we deal with your enlistment once again, you continued on at Eta and then coming back to start your apprenticeship

Yeah.

In the first year of the war?

Yeah.

What are your memories of the effect on Australia and on the people you knew

21:00 **of that first year of war?**

Well the thing that struck me it wasn't so much the war. It was all this sudden affluence – here's work, tons of work. Like, "I can walk out of this job today and I can get another one before I go home." That

21:30 was, "There we are, we've got money." And I think that was the biggest thing that I noticed.

Why was there all this work all of a sudden?

Well they're grabbing people to go straight into war factories and they'd had a bit of warning and had started getting things ready, and if it wasn't actually in a war factory it's building one – changing the BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary] to war production

22:00 and things like that. Built the ammunition factory out at Lithgow and, of course, in the food industry, building army camps all over the place. Then the clothing industry kicked along making uniforms. And everybody had money and it

22:30 made them a little buoyant. Then later on they weren't so happy when we started to get rationing. I remember the old motorbike that we had. Actually I had a motorcycle a VW [Volkswagen] Douglas that I never, ever rode but it was registered and it sat in the backyard because we got one gallon of petrol one month and two gallons the next, so

23:00 and we had an Enfield that we rode to and from work and that wasn't enough petrol to keep us at that and to let us go fishing, so we registered this bike but never went out of the yard, and so we got, well, three gallons of petrol a month.

I imagine that the wartime economy had a big affect on BHP as you said and

23:30 **specifically the steelworks in Newcastle?**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Did you have friends or relatives working at the steelworks?

Yes, yeah. See they had something like, I think at the peak, about 28,000 working at BHP and there was, well,

24:00 local buses running direct from all suburbs to the BHP, and you've got no idea the number of bicycles. They had big sheds built, racks and racks and racks of bikes, yeah, thousands of them. Every time the shift changed – it was on 24 hours a day, of course, there – and I can't think of anyone specifically.

24:30 A feller lived behind us at New Lambton he worked there but I can't think specifically of people that I knew there because I was away working, come home and of course went into the joinery shop, but then I was off again and…

Looking at your recreational activities at this time, you were quite a keen dancer, weren't you?

Yeah, where'd that come from?

25:00 **It came from the research. It came from the conversation you had with the people up in Orange. Can you tell us a bit about your dancing activities, because obviously this is before you enlisted?**

Yeah, well my parents danced pretty well. This is ballroom dancing and in fact they used to get on the old motorbike and go down to

25:30 the Petersham Caledonian Society dances and back home the next day. They'd stop with this aunt at Marrickville, my mother's sister. Then Mum was involved with the 2GB [radio station] Happiness Club who had a

26:00 group at New Lambton where we were living, and they had a dance once a fortnight I think it was – might have been once a week – down at the scout hall, which was a fair step from our place. So we all went – my mother, father, sister, myself – and then Dad was the MC [Master of Ceremonies] and as the natural thing you got up and danced and

26:30 eventually it got to the stage I'd dance seven nights a week. I'd go in with a Hamilton Catholic youth movement on Sunday nights. We'd go to church Sunday evening and then into the dance Sunday night, but just about every night of the week.

What sort of dances were you doing?

Well, old time ballroom

27:00 dances, the things that they don't do these days unless you go to the real old timers. Maxine – Maxi Axi – of course, the good old barn dance and waltz. And there are about 99 different dances done to waltz time, but in their turn we did all of them,

27:30 and…

How many people would turn up to these events?

Hundreds there'd be. The hall that we danced at on the Sunday night was part of the Sacred Heart church property in Hamilton –

28:00 what was it called? The Southern Cross Hall. And the good old tykes, we had a two different nights of the week – I think there was housie to make a bob, and then I think Wednesday and Saturday was the Southern Cross – was a dance – but the town hall, the

28:30 Tyrrell Hall, which was the Church of England's hall in town, it was a big dance hall. The Hamilton Girls' School, they had a beautiful hall and a magnificent floor, but there was something on somewhere and in those days was a case of you wore a suit and a tie and the girls wore

29:00 their long frocks and things like that. I can remember walking into one of the poshest places which used to be at, this was after the war, the Tattersall's Club in Newcastle. And I walked through there and I got two jewfish over my shoulder. I've got me pair of shorts I've got my belt and knife and benny,

29:30 an old suit coat, and I walked in carrying two 20 pound jew [jewfish] over my shoulder that I'd sold to the cook. My mate and I had a good run when we got 16 jew like that in two nights. We didn't know who to give them to so we took them up and we sold them for two bob a pound and, yeah, I carried 'em through and here's these girls in their ballerina-length frocks and the blokes done up in their bib and tucker and such, yeah.

What a contrast!

30:00 **That's a great image actually, that's a wonderful…**

Yeah, I enjoyed that. Then when I went back out to the car. My mate Jeff was sitting there and I said,

"They were good to us." I said, "they took us in and they gave us a beer while they got the chef up," and "Yes, the chef would buy these." So I went out and I said to Jeff, "Look, they were pretty good. They never questioned the weight." We told them what the weight was and we had weighed them.

30:30 I said, "I might come in there for dinner next Friday night; they'll serve me some of that. I'm certain that they're going to put that straight in the freezer – scales and guts and everything." I said, "I'm going to go and offer to clean them." He said, "Would you?" "Oh yeah." So I went in and I sent for the chef again and I said, "Look, you've put them in the freezer haven't you?" He said, "Yeah." I said, " Would you like me to clean them?" "Oh, would you?" So I went down and they had a beautiful big tub to clean them in, so I cleaned

31:00 them. He starts telling me how pleased he was to get it to get fresh fish like this. I said, "Yeah, they were swimming a couple of hours ago." "Yeah, but any time you've got fish bring them in, we're so pleased to get them." So about eight times he said how pleased he was, so I said, "Listen, mate. If I'd known you were that pleased I'd have made it bloody two and six a pound." No, he didn't like that.

That's wonderful. Just going back to the dances, I believe it was at one of these dances that you met your future

31:30 **wife?**

Yes, that was again at a Sunday night dance that was over at the Junction, which is over Merewether way. I don't know how well you know the town. Well it was further into town and over near the beach area of Bar Beach, but this was the same sort of thing. In fact, when my wife heard

32:00 me talking on the phone about that she said, "You don't remember how we met?" I said, "Yes I do." I said, "I'd walked in with my mate Keith Cunningham and his sister Jean and I was just standing there for a minute," I said, "and Jean Cunningham come over and she said, "There's someone over here to dance with."" And I said, "That was you." "Oh, that was right," she remembered. Yeah, she was all of 15. I'm just starting to think

32:30 it might be permanent. Like we've been married 57 years so it might last.

You're just starting now to think it might be permanent?

Yeah, yep.

Okay.

I think the great grandkids have sealed it. We might make a deal and say, "This is it," yeah.

Yeah, I get the impression that might be the case.

Yeah.

So what was your first impression of her when you met her at the age of 15?

33:00 Yeah, well the first thing was to try out whether she could dance, and she wasn't too bad so it was all right. It worked.

And what happened after that?

Well I wasn't…

33:30 I didn't expect a great deal of her. I can remember we walked out of the place and her father had come down to pick her up cause she was a bit later than usual, but then the next time I remember I took her home. Her father was at work. He was a watchman at one of the pits and, yeah, that's right, "So you'd better come and meet my brother."

34:00 So he was about that big and he was in bed with his mother, so that's where I met my future mother-in-law. She was in bed, but anyway it was just…

So she took you home to meet her mother?

Yeah.

And younger brother?

Yeah.

And how did things develop from there?

34:30 I think we must have met at that same dance two or three times before I asked her out to the movies, or I don't know whether it was to the movies or to another dance or whatever, but it just, well, it became a pretty regular thing then. It was

35:00 a couple of nights a week we went out then. I s'pose we decided – what was the word then? We were 'going together'. But next thing I was off down to Flinders Naval Depot not too long after that.

So we

35:30 **might come to this when it actually occurs within the chronology of the story. How long after you had met your future wife did you actually marry her?**

Well, that would have been, that was either late ‘42 or very early ’43,

36:00 and we got married on the 14th of December 1946.

I see. So it was obviously once the war had finished. Look we’ll come to that later, anyway. I asked you what you first impressions of her were, but how could describe her as an individual at that time?

36:30 Well, she had personality and she was a very attractive young lady. In fact she came from Glebe and cause I was from New Lambton, which was a fair way away, and I remember one feller that I’d got to know pretty well over there, and he called me a ‘rotten mongrel’. He said, “The best looking girl in the town and you

37:00 had to come from outside and bloody take her.” But it was, you know, we just clicked I guess.

So she was living in Glebe at that time, in Sydney, was she?

No, Newcastle.

Newcastle has a Glebe does it, I hadn’t realised that?

Yeah, yeah.

Okay, but you were seen as an outsider because you were from another suburb?

Yeah, well I was two suburbs away

37:30 and actually it was quicker to walk over to her place than it was to go by… If I wanted transport I had to get a bus over to Hamilton then a tram out to New Lambton, whereas I could walk over through Adamstown and home just as quick anyway.

Now, looking at the background to your enlistment, why were you particularly keen on the navy?

38:00 I don’t know. I had no aspirations about the army. I didn’t want to be a foot slogger. I had a mate who

38:30 said he was going to join the navy if they’d have him and I thought, “That’s a great idea.” That put it in my mind and I thought, “Yeah, well, if I’ve got to go that’s where I’m going,” and that’s about it. There wasn’t anything specific. Like I’ve always lived near the water. I did a bit of sailing on a thing called the Hannah Mower [?] –

39:00 it was about a 35 foot yacht – and not a lot, but I did that and I’d worked on another yacht. Give my Dad a hand – he put a new deck on it, and, I don’t know. I just thought, “Well, that’s it.” Seemed to be a cleaner

39:30 alternative to trotting around in the mud and it was…

Tape 3

00:34 **Around this time, from where were you getting information about the war?**

Radio; we’d splashed out. Actually almost as soon as the firm started to build the first pub I mentioned, Mum and Dad splashed out. Anyway, they bought a radio.

01:00 I can even remember the brand of it – it was Air Zone – and we, you know, kept pretty well informed. There was some pretty good news services on it and, of course, the newspapers. We had a quite a good evening newspaper here, the Newcastle Sun, and the Newcastle Herald, the morning paper, used to be exceptionally

01:30 good. It’s downgraded now, I think. It’s, well, I think it’s gone backwards. It used to be straight reporting. Here’s the news – bang there’s a story. Take it or leave it. No embellishments or no screaming sensation headlines and that sort of thing which, as you do today, you get in the store and find

02:00 it’s got nothing to do with the bloody story anyway, or very little. So I rather liked our newspapers. Anyway, the [Newcastle] Sun’s gone.

What about things like newsreels?

Newsreels. I loved the newsreels. Actually,

02:30 after we were married, or even before, we'd go to the movies and I didn't want to miss the newsreel. And for some reason my wife used to think it was a sin to be there early so I seldom saw them, but I thought they were great, really were. In fact, I've got a couple of tapes there of old newsreels that someone brought me,

03:00 you know, a bit of nostalgia.

Okay, now getting back to your enlistment in the navy, what can you recall of your actual enlistment?

Well, I can remember that we, well, that group I spoke about, six or eight of us or whatever it is, that stood aside, we went

03:30 down to Loftus Street and reported and were told to come home for a couple of days, to go back following Monday when it was organised for us to do our physical exams. And in those days they were still a little bit choosey as far as health standard was concerned, and I know one fellow

04:00 had a burn scar scald scar on his neck. It was a little outstanding. Anyway they rejected him for a seaman but they said he could come in as a stoker. I think of the eight I was the only one that passed the physical as a seaman, but with this feller and myself they gave us a while

04:30 then to do something and we had to come back in the afternoon. He and I went to the movies. I can remember the picture we saw. It was Noel Coward in Which We Serve, and if ever you saw that you'd never go to sea. But anyway, it was a bit late, so…

What was the movie about?

Well, Noel Coward was the skipper of a naval ship and got into all sorts of strife in the weather they were in. Like

05:00 it was supposed to be in the North Sea and frightful weather and conditions I thought, you know, and of course we only joked about it. Said, you know, "Fancy looking at this and going on with the navy." But anyway, we both did.

So what do you recall of your training that you underwent once you had

05:30 **joined the navy?**

Well, I can remember the Officer in Charge of the new entry school. Like people were coming from everywhere and they were divided into groups of about 28, 30 and you were class number so and so, whatever, but collectively we were the new entry school and the feller in charge

06:00 was a retreaded officer. He was a World War I officer who was too old for active service, but they brought him back in to be in charge of that lot. Lieutenant Commander Croft, popularly known to the fellers as 'Daddy Croft'. And I can remember some of the first words he greeted us with. He told us, "You are now in the navy.

06:30 Leave and sleep are privileges, they are not necessities." And then they started to prove it to us. He did have another saying, but he wouldn't get away with it today. He said, "At one time the lowest form of sea life was the seamen." He said,

07:00 "Now we have the WRANS [Women's Royal Australian Naval Service]." He hated the women in the navy.

So, during this time, when you were training, did you have much interaction with the WRANS?

Dear no, no. If we went down to the… We had a short time to go down to the swimming pool.

07:30 "Everybody out! The WRANS are coming." We weren't even allowed to look at 'em. I saw them a couple of times at the occasional – what will I call them? – dinners and dances and such that they had in the officers' mess,

08:00 but that's only because I was in the band and you could see them from afar, but don't touch. The leave side of it I can remember very well the wakey, wakey bugle call of a morning. A joker used to stand up with a bugle in front of a microphone and this bloody sound come over the loud speakers,

08:30 but it was quite a stirring call.

Was it the same call every day?

Yeah, yeah.

Can you remember how it goes or?

I can, but I don't think I could give you the call but, you were run on the on this loud speaker

09:00 system. First announcement would be ‘dress of the day’, and that was the clothes that everybody would put on; then the various announcement what different groups we were going to do and all that sort of thing. I had certain privileges. They did ask

09:30 for buglers or drummers to report to the band room and they gave us a bit of a test and said, “Righto, you’re in the band.” And because of being in the band we did get a few extra privileges like getting out of Flinders and going up to Melbourne. There’d be some charitable do on and the band was to play, so we’d go

10:00 up there. I might miss a couple of classes that I should have been at. In fact I came back from one of these jaunts up the line and the feller said, “You’ve done all right. You’ve just passed your swimming test.” I was up there and they were in the pool.

Well look, just, so this is all while you were doing, undergoing your training?

Yep.

Now, how was it that you came to be a drummer?

Well, they just said, “Has anybody got any experience?

10:30 Report to the band room.” So that’s what I meant we went up and they tested us. Some blokes got in some didn’t.

What I mean is, like you must have obviously had some experience that we haven’t talked about. How did you – where did the drumming start?

I played around with a few people I knew at the various little dances that were on. I never played seriously or anything like that, but I

11:00 had enough to be able to do what they wanted me – all they wanted was a couple of rolls on the drum and if you can do that right… We can teach you what we want. And there was two major actions. I don’t know whether you’ve ever seen the naval band. Well, a lot of them now bring the sticks up between beats and all that sort of thing, and they did that, and there was really only the two basic movements

11:30 and you had to remember where that was, but they did teach us to read drum music, which is all written in bass cleft – it’s not up and down, it’s in a straight line – but it after I’d finished my training I was still down at Flinders. Like this was only about six weeks to train, but I was still there and I

12:00 couldn’t get out of the place. The draft list used to go up on the notice board on a Tuesday and the thing was you went out of the depot on the Thursday. So anyway, I used to go and have a look, “Oh yeah, beauty! I’ve got a draft.” So I’d go back to the band room and say to the fellers, “Well, so long blokes, I’m off. I’ve got a draft. I’m going to such and such.” Next thing I’d see the little

12:30 band master go up to the… Well, he away. He’d go marching along with his baton under his arm and next thing I’d get word my draft had been cancelled. And took me a few weeks to wake up what was on. He was going up – he didn’t want to lose his bandsman. So all of a sudden when my name went up I just kept my face shut and didn’t say anything and went, but it was a quite an experience

13:00 down there. We were allowed up into Melbourne once a fortnight. Yeah, every second weekend. But because of the band I was getting up there quite a bit more and we’d get a few hours to ourselves when we went up. And we all thought quite a lot of the band master cause he’d pull a few strings for us and get us little privileges.

13:30 **What was his name?**

Now, that’s one thing that I can’t remember.

And when you talk of privileges, what kind of privileges would he give you?

Well, when we’d go up to play at some sort of a do – a big charity day or something or even a march through the city – every month or so there was a march through the city of

14:00 Melbourne raising money for war bonds and that sort of thing – so he’d always make sure that instead of straight onto a train or onto a truck and back to Flinders we got two or three hours to ourselves. And nobody ever let him down and, in fact, a couple of times there’d be something on when a few of us should have been on leave but we all

14:30 voluntarily went back and played for him. So, you know, we all thought a lot of him. It’s one of the few names I can’t remember, but…

Now, getting back to other parts of your training, you were obviously doing your drum training and drum activities, what other activities were you doing as part of your training?

Well, gunnery.

15:00 We all had a couple of belts with the… They had a four-inch gun down there which they fired out into

the Bay [Westernport Bay] and we trained on that. We used to fire 'half-charge', which means only half the amount of powder they normally use. Used to be able to see the shell trundling through the air. It didn't go very far,

15:30 and then with small arms Bren guns the old .303, rope work, splices, knots and all that sort of thing. Navigation, lookout duties.

What's splice work?

Splicing a rope together.

16:00 **Sorry, I've actually never actually heard of splice work before. Can you describe what you do when you splice a rope together?**

Well, it depends. Well, if you've got two pieces of rope and one's not long enough, well you can splice these ropes together with short splice, long splice.

16:30 Short splice you've only got about three turns of each rope and doesn't matter, you know, your rope's like this or like this or whatever – same principle where you weave one strand of rope over a strand and under a strand, over a strand under a strand, until they're interlocked, and it's about 90 percent as strong as the rest of the rope, but it leaves a bulky piece.

17:00 If you do a long splice, which is much more intricate, you start with the full size strand and then you take some of the strands out and cut them off and then you take, say, two thirds of a strand through, and then you take half the strand, then a quarter of the strand, then just a little bit, so that it comes out as

17:30 a tapered thing, neater but no better. You can bring one piece of rope around and make an eye and splice into the other piece of rope and that is an eye splice. Sometimes in that splice you have to put a piece of steel so that you've got a reinforced eye and

18:00 then they go onto fancy things like Turks heads and whatever, but

Sorry, what is a Turk's head?

Well I'll try and show you one after. I think I've got a miniature one out there.

Sure, yeah.

But people talk about knots, and there was really

18:30 only one knot. Whether you know that, but there used to be three knots in the navy. The reef knot, the other was the knot in the old sailing ship days they had wooden buckets, a piece of rope that came through and that was the handle it went through two holes. That was a knot on the end of the bucket handle

19:00 was called a knot, and on the cat of nine tails that they used to whip the fellers with, there was knot on the end of that. That was called a knot. But everything else is a 'bend' or a…now I've slipped the word, but anyway, they're not called a knot.

19:30 Bends and splices and that sort of thing, not knots. Like a bowline is a not a knot, it's a bend. That's the word – a bend.

So what is the difference between a knot and a bend?

Well, the thing is, we'll call them knots or whatever. The main thing about a knot it must be firm and hold, but it must be easy to undo

20:00 because very often your life might depend on undoing a knot as quick as, or as much as it does on perhaps tying a good knot, so that's about it. It's nebulous sort of thing, isn't it?

And that's why, I guess, the reef knot is such a good knot?

It is called a knot, yeah, that's right. The reef knot –

20:30 it's easy to undo, but…

Can you talk us through – I know how to do a reef knot cause I did my St John's ambulance course – but for like people who, you know, for the record, who might not know what's involved in doing a reef knot, can you talk us through how you actually do a reef knot?

Well, it's left over right and right over left, is that what you all you remember? Now to demonstrate it

21:00 with your fingers is a bit difficult, but the thing is that the two pieces of line coming out of each end must be on the same side as each other. If one is tucked the other way, like there's a loop, and if one comes out one side and one's

21:30 out the other side well, that's a granny [knot], and it ain't good. It won't hold as well.

And can you describe how you released the reef knot?

Well, it should release easily by pushing the two lines together. It should come away quite easily.

Now this is a bit of an unusual request, but I don't

22:00 **suppose you have some rope hanging around the place that we can run off and get and maybe give us a demo, demonstrate it?**

I'll be able to get a bit after for you, if you like.

Okay, well why don't we, on next tape, we'll…?

Yeah, well next tape we'll have a cuppa and I'll grab a bit of line.

Yeah, okay, great.

Tie the bowline for you, that's the best.

Okay, cause I think everyone should know the reef knot, but that's great cause we interviewed a few navy men but we haven't actually talked about knots and it seems like

22:30 **a kind of a strange thing, but it's actually a very practical and good historical thing to know, I think, so that would be good.**

Yeah, well one that everyone should know is the bowline, particularly if they muck about with boats. They do know that and I remember that as a kid, as a Cub [junior boy scout], being taught about it. And I believe they still teach it the same way about – this is a tree and that's a rabbit burrow and the rabbit comes out and has a look and he decides

23:00 he doesn't like that so he went round the back of the tree till he saw there was nobody looking and he come and he went back down the burrow and bang, that was it. But they still teach the kids the same way.

Well thanks for that, that was great. We'll get you to demonstrate those next tape. Now, you were talking about your training and I think we got up to… You mentioned gunnery and the knots and a few other things. Was there anything else about your training

23:30 **that you could mention?**

Well, they took us out on a tug that was down there for training on little minor seamanship things, acting as the helmsman and the lookouts and such. And most of the time there was a lot of us standing around doing nothing, so they provided us with fishing lines and

24:00 I remember I caught a bream, quite a nice fish. And the chief petty officer that was there and I was, you know, I wasn't up on all these things that if they made a suggestion you fell in with it. "Oh, that's a nice fish. That'd be just nice for my dinner tonight," says the PO [Petty Officer], and I said, "I don't like your chances, chief," cause I'd been taught – you catch a fish,

24:30 it's yours, you know. Anyway, he didn't press it and we went back and I took the fish. Anyhow, I went over to the galley to get it cooked. Couldn't get it cooked, so I told one of the cooks the story. He said, "Bring it over. I'll fix it." So anyhow, it was steamed in cream and butter for me, so

25:00 yeah. I was, you know, I thought after, "Oh, gees, I should have said, 'Oh yes, chief.'" You know, "My compliments. Beauty! Ha, ha, three bags full, Sir," but I was not quite au fait with the way you acted.

So had he told the galley not to cook the fish because you hadn't offered it to him?

Well, I wouldn't say that even if I thought it, but somebody told,

25:30 yeah.

But you ended up getting the fish anyway so?

I got it, yeah. I'd have fixed it. I'd have cooked it somehow.

Now tell me how difficult was the training?

Physically not all that exhausting. And

26:00 not all that hard in knowledge, either. You just had to pay attention and be no problem for anyone to pass it. And we didn't do – what do they call it? – square bashing, where you're march, march, march, march with your rifle and, you know, do all these

26:30 exercises that the military do, although we did do the basics of that sort of thing, we had to. But it was, well, we were all physically fit and it was not bad.

27:00 **You mentioned before that you were in the navy band, what sort of music would you play in**

the band?

Well it was mostly march music. Once a month, you bet on it, we… Actually, they played it beautifully. I placed a very nice

27:30 lilting Waltzing Matilda and that was on commodore's inspection at the Officers' Training School. We used to go down there and play there. You've seen the figures march up and down the rows of servicemen, inspecting them? Well the commodore used to come. He was the naval Officer in Charge. He used to come down and do an inspection once a month. We had to line up

28:00 and play some nice melody for him and they played it very, very well. They ought to, I s'pose, they played it all the time but. And we did, yeah, we went up to Frankston and we played for a funeral, the Dead March in Saul, and so they were pretty versatile

28:30 but it was mostly martial music.

You mentioned before, you know, that there was a certain amount of frustration about not being, you know, being held back by the conductor and not being able to go away to sea, didn't you? But was there any – did you enjoy being a part of the band?

Yeah.

Is this something that you liked?

Yeah, I liked it, yep. And

29:00 it sort of gave you an open door to some of the places that you went to cause, you know, "I saw you." You were accepted, although I have to say the people in Melbourne were marvellous to us. Things it got to be that

29:30 the topic would be you meet somebody, "Oh, I've been to so and so." "Oh, yeah? What sort of sailors' town is that?" And you got to know very quickly that's how they treated sailors, and the Melbourne people they treated you very, very well. Sydney all right, but not all that good. Brisbane,

30:00 very Americanised – you put your thumb up, they'd stop and give you a lift. Western Australia, Perth, if you didn't get in their car they wanted to fight you. It was so that, just, you know, we had the gauges on all of it. Melbourne people were great.

So you really you got to see quite a lot of Australia as a

30:30 **bandsman?**

No that wasn't as a bandsman. I'm talking now as a sailor.

Okay, as a sailor, right, okay.

Yeah, yeah.

Great. Okay, well we might talk about some of those places that you went to when we get to them in the chronology. Now what about – you mentioned that you played in the band as part of war bonds appeals. What could you describe for us? What was involved with a war bond appeal?

31:00 Right, well it was like government bonds are today. You lend the government some money and they'll pay you a rate of interest, but these bonds were specifically – I think they were 10-year bonds – but they were specifically to help the war effort. Now, and things that they did now, they'd

31:30 allocate… The government of the day would say, "Well, this town or this city ought to be able to find so much for bonds." And at one stage, if they did that, they would name a Corvette after them. And that's how the Echuca came to be, the Wollongong, the Cessnock and such. And I think the figure

32:00 was a hundred thousand pound. And so they get a ship named after them. But for other things – to build aeroplanes and such – and instead of whacking it in the bank you lend it to the government.

Can you describe for us what would happen at a typical war bond appeal performance?

Well, after

32:30 these super appeals – like the bonds were there all the time. You could go to a bank and buy a bond. All over the place were billboards and posters. There was three really I can remember but this one was just "Buy Bonds." Another one was a little kid sittin' there looking a bit forlorn and,

33:00 "Little Johnnie doesn't mind giving up his Vegemite for the troops." He's got an empty Vegemite jar and we're getting it. Oh no, there's another one. Soap – Protex soap. There'd be a great cake of soap. "Have you Protexed yourself this morning?" And the other one was on the railways: "Is your journey really necessary?"

33:30 And, you know, "The coal that's going in the fire we could use to make steel," or whatever. "Don't travel

unless you have to." Yeah, but with the bonds when they had the big rallies where we had the march and that they'd have a stand platform whatever and they'd have somebody prominent –

34:00 sports star or stage star or something like – that auctioning the bonds or selling them, getting in what he could sort of thing. It was a big promotion but, yeah, and they apparently didn't do too bad. We finished up we built 60 Corvettes.

34:30 **Pretty impressive?**

Yeah, they weren't all for us. We built four for the Indian navy and 30 for us and 26 for the British navy. We manned them and ran them, but the British navy paid for them.

Now, you also mentioned before that your conductor,

35:00 **you know, made sure you had a couple of hours off, you know, before you had to travel back up to where you're situated. What would you do on your time off?**

Be thankful that you wasn't back in the depot. But we'd what do young blokes do when they're wandering around Melbourne.

35:30 None of us were drinkers. You know, we might have a little one now and then but not much. We used to go to a place a lot called the Dugout which was a service canteen – the Dugout because it was down under one of the business houses along the… Can't think what street it was in

36:00 Melbourne – and any service person was welcome, and had their hostesses and there'd be coffee and drinks and soft drinks and meals and all that sort of thing down there for us. But something like that was in every place you went, more than one of them, heaps of them,

36:30 but that was it. Just sort of hung out together, but you wasn't there under the discipline.

Now, you were talking before that an announcement would come over the loud speaker at the start of each day saying what the dress of the day would be. Can you talk us through what that meant and what different types of dress of the day there were?

Right, well you

37:00 were issued with two uniforms in the blues. There was overalls. There was shorts and what we'd call today a t-shirt for or t-shirt type of thing for sports, but your uniforms were numbered.

37:30 Now they'd stopped issuing the white uniform. You see so many in the whites. That was number sevens, so they'd just say, "Dress of the day, number ones." So if there was something on you had to put on number one, your best uniform. Now none of us… They were very heavy serge and

38:00 not well fitted. You know, nearly one-size-fits-all sort of thing. So everybody got hold of a couple of clothing coupons from somewhere and had a tailor-made suit. That was a 'tiddly suit'. And Robbie the tailor, he had a sheet that he'd sent you and you'd do your own measurements, or someone would do them, and you'd write them on this sheet and send it back to him and,

38:30 course, everybody used to sing out and tell him, "Make it tight, Robbie. Make it tight." And it was. If you'd get out of the uniform jacket on your own without much trouble, it didn't fit. If you needed your mate to get you out of it, it wasn't a bad fit. You'd lean forward put your hands on his knees your mate,

39:00 he'd get the back of your jacket and peel it off like a second skin. But it was made out of a nice piece of serge, and though that was your tiddly, that was your steppin' off gear, but that was your expense. And, of course, we got the first issue of uniform or uniforms, but after that you had to replace everything yourself. You got your towels and

39:30 even boot-cleaning gear and such; that was all issued. But then you got threepence halfpenny a day I think it was to keep your uniforms. And if you lost your blanket or the little mattress – they gave us at one stage only one blanket –

40:00 if you lost that or your hammock then you had to replace it on this threepence halfpenny a day.

Tape 4

00:32 **So, Ossie, I believe you have some rope knots that you can show us?**

Well, some rope skills. Well, I feel a bit foolish with a simple thing like reef knot that you don't even have to look at it you just there's your reef knot. Doesn't work.

We'll just get you to redo that again but do it a bit higher?

Right.

01:00 So, up there. I'll do it slower in a minute but that's like that. Not successful in this type of rope because it springs loose itself. No grip in the what's-a-name, the dry. Left over the top of the right, right over the top of the left,

01:30 reef. Grasp that. The bowline. And that's what you use to moor your boat. I won't say ship in a little line like that, but that's what you use to moor your boat. But that's enough for now.

Can I just get you to do that one more time – just do it a big higher, yeah?

Right. Well this is the one they

02:00 used to teach or still teach the Cubs about. That's a tree. I've got to remember how it goes. And that's the burrow at the bottom of the tree and the rabbit comes up through the burrow round behind the tree, sees it's all clear, runs back down and that's the bowline. But if you're doing it every now and then you can't muck about doing that, and you might want it in a hurry

02:30 to secure your boat. You do it like that and that will hold and, as you must have with all of these things, must be easy to undo. Might save your life having to undo it quick.

Great well thanks for that. That was really handy to know.

Now you do it?

I could do the reef but

03:00 **I'd have a bit of trouble with the bowline I'm afraid. Great, now before the break we were talking about quite a few things but I might just go off the track a little bit and ask you how important religion and faith was to you at this time?**

Well,

03:30 I'd been brought up in the Catholic faith and it's one of the first things they ask you when you enlist or go into the service and the first thing they ask you any time that they want to ask you questions or if you're in the rattle – if you're in trouble.

04:00 Name, age, rank, serial number, religion. And all of the ships in the Australian navy and in the British navy did have, I don't know about whether they still have, but they all had a plaque somewhere towards the stern on the upper deck where it could be easily

04:30 read and it was sometimes quite big and it said, "Fear God. Honour the King." Now of course it'd be, "Fear God. Honour the Queen." So God comes before the king and it was a big thing in the services. Always you were released from whatever you're doing to

05:00 go to religious services – and be, "Catholics on the right, Church of England on the left and Protestants stay there," and that sort of thing. Really, the three major Christian faiths, and that's all they were bothered about in my day. And there was church services for all faiths. At sea different thing like on small ships. Naturally there's no

05:30 pastor, but Sunday mornings they call them divisions and they clear the lower deck for divisions which meant that everybody's out. Everybody is down the stern of the ship and it's a small religious service given either by the captain or the first lieutenant of the ship.

06:00 And it's an interdenominational thing. It can only be general, but it's considered to be a church service and it was compulsory. But myself, before going in the… Well it was a religious group but I, not ran with it, it wasn't the be all and end all

06:30 of everything, but it was people of like interests and they run a dance.

Now what was the relationship like between Catholics and Protestants at the time?

Very tolerant of each other. In everything you do get your

07:00 bigoted people who, you know, it wouldn't matter what you were or what you did you'd be wrong, but generally people were very tolerant of each other and their religious beliefs. They didn't need legislation like we've got today to say, "Right, I must treat you right." We just did.

Did you ever see any examples

07:30 **of people not being so tolerant of other religions, other faiths?**

No I didn't. There might have… No, I was going to say there might have been a bit of an occasion where it was thrown up as a side issue, but no, I

08:00 never saw much in religious bigotry at all except that at one stage, and going back to the era we're talking about, one faith didn't like you going to the service of another faith, whatever it was, whether you're not necessarily straight-out church service, to a wedding in another church and such, but

08:30 that's all gone by the board now, though.

You mentioned, you know, there not being much religious bigotry. What about other types of bigotry? I'm talking about, you know, interracial relationships?

I never saw any cause I wasn't looking for any, but everybody seemed to me

09:00 to be tolerant. I was certainly never involved in any and didn't see any. No doubt there was some, but I wasn't involved.

Where there any aboriginal people or anything in the navy around your time, or…?

No. Again, not that I saw or heard of. There may have been

09:30 but I don't think so. There were a few in the army.

Yeah, I think it was a lot more common for them to join the army, yeah? Now what about – what was the criteria for being chosen to be an officer?

Education. First of all, the kids were taken into

10:00 the naval college at age 13 and they were taught all the niceties – you know, which fork to use and not to eat the peas off your knife and that sort of thing – and it was drummed into them. But in wartime they needed officers quickly, so a few

10:30 went into the service and you had the higher school certificate or… Wasn't the HSC [Higher School Certificate] then, was it? It was the Leaving Certificate with a reasonable pass. They'd automatically grab you and they'd put you into the Officers' Training School and they'd give you – I don't know what it was – four, six months, something like that, then turn you out as a sub lieutenant.

11:00 They needed officers, but most of the small ships were manned by reserve officers. These are the fellers who were in the naval reserve. They weren't in the navy proper but they were in reserve. These are the, well the same as the reserve services now.

11:30 And they'd come up and they trained as civilians, and then when the war they came in and they worked their way up to officer rank in this reserve, and then they were inducted into the navy in wartime. There were also a lot of merchant service ship officers who were in the Royal Australian Navy

12:00 reserve and in bracket S. That meant they were seagoing men. They were at sea and had all the experience of handling ships, and they were prepared to come into the navy in times of war. And they were grabbed and brought over and there was a distinction between them all that – you could tell easily. The

12:30 naval college officers, their gold stripe was perfectly straight – with the ring, of course – but straight stripes. The reserve officers it was a wavy stripe. Still had that one circle but the other stripes were wavy. And then with the reserve S officers,

13:00 theirs were interlaced stripes. So you knew immediately. Say, "Oh yeah, he's in the wavy navy," or, "He's straight-laced," or, "He's a seagoing bloke." And there was some really good ones in all of those things, and there was some God awful ones, too.

So that must be where the term straight-laced came from?

Yeah.

There you go.

13:30 **I wouldn't have even thought of that. So what – did you ever feel a certain amount of frustration that because you did leave school at 14, 15 that you, you know, your access to become an officer would be a lot more difficult?**

Well, became impossible, but I never worried about it,

14:00 you know. I knew I wasn't going to be there all that long and had no ambitions towards it then, but the navy would have provided me with some educational opportunities if I'd wanted to, showed, you know, that I had the aptitude and sense to be able to do these things. They'd have let me

14:30 study, I and had a go but I couldn't see the point unless I was going to make a career of it and I had a career to come home to or to finish. And I regretted later generally not having education. That's why I did something about it. But the at that time, no, I was quite happy.

15:00 **Now you got your first draft. What ship were you first posted to?**

Well, my first permanent draft was Echuca, joined her in Sydney. Well actually my draft from Flinders brought me to Sydney to Penguin and it was great. I was in the Penguin pool. This was the pool of people in Penguin

15:30 ready to go out to ships. And then it came down that I was posted to Echuca.

What was the Penguin like?

Out at Balmoral.

And what was she like as a ship?

Well it was a shore depot.

Sorry, yep.

See the shore establishments are ships in the navy.

Okay.

And treated as such. And you don't…

16:00 When you come out through the gates you're going ashore. You're not just going up the street, but you're going ashore. And it's treated just as if you were at sea all the time. But I only had a little while there and then off to Echuca and I think we sailed within a couple of hours of me

16:30 joining her. And we took her a two ship convoy up to Brisbane.

Can you describe the Echuca for me?

Well, fully laden and armed and manned it was about 960 ton.

17:00 Had a four-inch gun forehead. Actually, when I joined her it was only a low angle gun. It wasn't, we couldn't get enough elevation for anti-aircraft fire. Had three Oerlikon 20 millimetre cannon and two Lewis .303 machine guns and, I don't know, up to

17:30 28, 30 depth charges, a couple of depth charge throwers and somewhere between 90 and a hundred men on board. And I think was about mid '44. When we got the radar,

18:00 the gun was changed – the for'ard gun. We got a high angle gun and that was about her. I'll show you a picture of it after.

And what was your role aboard the ship?

I was a seaman. Now,

18:30 on the ship there's a few splits in it. There's watch keepers and non watch keepers. Takes a fair bit of explaining, but roughly the ship's company, which means everybody, was split into three watches, which was three groups: the red the white and the blue watch. And

19:00 a watch was sufficient to run the ship on everyday running. Now in that watch of the seamen there was enough in that to man the four-inch gun. There had to be a helmsman and a

19:30 side boy or a quartermaster. And I had an argument about this with one of my English teachers, about what quartermaster meant. And it means one who steers a ship. Most of the people relate quarter master to the feller in the army that dishes out

20:00 the clothes and whatever, but it's a naval term and the quartermaster, he's the driver. The bosun's mate or the side boy is the feller that runs messages. Now those two fellers, when you're running the ship, they do an hour on and then they change positions for an hour and then back and back again, so that a watch is four hours.

20:30 There's the gun's crew who stand to and stand down, and one would go in the crow's nest as a lookout. There'd be a lookout on either wing of the bridge and they'd get relieved every hour, so they'd have an hour break but they were still down where the gun could be manned. So that was again swapping over, over a four-year period, a four-hour period rather. Four-year

21:00 period – good God! They'd swap their positions so that you got a break from doing that thing. Up in the crow's nest, which was a fair way up, and a tiny little ladder that you had to climb up, and then you'd climb over each other while one got in and the other got out and then you'd spend an hour up there with glasses glued to your eyes and you dare not miss anything

21:30 cause if the officer of the watch spotted something before you did, you got a blast. You were in the rattle, you know, "Why did you miss that?" So a little wisp of smoke you'd report. But the starboard side of the ship – You know which side that is, of course? The starboard side's the right-hand side looking at the sharp end and it has a green light on that for navigation. The left-hand side of the ship

22:00 looking for'ard is red, and that's the port side. So you used the centre line of the ship and you'd report, "There's smoke on the horizon at green three O." So that meant 30 degrees off the bow. If he looks that way he might see this smudge of smoke. But you saw everything, a little stick, a log, whatever but you had to be first. It became less so

22:30 when we did finally get the radar, but you had to be first. And looking backwards as well; had to go

round the lot.

Did you ever miss something?

Probably, but so did everybody else. But it was experience and rough weather; it was rough. You're just in this little thing and about there'd be the bar that held you in.

23:00 Bit of canvas around it, but it didn't give you any protection. But when… And it was terrible when they'd drop a depth charge; you'd all shake and whatever. What was worse, it'd shudder, the ship. All the soot in the funnel would drop down then blow back up and generally blow the lot over you, you know, and it wasn't

23:30 pleasant but.

What was involved in dropping a depth charge?

Well there's this great canister. I s'pose you've seen them on the movies, great canister that's filled with explosive, but they each had a brass key and this key went in a notch and you turned it

24:00 to the depth. You'd be told what depth to set your charge for and you turned it round until it says, "So many fathoms," then you pull the key out and you must retain that key because if it went over and it didn't explode, that was your proof that you'd done the same thing. You couldn't get the key out unless you'd turned it to a depth, so, "That's it's not my fault, it was his,"

24:30 whatever. But normally a pattern of depth charges would be dropped, and there were throwers each side that threw the depth charge out, oh, I don't know, about 20 yards, and you would drop three other charges from the stern rails and they were all set for different depths

25:00 so that hopefully the submarine would be at that depth where it would explode and do some damage. I might add that they were also used for fishing, but no, that's not right; they weren't used for fishing. Fish were a byproduct. They were used for training purposes occasionally and we ate fish for a few days.

So what would happen

25:30 **when the fish become a byproduct of the training? Could you describe the process of getting the fish?**

Right. Well they'd be standing by, but boom, up it'd go, and as soon as it settled a little bit and a pipe would go. Now the things are run with a bosun's pipe. You've seen

26:00 the people coming over the side of a ship and the bloke's blowing the whistle? I haven't got my pipe. I don't know where it is. But the whistle would be blown and, "Do you hear there? Do you hear there? Away sea boats! Crew away! Motor boat crew!" They'd lower the boats just picking the fish out of the water and

26:30 it was just that simple. But first the bloke on the ping set the ASDIC [submarine detection device], which was the anti submarine device. They could pick fish or a whale or a log or whatever from the ping echo that they got. They could say, "Oh yeah, it's that." So we always made sure we made a

27:00 run over a school of fish and let the bugger go. And it was good to have some fresh fish now and then. We used to fish over the side a lot, but it was nearly all shark up in the tropics. There was millions of 'em.

Shark?

Yeah.

Quite big sharks?

Well, I can remember one place where we were

27:30 at Scott's Reef, which is over towards Timor, with a survey group and dropped the anchor, and a few of us were fishing in very clear water. You looked down over the side of the ship and there was literally thousands of sharks. They were

28:00 like, you reckon you could have walked ashore on their backs without getting your feet wet. And they weren't big fellers, you know, five, six feet, that sort of thing, which is only a small shark, a young shark. But there was hundreds and thousands of them, yeah.

I bet you didn't go swimming that day?

We didn't swim there but funny we used to

28:30 jump over the side in Darwin Harbour and swim, and… Not on the Corvette; this was later. But we used to tie two ropes together and put the life belt on the end and throw it over the stern. We'd jump or dive off the fo'castle, the front, and you make about two sweeps and try and grab this thing as you went past. If you didn't, you were at sea but the tide up there

29:00 falls over 30 feet so it's going out pretty fast. But we never lost anybody.

Now what was the mood like aboard the Echuca?

It was pretty good. They were a good bunch of fellers, and I've said this so often, that

29:30 they're your mates they're your family. You're living with them in a confined space. You've got to get on with each other and I learnt, well, one of the greatest lessons in life there. I joined the ship and the coxswain of the ship, who is the senior rating on the ship, is petty officer.

30:00 He took me round to introduce me to my watch mates, so I met a fellow chap from Tasmania, Jack Batchelor, and I don't know why it was but I intensely disliked Jack Bachelor from the word go, and no, never, ever been able

30:30 to put my finger on why, but probably you've met people and yourself instinctively I don't like him or her, whatever. Well, this is how it was. But it was intense with Jack. Anyway, we sailed. This is on the first trip that I did, and we were out for a couple of hours and I was talking with the chief stoker and I said, "Oh well, here it comes, over the side." It was a pretty rickety

31:00 ship.

You're talking about?

The Echuca.

Vomiting?

Yep. And that went on for three days and nights and still had to go up in the crow's nest and do my turn, or on the bridge as lookout and that sort of thing. There's no excuses, but I was sick. Anyway, I was sitting down on the minesweeping hatch down the stern of the ship feeling very sorry, and this Jack Batchelor came down and he had a

31:30 pusser's mug which is just a mug but a particularly strong thing. Pusser's, incidentally, is the navy. So he brought down this pusser's mug and it's full of thick very hot soup and he's got a piece of dry bread about like that, and he said, "Right, get that into ya." I said, "Jack, I couldn't." He said, "Well, you please yourself." He said, "You'll take it orally

32:00 or I'll get your watch mates we'll stand you on your bloody head and you'll take it the other way. Now what are you going to do?" Thought I'd better drink it. So I did. Nothing wrong again, but he's the one bloke on the ship that I disliked and he's the only one that did anything for me. We became very, very good friends. Poor old Jack.

Isn't that funny?

So I've learnt, don't make instant

32:30 assessments of people. Give 'em a little bit of time.

How important was mateship onboard the ship?

Well, it was strangely important in a lot of ways. Now you're mate in the navy is your oppo and you had your steppin' off oppo. When you came to harbour and you

33:00 could go ashore for 24 hours or whatever, well you always had a mate. At sea you had your scran oppo. I have to keeping explaining what these are, I know. Scran is food, and we were on what they called a repayment messing system, but on the ships that were – I was going to say unstable, because it was unstable but rough

33:30 at sea you often had your crockery broken – so after you were at sea for a while there's a shortage of cups or plates. Even so, when they would pipe "stand easy", which was morning tea and afternoon tea, there'd be a group of you, they're your scrannies; we use scran oppos. Well, whoever was closest to the mess deck would race in and get the cups for the

34:00 six of you and he'd put 'em down and he'd have your tea or your coffee or whatever made. And there was one bloke, Jack Wilson I think. Anyway, he always seemed to be first in, or more often than anybody else anyway, and he had the stuff waiting, but for some reason he seemed always to be working on the wires

34:30 with a bit of cotton waste fish oil and he's oiling the wires. You race in get these and you come in and say, "How do they, stand Jack?" and he'd say, "That's yours, Os," and you see this film of oil come off his fingers across the top of your cup, but, "That's yours, so and so," and whatever. You drank it because someone else was waiting for the cup. It was vile. But he never put his finger in his own, yeah.

35:00 **What were what type of food were you eating on board the ship?**

Very good food and well prepared. There was always a good hearty breakfast. Generally you'd you know

what it was. The first feller down to the galley would come back with his plate and as he got close he'd go, "Yippee!"

35:30 We'd all know it was a cowboy's breakfast – bacon and beans and an egg. I don't think the cowboys had many eggs but – bacon and beans was the usual thing. Most days there'd be three courses for lunch. You'd get a soup, a baked dinner when it was possible

36:00 and a sweet, and we ate, we stopped for something. We had breakfast, which was a cereal and a meal. We had our stand easy about ten thirty, ten, ten thirty. Then we had lunch

36:30 which was generally three course. Then at four o'clock we had tea which was a cup of tea and a couple of slices of bread and that Vegemite that poor little Johnnie gave up, and that sort of thing. And then you had supper, which was another two course meal about six. So we were well fed and it was all well prepared.

37:00 Very, very seldom that we didn't have really good tucker.

Yeah it sounds like you guys did all right.

We didn't do bad, didn't do bad. I forget how many cooks we had. I think might have been five.

Now what about other conditions, for instance, what were the

37:30 **sleeping arrangements like?**

Hammocks all over the place; hammocks. Sometimes there'd be like different stanchion poles sticking up and there'd be three hammocks, and you had to… Like in the morning they'd come through and blow a whistle. No bugles there, but the whistle come you know, "Wakey, wakey, rise and shine."

38:00 And the call was, "Lash up and stow." So what you did, you got up and then you had to lash your hammock into a long sausage and then you had to stow it in the hammock bin so that it was out of the way of everything because you slept and ate in the same area. And then for each mess there was two

38:30 messes for the seamen on the starboard side, and one of the seamen would be appointed as mess cook for the day and with a lot of meals, and it'd be his job to go and get the food for the mess and then it was his job to clean up. Then it'd be someone else the next day and such.

39:00 And the pipe would go out, "Mess cooks to the galley," so that was his job to make sure the plates were there and everything fixed. But I never, ever had complaints about the food. And I found the only people who did complain were the people who had nothing at home. They'd come from the first of the lot and they complained about

39:30 the tucker, but anyway.

How strange?

Yep, yep.

Why do you think that was?

I've got no idea, no idea. I wasn't too keen on pumpkin until I went into the navy but I loved it after that and still do.

Tape 5

00:32 **You mentioned in passing before that the navy was called pusa?**

Pusser, pussers.

Why?

I don't know where that one came from, but we soon found that out. And it means something about regulation, because if you went

01:00 up the line to Melbourne and you didn't have your tiddly by that time, they knew you were a new entry. "Ah, pusser bastard," was the remark you got from everybody.

What, including the other services?

Well…

Was it an internal navy thing, was it?

Well yeah, but because Melbourne was the main training area, or out of Melbourne

01:30 in the Mornington Peninsula, they all got to learn about it. And it was used as a derogatory remark. And

it was, well, that's what it was used for. As when they were, all the young ladies of the place you know, they didn't want anything to do with you. You wasn't an old salt so you were the pusser bastard.

You were a pusser, yeah

02:00 **yeah. Now what was the role of HMAS [His Majesty's Australian Ship] Echuca?**

Well very, very quickly we needed a small fairly fast escort vessel. We just didn't have them. We had hardly anything. We were getting rusty old tubs that we were requisitioning from

02:30 people – old coastal steamers and all that sort of thing. To do the role, they needed a ship for a specific purpose and they were partially designed on the flower class minesweeper of Britain, but a lot of differences. They made this for Australia

03:00 and so someone came up with this design. I don't know just who, but they came up with it, but it was something that could be built quickly. And, as I said, for us to build 60 of them… And they didn't launch the first one until about '41 or late in '41, and to have 60 at the end of the, well again, 26 for Britain, but they were all built here. And four for India and

03:30 30 for us.

So what kind of role was Echuca intended for?

Well it was they were called an AMS Australian Minesweeper, but they were also equipped to search underwater for submarines. And predominantly they were for escort

04:00 work and that's, well, what we did quite a lot of was up and down the coast. Until the end of '43 early '44, this east coast of Australia was pretty heavily covered by submarines. We lost, I don't know 48, 50 we had 48, 50

04:30 torpedoings up and down here.

From Japanese submarines?

Yep. And some ships weren't sunk but quite a lot of them were. And actually there's a book produced, quite a big book, Battle Surface, yeah, Australian thing, and it's got all of the days, dates, ship casualties and all that sort of thing. But I had one young feller

05:00 that was in this Catholic Youth Group with me, Les Record. He was sunk twice in the merchant service and so we when we weren't doing escort duties like, we'd do a run up to Brisbane. We wouldn't go into Brisbane but we'd release the ships to go in,

05:30 and we'd anchor. I was going to say, "Swing round the pick," but I thought I'd better say anchor. But we'd swing round the pick for a couple of days till the convoy came out. Now it might have to go up to Townsville, but it's only generally only a two or three ship convoy so we were sufficient escort, or we'd bring it back to Sydney. Well if we came into Sydney Harbour, first thing is we'd fuel ship again

06:00 and restore cause that would take a week and a half, fortnight, depending how long we were in Moreton Bay. But then if we had, there was a few days before we had another job to do, so we'd go out and we'd do an anti submarine sweep up to about Nelson Bay back down. You know,

06:30 zigzag all over the place. And there was minefields out there. We had to dodge them and that was to keep them down and away and all that sort of thing.

Keep the submarines down and away?

Yeah.

Yeah, so you were specifically on the lookout for submarines?

Not specifically, that was just part of what we did on occasion in the anti submarine patrols, but mostly while we were down here it was

07:00 convoy duty with a bit of that thrown in now and then.

How often were you aware of or afraid of the possibility of attack from a Japanese submarine on your own vessel?

I don't think any of us were, you know, "Can't happen to me sort," of thing. We were aware of the possibility but not

07:30 apprehensive about it. I s'pose, you know, but wasn't bravado or being blasé or anything like that. It was just that, well it wasn't happening.

I s'pose it was a sort of self defensive attitude towards what you were doing?

Yes, yeah probably.

Was it ever boring at all doing this kind of duty?

Very, very.

How would you alleviate the boredom?

08:00 Well generally, if you could you would go to sleep. You learnt. And I think you've probably got a note there. You learnt to sleep on a clothesline, cause in over a period of each three days you worked every hour of the day, every one of the 24 hours plus

08:30 a few hours more. The day was split into four-hour watches and, as I explained before, you go on, you do two on and two off or hour on, hour off, hour on, hour off in the four years [hours], then you were relieved and the next watch came on. And, if you didn't have an area

09:00 where you could swap over your times, then you'd keep doing the same four hours all the time. So your watches were, well we had the four noon watch, eight till 12. The afternoon watch 12 till four then you had the first dogs and that was four till six – a two-hour one.

Why was it called the dogs?

I don't know.

This was the dog watch, wasn't it?

Well,

09:30 dog watches normally used to be midnight at what's-a-name, but the first dogs was four till six and the last dogs – not the second, but the last dogs – was six till eight in the evening. Then you had the evening watch from eight till 12. Then that was, then you had the middle watch

10:00 12 till eight, and, ah, 12 till four. Then you had the morning watch four till eight and by having that two, two-hour periods then you changed the period that you would do the next day. And if you had the morning watch today you had the afternoon watch the next day. And then if you had the afternoon watch the next day you had

10:30 one of the dogs. So that you went through all of it. But besides that, if in the morning you wasn't actually on watch which was running the ship, then you had to work on part of the ship, which meant you went out and you chipped rust and painted it, or you oiled the wires, or you

11:00 pumped the water or whatever, but you did something else in that morning period.

This is always under supervision?

Yes and no. The coxswain of the ship was like the foreman, and he'd allocate the jobs and that's what you'd do, but you were in plain view of everybody most of the time and there was soon screams. For instance, if you didn't go and pump the water and the freshwater tank got empty the whole

11:30 ship would hear about it.

I'll bet.

The cooks would scream. The fellers trying to have a bath would scream. And then, if you were on afternoon watch, you'd get off half an hour early to have your lunch and prepare to go on watch. So it was quite a routine. But, then again, there was another thing that happened because at dusk in the evening and at dawn in the morning

12:00 everybody went to action stations because that was the danger period. You know, there's no light and half light. You can't see anything. So everybody was closed up to action stations so you had to fit in sleep where you could. You definitely learnt to sleep on a rail, and if you had as much as 20 minutes you put your head down.

So

12:30 **the question I put to you a moment ago was alleviating the boredom. Was the alleviation of the boredom the actual variation of the shifts or were there other ways in which you could alleviate the boredom?**

Well there wasn't much that you could do. Sometimes, not very often but sometimes, they'd pipe, what was it? Tom Bowler was being played in the petty officers flap, which,

13:00 Tom Bowler is housie. That was one thing. We had a pretty good 500 group on the Echuca. We used to play for hours. You know all of a sudden you'd be a bit awake so you'd play 500. A game played is the old Chinese game mahjong; only place I've ever seen it played. And you do those

13:30 sort of things. Or if you're really stuck you'd write a letter home and

How often were you writing home?

Almost daily I wrote to somebody.

Were you writing to Shirley much at this time?

Yeah, yeah every couple of days.

What sort of things would you write about?

Well you're a bit limited. You had to talk about things that had happened without being specific.

14:00 You couldn't say where you were and you'd talk about the fellers that you worked with that she had no idea who they were, but there wasn't much else. But you tried to write chatty letters and such about things but you couldn't say, "Oh," you know, "we went ashore in Milne Bay yesterday," A no-no.

Was there censorship of your letters?

14:30 Yeah.

There was?

Yep, yeah, yeah. Only once I got something through without censorship and that was when I was on the Herros. That's another story but.

Just staying with the Echuca were you allowed to drink on board the ship?

No. The Australian navy is dry. It wasn't until

15:00 19..., about 1945 before we started to get an occasional drink. They allowed us to have two bottles of beer a week perhaps.

What did the perhaps depend on?

Supply and where we were, what we were doing. And the supply

15:30 assistant, he'd get the beer cold and used to come in boxes of four dozen in a box, full bottles and that was a fair weight. And he'd have that box alongside him and, again, the coxswain, the foreman, he'd be there with a great list and say, you'd come up to the table, give your name and the coxswain would say so and so,

16:00 or you'd give your name. That's right, the coxswain would have a look, strike your name out, stores assistant would lift a bottle up, take the top off and give it to you. No way, to save it so you'd go and find a corner and sit down and drink it. You might find a mate and the two of you would sit and you'd chat about what used to be and what you used to do, but I found a way around that a little bit at one stage.

16:30 That again was on the Herros.

This is regarding saving the beer?

Well, getting a bit extra too.

All right, we'll remember to deal with that when we get onto the Herros story?

Yeah.

Were there ever any fights onboard the boat on board the Echuca?

Ship?

Aboard the ship. Were there any fights aboard the ship the Echuca?

Thank you. No, no there were a few disagreements but they

17:00 were ironed out but. Well, there may have been, but I never saw one and it's a pretty tight community. There's nothing goes on that everybody doesn't know about.

What sort of things would people disagree over?

After we'd been at sea for a fortnight they'd disagree over anything. You know, your

17:30 food would be getting a bit tight. Like after, well, after three or four days you had no bread and unless you had real good cooks you didn't get any bread until, you know, you might find somewhere one day to scrounge a bit from somebody, another ship or whatever, but they never had

18:00 time or room to bake bread was the main thing. But they carried whatever they could and, you know, dampen it a bit and throw it in an oven and freshen it up a bit for you every now and then but.

So people could disagree over anything after a couple of days at sea. Why was this?

No it took more than that. Well I think this was part of the boredom,

18:30 but nerves got a bit frazzled because, see, you never had much room to move around. The only

uncluttered space was in front of the bridge and it would be about 25 feet. She was 30-odd feet, 33 feet, I think, in beam,

19:00 and you'd say to your mate, "We'll go for a walk." So you'd go up and you'd over there, about turn, over there, about turn. You'd go up and do that for an hour to get exercise. If you went anywhere else you're stepping over stuff and dodging gear and people, and that was the one uncluttered place where you could walk. And there'd be room for about three to walk abreast across and back and

19:30 amazing how often you'd do that and walk in unison, you know, in step. The whole bit was automatic, and just chat and chat and chat, but I think that was it. Lack of room to move and living in each other's pocket all the time.

I was going to say lack of personal space?

Yeah, yeah.

And would an officer ever intervene or would an officer ever have to intervene to resolve some of these arguments?

20:00 The disagreements they never let go too far because, you know, that, well, to use the word that we used, you'd be in the rattle. And they had two grades of judiciary. Very minor offence,

20:30 you would go on the first lieutenant's report and you'd have to front him at the table. But if it was a little more serious you'd be on captain's report and you'd have to front up and 'off caps' [formally present oneself]. Particular way you had to take your cap off and you did that for two things: if you were on report or to get paid and

21:00 the, I don't, the disgrace of having to go up on report. It's public; it's in front of everybody. They used to do that and then they'd finish up, tie you to the capstan or something and whip you, but we didn't get to that stage, thank God. But they still had the, that's right, to pull you into gear if things were getting a bit tough, the captain used to read, clear the lower deck

21:30 and read the Articles of War. And they say, "You do this and this, punishment is death." "So and so and so, punishment is death." And it still stood and so you didn't want to get punished.

Did your captain ever have to do that?

No, no not to that extent. I only ever saw one courts martial and that was when I was waiting for my discharge at Balmoral and I was

22:00 one of the guards for a fellers courts martial. He wanted to get out of the navy so he didn't annoy anybody, didn't do anything bad. All he did, he subscribed to the Tribune, the communist paper, and always in the hip pocket. And when it came stand easy, morning tea, afternoon tea in a corner on his own and out it'd come. And he made sure it was turned around where it says Tribune outside

22:30 and they trumped up a charge; they got rid of him.

So in other words there wasn't much space for people of an extreme left wing view?

No, no even though the Russians were our allies they found reason to get this fellow up, out. In fact, when you went, going back to what you're talking about with religion earlier, this fellow fronted and,

23:00 "Name? Age? Rank.? Serial number? Religion?" He said, "None, sir." And, you know, "What, what, what, what, what, what?" Who was the captain? Harry Howden was the Captain. This at Balmoral and, "But it says here that you're Church of England," and he said, "Yes, sir," he said, "since then I'm older and I have attained intelligence. No religion, sir." "Well get him out, shoot him, do something."

23:30 And we're standing there with a cutlass stuck up and the table was draped with the flag and all that sort of thing.

This was the court martial?

Yeah.

Sounds ridiculously draconian by today's standards, it just sounds ridiculously harsh by today's standards?

Yeah but he got what he wanted. He wanted out and they discharged him.

Who was the skipper of the Echuca?

Ronald Nettlefold when I was on it.

Was he a good skipper?

24:00 Yeah.

What made him a good skipper?

He knew what he was about. He was a good navigator. We went up into New Guinea waters and the entry through the China Straits into to go into Milne Bay was pretty narrow, and we were about four days virtually lost at sea. You

24:30 couldn't see anything. It was overcast, drizzly rain, they couldn't get a sight on a star to get a sighting of where we were. Like, it's not like today where they press a button and the satellite says, "You're here," put an x on the water that's it. They had to work out the position. And anyway, we went up and all of a sudden it got a bit clearer and here we are, right where we should have been. And I don't know whether it was on purpose. As a matter of fact there was a big

25:00 American troop landing craft there. It must have been 13,000, 15,000 ton, and he was waiting to go in. Anyway he signalled up, signalled us. We're about, you know, he's like that and we're like this. But he signalled us and asked permission to follow us in. But 'old bulk', behind his back we used to call him, his chest went out and

25:30 he was entitled to put it out.

So this is Nettlefold, his nickname was Bulk?

Bonk.

BONK? B O N K?

Yeah. Don't ask me why, yeah, but…

The imagination runs riot.

Yeah, but we also had another exceptional officer, the first lieutenant, Ken Gourlay, and he finished up he got his own command and he was

26:00 hard, but he was straight down the line. You knew always that what he said he meant and if you were right he'd back you, didn't matter who it was. It could have been the admiral and he'd say, "No, this bloke's right here." He was also an exceptional officer.

Now what makes a good leader do you think aboard a ship, a good skipper and a good

26:30 **first lieutenant?**

Well in the navy he wants to be a good navigator, although they generally appoint another skilled officer, particularly in the big ships they appoint a fellow as a navigator and he is an expert. Little ships, you haven't got that many people to go around. And the critical time in navigation is or was

27:00 daybreak, where they would take a shot of the sun as it came over the horizon and with working out angles and whatever with the sexton and with the azimuth tables they could work out our position. Same thing with certain stars

27:30 of an evening and, like, I've with… One time I was on the ship and, not this one, and traditionally the first lieutenant of the ship does the morning watch and he is the bloke who works out the morning position cause when the captain comes off –

28:00 a little after dawn the skipper would come up the bridge. "Good morning, sir." "Good morning, number one. What's our position?" And he'd be expected to have it all worked out and go over and say, "Well, here we are sir, just here." But the skipper would know instinctively whether he was close or not because he'd worked out where we ought to be from his orders and that sort of thing.

I mean, I imagine this would

28:30 **engender quite a lot of trust among the crew knowing that degree of accuracy and perfectionism?**

Yeah. And these blokes, our Corvettes were almost 100 percent manned by reserve officers incidentally, and they had to be good to get a command. But, both of those fellers I had tremendous respect for.

29:00 **How often would the Echuca fire a shot in anger?**

I don't know. I'd say about twice.

That was twice in the time that you were aboard?

Yeah.

Can you remember what those circumstances were?

That was all. Well, we thought we had a submarine up

29:30 round New Britain area and we thought we'd, perhaps, done it a bit of damage and whatever.

But an intelligence officer that I spoke to assured us, or a few of us, that yes, we were going to get credit for that, but we didn't. And they told us we didn't get one, so that was all right.

Can you be more specific what sort of credit are we talking about there?

30:00 For sinking a submarine.

Yeah.

But they tell us there wasn't a submarine in that area at that time, so…

Did you see a submarine in that area at the time or?

No, no.

No sign of?

No we got a ASDIC ping and made a run. I can't think, there was another ship with us at the time. I can't think which one it was. It was another Corvette but. There was a fellow wrote a bit about

30:30 it in a little magazine down at Echuca in later years, and he reckons that he spoke to an intelligence officer that said he thought we had got one, but anyway it didn't matter.

So the ASDIC guys actually saw a submarine there?

No, no they got a ping on their what's-a-name. See, they could distinguish the distance and direction of

31:00 and what it was that they were getting a ping from. I don't why they call it a ping. It sends out a ping sound and they get a sound bounces back, and how long that takes gives them the distance. And the type of ping, they can say, "No, that's a whale," or, "That's a school of fish," or, "That's steel hull," whatever. And

31:30 if they get the sound of steel, well as far as they're concerned it was under the water it was a submarine. Then there was the time that we went we took some troops into Auro Bay up Buna Gona area and we had something like 145 soldiers onboard, I think it was, with a couple of other ships. And

32:00 I don't know whether it was in anger but we lobbed a couple of shots ashore. That was about it. We don't know whether anything happened. I think the skipper allowed us to do that to let off a bit of steam more than anything but.

Sounds quite effective. So I believe you were part of an American taskforce?

Yeah.

What did this actually mean?

Well,

32:30 the Americans would have a group of ships and they determined that they were capable of doing various tasks that, "Righto, we want to take an island this big. "So that task group is big enough and they'll do that." And it would have

33:00 capital ships, large heavy cruisers or battle wagons. It would have aircraft carriers and it would have troop landing ships and support ships and all that sort of thing to do that, but they'd have also smaller detached groups that would be part of this task group. Now I think we were

33:30 so important we were part of task force seventy point five I think it was.

But that was your, I mean when you say you were part of it, so what, how did you actually fit in with the scheme?

Well what we were doing then was survey work, which was quite important whatever they wanted to do. They had to know where the reefs were, the shoals, how deep

34:00 the water was, how big this area was, what they could take. And we did quite a bit of that. We worked with an old ship, senior ship was the Moresby and we did a lot of survey up round the Timor area.

So how frequently would you be doing this kind of work for the Americans?

Well, it was for

34:30 everybody.

Right, so it was for the south west Pacific area?

Yeah.

So, but I s'pose the point is, how long were you part of the American task force doing this kind of work as opposed to going off and doing your own independent thing or was your role?

No, she was part of that.

Just wondering if your role meant that

35:00 **you occasionally became part of the task force or whether being part of the task force was the full time situation?**

I think she was still after I left her. I think she was still part of that group. And that would have been well, at least till we did this specific job that was wanted I s'pose. We were six or eight months in that group, but a lot

35:30 of that we were doing independent. We were about somewhere on our own but we're still overall under that umbrella.

So that ran throughout?

Yeah.

Now you've referred to a specific task, what was that specific task that you were asked to do?

Well…

The specific task was part of what you were doing all the time was it?

36:00 Well this. No. Do you mean the task force specific task or?

No. You just mentioned a task a moment ago and I thought this might have been something out of the box, but I think what you're actually talking about is what you were doing all the time?

What we were doing for quite some time. And see there was this big reef that was

36:30 partially hidden. Now it was Scott's Reef it was called, and at high water all you could see would be a patch of sand almost as big as our yard, I s'pose, you know, this whole block. Just bare sand, but then that was high water. Low water,

37:00 cause up in the tropics the water rises and falls a long way and there's this reef that was hidden. Looked like good water when you're down on the level, but this reef went for miles and miles and miles. Well we surveyed that and chartered it and it was inaccurately placed on the charts, so we corrected that so that, righto, if this task force

37:30 of big ships had to come through that area they knew where the safe passage was. That's what we were doing with this group.

That sounds more than essential.

Yeah.

That sounds absolutely vital, yeah. Now there was a certain point where you were transferred to the HMAS Herros. At what point did that occur?

That was very close to Christmas

38:00 1944.

And why were you transferred?

Well this is how it was in the navy. You'd spend, it was, there weren't many people that spent more than 12, 15 months on a particular shift and, unlike the army where they would move a whole platoon,

38:30 it was all single drafts. If two or three people from a ship's company went to another ship the same it was rare, so up come the single draft. They needed another seaman on Herros and actually the ship was coming home. We got into Darwin for fuel and stores and about to come out. They're coming back down to Sydney for boiler clean and a fortnight's leave and

39:00 all that sort of thing, and the coxswain of the ship came to me. He said, "I'm sorry about this Ossie," he said, "but we're about to sail." And he said, "If we'd started, you were right, But that's your draft coming through here." So if we'd have started an hour earlier I'd have come home, had a fortnight's leave, and they'd have phoned me back up the day I'm to join the ship. But as it was over I went and, of course, everybody else comes home. I didn't get any leave.

Tape 6

00:36 **Ossie we just wanted an idea of what kinds of ports and places that Echuca actually went to?**

Well the only place that was of any size… Well, quite a few up the east coast:

01:00 Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville, Gladstone. We had a real good one at Gladstone actually.

What made Gladstone so interesting?

Well we went up to Townsville, took a convoy up and we're to come back down to Brisbane independently, which means alone.

01:30 And during the war years the navy took over or requisitioned from private citizens these nice little luxury 40-footers, cruisers and that, to do harbour patrols. And there was two of them in Townsville and they'd told half a dozen sailors that they could go home or back on leave down to Brisbane. But three of them had to crew each of these

02:00 cruisers and we were going to tow them. Again it was dirty, miserly days, a couple on end, fairly rough, and it was very early morning and I was the after lookout. I was down the stern looking for anything behind us, and again

02:30 I was talking to the chief stoker and a feller came up to check the towline on one of these little things. She gives a lurch and over the side he goes. He's got an overcoat, sea boots, but he had his mae west on so the chief stoker goes rushing up to the bridge. You know, "Man overboard! Man overboard!" And I'm chucking life belts out and whatever, so we did a fair bit of backing and filling and mucking about

03:00 and we picked him up. But in the process we got the towline round our starboard screw so we're able to proceed with one propeller, and so we carried on and the skipper, of course, radioed ahead and he got instruction go into Gladstone to clear it. This was his suggestion,

03:30 so, and it's a very long approach into Gladstone from the sea through the channel that's there, and when we were coming down and going in we shifted everything with any weight like all the depth charges that were on the starboard side, all the ready-use ammunition and all that. Everything that we could we shifted over to the port side, so that we go in and

04:00 we've got a list on her like that, you know. You could see it limping along. And apparently there's some bright spark down on the wharf which was about a mile from the town and he saw us coming in like this. He races up to the town. "One of our ships is coming in. Looks like it's been hit! Look's like it's been hit!" instead of… It was stupidity. So when we get there half the town's on the wharf. They're cheering and yelling and whatever. None of us told them any different. You know, "What happened? What happened?"

04:30 "Not allowed to say." Anyway, we were there for three days and three nights and they turned it on for us. There was three of us. The watch keepers got… Or there's the harbour watch keepers got off before anybody else. They had time to make up and there's a mate of mine, Hal Bailey – he was my stepping off oppo –

05:00 I can't think of the name of the stoker, and myself, and we were first off the ship. We had about two hours' start on anybody else so we walked up into this pub, and on a corner, batwing doors, just like the old western movies. So we bowled in and I know I threw two shillings on the bar, which was plenty of money in those days. "Three beers, mate." And he pushed 'em up and he pushed the two bob back and I pushed it to him and he pushed it back.

05:30 "What's up with you?" He said, "Money's no good here, mate." "Looks all bloody right to me," like. "Oh no, you can't spend money in this place." They'd got this story. Here we are, we're all, well the ship's wounded anyway even if we weren't, so we couldn't do that. We went into a Greek café, couldn't buy a feed. They woke up that it wasn't quite that bad and there was a lot of us, so it didn't last long but we got into it.

So in other words they were regarding you

06:00 **as returning heroes and didn't want you to pay for anything?**

No, no and we thought seriously about it after a while. Thought, "If we say anything now we're going to spoil it for them." But the fellers started, you know, "There's too many of us. We've got to pay." We thought it was a great joke at the start. No, next thing the

06:30 local priest came down to the ship and asked could he see the captain, and would it be all right if they put a dance on that night for us? He had a local band lined up that were all right and he'd get round to the girls of the youth club and all that sort of thing, and some of the mothers to make a supper. Yeah, that was all right. Anyway, the three nights we were there, there were three dances on

07:00 the same group of people, but run by a different church group each night, and we had a ball. I only managed to get to two. I had to be on duty the other one but.

Sounds fantastic!

Yeah, it was great. But we, you know, we went away, well, people must have known because we went round the inside of the wharf and when the tide went out she was high and dry on the mud, so they just they had a barge there that they could stand on. As the tide went down it

07:30 settled on the mud and undid it without a lot of trouble instead of having to dive over the side to do it.

So they undid the screw and did the repair work?

Undid the line.

The line from around the screw?

Around the screw and yeah.

So you were listing the areas that you operated in. Would I be correct in assuming that this was approximately between Sydney and New Guinean waters up the east coast of Australia?

Yeah, up past New Guinea a little bit, but it was mostly that

08:00 not quite over into the Indian Ocean. We're in the Timor Sea, but not… Didn't quite get as far as the Indian Ocean.

How often were you in convoys?

Well for the first six months or so just about all the time. We didn't do much escort work after that.

What

08:30 **was the nature of the ships in the convoy, I mean what were they carrying?**

Well I don't know. We never saw the manifests. But a lot of it was service supplies, like be general cargo, but a lot of it, particularly to the Townsville area, was supplies for the American force because a big American

09:00 establishment up there. But, you know, the questions that, well, we didn't ask and we didn't get any answers. We just said, "As far as we're concerned it's something that had to go and they had to be protected whatever it was." It wouldn't matter if it was sewing machines; they had to be protected.

Yeah absolutely. Just returning to the Herros, could you give us a description of the Herros?

09:30 I'll give you a photograph after or I'll lend you one. The Herros was a steam tug. She was coal fired. She was built in 1919 for the British navy and she was actually called or christened

10:00 The St Earth. There was three of them. The St Hillary, St Ives and St Earth. It was 1926, I think, it was sold out of service to civilian people and J and A Brown.

10:30 And their full title was J and A Brown Abbermain and CM Collieries at Newcastle or Cessnock area, and went into the tug business. She was based in Newcastle for quite a long time, then the navy requisitioned her in the war years and they built up a fo'castle, like

11:00 tugs are generally pretty low slung. Well they built a false fo'castle up on it and put a gun platform and mounted a four-inch gun up on there and gave us a couple of small arms. And actually you've heard all the hoohah and whatever about the loss of the Sydney and no survivors, well the Herros was on the

11:30 west coast of Australia when that happened and she was the only ship that found any relics of the Sydney, that was a carley float and life belt. Nothing else has even been found of the Sydney, but the old Herros did that. She was pretty fast for a tug. She'd do about 14 knots

12:00 and very, very powerful.

So what was her specific role?

Well it was almost to act like a Corvette, although we didn't have depth charges, but was major towing jobs. Like one, there was a big floating

12:30 dock was being towed out from South Africa and they were heading for Darwin, and there was two, three tugs involved with this thing. Anyway they all for one reason or another became incapable of towing so we

13:00 had to coal ship load stores and whatever and go out looking for it, and we found it. God knows how far out, but think it took us five days to tow it back into Darwin. They sent another very big diesel electric tug out to do it and she only pulled it about, I don't know, 40,

13:30 50 miles and it packed up, so here we are. We're just about, we're pulling that and two of the original tugs behind the floating dock and pulled the lot into Darwin. And she was there for a little while and then we had to take it all away over to Port Moresby and

You had to take the floating

14:00 **dock to Port Moresby?**

Port Moresby, yeah. And we took that over. We had one stop. We had to go over to Thursday Island for coal and that's an interesting adventure. Coaling ship, you've got no idea. I'll show you what we looked like after. Looks like we've come out of Belsen Camp and we had, on that job we had air cover all the way and

14:30 had aircraft over us from dawn till you couldn't see, all the way.

Why did you end up looking like you were from Belsen Camp?

Well we were all pretty thin and when you're coaling ship, everybody coals ship, so the crowd I was with we're all down in the hold of this

15:00 old hulk the Momba, and actually Herros had towed that all the way from Western Australia but I wasn't on her then, round the south across the [Great Australian] Bight, up round past Melbourne, up to Newcastle where they filled her with coal and then she towed it all the way up to Darwin so that there'd be coal for the coal-fired ships, mainly herself.

15:30 And you're down in the hull and you shovel coal. We just had maybe a knotted handkerchief on our head and a pair of shorts and something on our feet, and you're down there. Stifling heat and closed in and filling these baskets with coal. They'd be pulled up, over to the bunker hatch and I've got to admit the skipper, a bloke called Paulson,

16:00 he didn't shirk himself. He tipped every basket down into the bunker hatch and he worked just as hard as anybody. The only person excused was the telegraphist. He wasn't allowed to damage his fingers or he wouldn't have the touch.

Sounds like a hell hole out of Dickens?

Yep, yep.

I mean how many people were aboard the boat?

16:30 Ship.

How many people were aboard this particular ship?

Boats are little things with oars. You go like that.

I will remember that.

We had 38 on it and

And what was it like as a crew would you say?

they were great blokes every one of them. No,

17:00 one exception, two exceptions, but we fitted. We worked around them. But we'd lost a couple of people who were transferred. And actually we started a little canteen. There was a little cupboard built in the ship

17:30 and we got permission to use that and to start a little canteen. It was pretty simple the things we had: soap, toothpaste, chewing gum, cigarettes, a few sweets. And they appointed me from the seamen's mess, the stores assistant and the bloke from the stoker's mess

18:00 as canteen managers under the watchful eye of Knocker White. who was the ship's captain, ah ship's captain, the ship's coxswain, who again, this is the foreman bloke. And anyway Knocker was transferred

18:30 and they appointed the senior seaman to take his job. He was a leading seaman. The stoker was transferred and the stores assistant was transferred, so generally when the stores assistant goes they appoint a seaman to do that job. He was then called the tankie. So they said to me, "Well, you're doing the canteen, you'd better be

19:00 the tankie." So I became the stores assistant as well as the canteen manager, and this is how I come to get the extra bit of beer because we were reduced to 35 and they never replaced those people, so I still drew the beer for the 38.

So these two

19:30 **roles that you've mentioned were your sole role, although you did mention being down in the boiler room shovelling and…?**

No. I was never in the stoke hole. Oh wait a minute, that's not right either. Voluntarily, we didn't have to do it but it was so bad down in that stoke hole that when we were steaming across to Port Moresby we went down. These blokes were

20:00 our mates. Normally you didn't talk to stokers and they didn't talk to us, but these were our mates on this little ship so we used to go down and give them a hand. We didn't know anything about raking fires or trimming them or anything like that, but we could get a shovel and we could throw a shovel full in for about 10 minutes. Then we had to come on the upper deck. Nobody could stay down there more than ten minutes.

So you've just described two specific roles, the canteen role and the other role. They were, that

20:30 **was the full extent of your duties aboard the ship?**

No. I still had to do my seaman's watches at sea and that sort of thing. But there wasn't much to the stores. It was all set out nicely and such as it was and I just made sure it was right. The cook would come and tell me what he wanted and I'd just put in the requisitions and such. And I saw the first lieutenant and I said to him, "Well look, we're down three in the ship's company

21:00 and at this stage we'd started to get a bit of beer but they haven't taken them off our manifest. I think I should keep drawing this beer." And he said, "Yes, yes, do that. Just put it in the wardrobe." I said, "No," I said, "I'll put half of it in there." "Oh, fair enough." So I split it with him. We got another three bottles a week each

21:30 and that was fair. And because I was looking after the stores, which meant the refrigerator and all that sort of thing, I was just able to save a bit up. And when we got a bit there I said to the fellers, "Righto, if there's enough for each of us to have a couple of drinks…," we'd have a couple of drinks.

Fair enough yeah. Now you mentioned that there were two exceptions in the crew. Who were those two exceptions?

Well,

22:00 don't like to mention it much, but steward. He just didn't, like the officers had a steward and he just didn't gel with any of us and he was all right, nothing against him or anything like that, but he just didn't gel. The other one was the first lieutenant of the ship.

22:30 He was one of these blokes that with a bit of higher education went through Officers' Training School. He was the corporal in the Army Reserve, but then he instead of going to the army he decided to join the navy. And he had his

23:00 school certificate, his leaving certificate with a pretty fair pass, so they put him into the Officers' Training School and he passed out and he became a lieutenant in the navy. And we got him as first lieutenant and he was pretty hopeless. He had no charisma. A ship that small you've got to

23:30 mingle, but the skipper of the ship, a bloke called Paulson, was one of the world's greatest mongrels but he was a great bloke. The way he treated the troops, he was a seagoing fellow and he'd been used to having lascar crews and pretty harsh with them, and he thought he could be the same with us. But he broke regulations and

24:00 he got some of his mates who were going down to Broome to buy a keg of beer and he brought it back, put it on the bunker hatch, knocked the bung in and he says, "Righto, come and have a drink on your bloody old man." which we did. Now he could have got time in the pokey for doing that but.

So what was the problem with the first lieutenant? You said he was fairly hopeless and that he wasn't a good mixer.

24:30 **What did this mean in terms of his ability to command men aboard the ship?**

Didn't have any.

Didn't have any ability?

No, had no we had no respect for him. Now the other fellow, it didn't matter how bad the skipper was in some things, he was a seaman and we had respect for him. And I nearly had a knock-down drag-out

25:00 fight with him one night which would have got me five years in the stockade.

With the first lieutenant?

No the skipper.

With the skipper?

Yeah.

What happened?

I was on watch. I was up on the bridge. I forget what it was about but he came up about… Something about wanting an early shake in the morning or whatever. And anyway, we got into it hot and strong. We were calling each other for everything and such, and anyway he went. But after that

25:30 I could do no wrong. I'd stood on my dig was all, and he accepted it and he never went any further. But then he started to hold me up, it became embarrassing. Started to hold me up as a horrible example to other blokes, and fortunately every time he asked me a question in front of the others I knew the answer, but it was embarrassing.

26:00 He was all right. Like if we were in a place where there did happen to be a beer, that didn't happen more than once; he wouldn't embarrass us or be embarrassed by us. Take his cap off, which was only a sign of rank, hang it up and stand at the bar and have a beer with us. When you went back on board of

course things changed, he was the Captain again. But, no, he was all right.

26:30 **Now what did you do in your spare time?**

Well I think I mentioned that or I mightn't have to you. We'd swim in the harbour, which was frightfully dangerous. I only explained it to Rebecca [interviewer] I think.

Which harbour are we talking about here?

Darwin Harbour.

Darwin Harbour?

27:00 **Okay so you swam in that harbour?**

Yeah.

Why was it highly dangerous?

Well to start with it's got saltwater crocodiles but that wasn't the danger. The rise and fall of tide is 33 feet and the tide races out of the place. So what we used to do, we used to get two heaving lines. Now these are the lines that are weighted on the end. When you're coming alongside the wharf you throw it over, a bloke catches it

27:30 or gets it, and you tie the hawser to it, he pulls it ashore and puts it on the what's-a-name. So we tied two of those together and a life belt on the end of it and throw it over the stern of the ship, then you'd go up on the fo'castle and you'd dive in, and you look where that is and you make two strokes and hope you caught it going past it and pull yourself back to the ship but.

If you don't catch it what happens then?

28:00 Well it's hooroo, you're out the heads. Sometimes we had an old canoe we got from somewhere and sometimes you might have somebody paddling around in that but they'd be battling to… They'd have caught you, but whether they could get you back or not was a different story. But we never had any tragedies.

So there was apparently some significant leave or quite memorable leave that you had on

28:30 **the Easter weekend of 1945 wasn't there?**

Yeah.

What happened?

Well if people ask me if I was ever frightened during the war I bring this up. But yes, that's when I was frightened. The coxswain came round and he just announced out of the blue, "Able Seaman Tolhurst, Able Seaman Griggs, pack your bag and hammock. You're going home on 28 days' leave." And the beauty is

29:00 that the 28 days starts when I get home, not when I leave the ship. You report to the local naval officer and he stamps your leave pass and records it and that's when it starts. When the 28 days are over you report back to him who sends you to the RTO, which was the Railway Transport Officer, and he says, "Oh Christ, I can't get you there mate for about

29:30 eight days. Go home and come and see me in a week." And it didn't matter how long it took you to get back, you was back on duty. But anyway, yeah, this was it was the Friday, at least, Good Friday. Went ashore… No it must have been the Saturday because we went ashore and we had to spend the night ashore and then out to the airstrip

30:00 Easter Sunday morning. And we waited and waited and waited and this rotten aeroplane didn't turn up. It was a little Lockheed Loadstar Qantas aircraft and it was about three and a half hours late or more, and I was dead frightened they were going to come and get me and take me back to the ship, that I wasn't going to get home. "Plane hasn't turned up," you know,

30:30 "get back." And I was frightened. Anyway we get aboard and away we go. And there was only two crew and the skipper kept coming back and talking to us, or his mate did, and when one came back one of us passengers, was only 10 of us I think it was,

31:00 was allowed to go up and sit forward and talk to whoever's flying the plane. So anyway we get along a bit and the skipper comes back and he says, "Righto, you lot," he says, "what do you want to do? Will we go on to Brisbane? Easter Sunday night – you know what Brisbane would be like on any Sunday let alone Easter – and we'll get there around about 11 o'clock. Or do you want us to go and stay at Cloncurry overnight? It'll be on

31:30 the company." Everybody plugged for Cloncurry. That's another day away, so couple of cabs come and picked us up and took us into Cloncurry and we stayed at the Post Office Hotel. We got round the publican a bit and he allowed us one bottle of beer each with our dinner cause beer was short everywhere and that's out the back of nowhere. I thought Hopalong Cassidy would come along the

street any minute.

32:00 And I remember I was in room seven. We went to the movies. I know we did a cruise around the town and we did pick up a few more bottles, but we decided we'd go to the movies. After the movies, back to the camp and on into bed. Cause they come and woke us at five o'clock to go and catch the plane. Now ever since then I've been looking for somebody

32:30 going to Cloncurry cause I left my naval overcoat behind the door of room seven. I want somebody to go and pick it up for me and I can't get anybody.

Isn't that strange?

Yeah, look, dinkum, I'd love to do it. I'd like to give somebody a letter of authority to the publican to go and pick it up. I reckon the publican would love it. He'd frame it for sure and…

He'd probably produce a coat anyway regardless of whether it was yours

33:00 **or not.**

Yeah, it had my name in big letters like that inside it. They were a beautiful coat, the burberry, magnificent.

So after Cloncurry, what happened then you got your leave?

Yeah, we got home, came down to Brisbane. I was about three or four days in the naval depot there waiting for transport down to Newcastle

33:30 and that was funny too. They had a bit of beer there. They had a wet canteen there for the sailors. It was a tin shed – something like my garden shed with a flap that came up and was held by two sticks. You had to bring your own glass and whatever glass you brought it was sixpence to have it filled or, for the uninitiated,

34:00 five cents, so most of us drank out of 'Lady Blameys'. You heard of a Lady Blamey?

Yes we have heard of 'Lady Blameys' actually. What was your understanding of what a Lady Blamey actually was?

I know exactly what it was because I made a few. It was a full beer bottle, and you soak some string in methylated spirit and you tied it around the top just where it started to curve in.

34:30 You lit that and after it'd all been burning for a while you dipped her into cold water and it went crack, lift the top, off then you put it in the sand and grind it to make it smooth and that was a Lady Blamey.

Why was it called a Lady Blamey?

Cause that's how she was built.

She was built like a straight up and down beer bottle was she?

Well, we were a bit more impolite. We reckoned she was

35:00 built like a brick shithouse.

Dear oh dear, that's great. I've never seen a photo of a Lady Blamey. It's made me very curious. I'll have to find out what she looked like.

I don't know whether that's right or not. I can't remember but.

Now what experience did you have of the Salvos? Did you have any experience of the Salvation Army at all? Were they making themselves available?

Look, they

35:30 were magnificent. They're one of the few charities that I still believe in. Things had quietened down a lot the last time that we went into Milne Bay. It was still a war theatre but it, you know, it was pretty quiet. But down the track here's a hut Salvation Army and you

36:00 go in. "Have you written home lately?" There was some tables, chairs, writing paper, envelopes. There was a cup of tea, maybe a biscuit. I think they had a table tennis table. But everywhere you went they were there and they didn't shove anything down your throat except a cup of tea and they were great and

36:30 other places…

Well actually speaking of other places, although we spoke about the places that the Echuca went, where was the Herros going? What sort of waters was it sailing? Because you mentioned Milne Bay, which indicates that it was going far further afield than the Echuca had?

No, no Herros went to Port Moresby. Echuca

37:00 was Milne Bay and Moresby and further up round the northern side of New Guinea where we could go. But when we were up there our base, the only port we hit, was Milne Bay. That was where we got stores and fuel and we'd never do a patrol of

37:30 more than 10 or 12 days because that was about all our decent cruising area was, and back we'd come.

Now you mentioned, you know, the Salvos having letter-writing facilities available before, and this leads me to ask, as the war went on, were you writing continuously to Shirley and maybe suggesting that you might have plans for marriage? I mean was that on the cards at that time?

38:00 No, it was sort of… That really didn't happen till I did come home. Perhaps we were thinking along those lines when I was, for a couple of months in Platypus, no Penguin, rather at Balmoral which incidentally is the same place. Platypus was down

38:30 below and Penguin was up top, but it sort of just became in that period a mutual understanding that this would probably happen, and it was pretty early in both our lives, but I remember I've never thrown up the war service at anybody, not that we had war

39:00 service. It was, you know, we were there. But went to see the priest. Said, oh yeah, "Father, thinking about getting married." "Yeah? Like me to do the service?" "Yes." So he starts taking a few details and age, and Shirl was 19 and I was 22 I think, yeah. And

39:30 he said, "What? You're only babies. What are you doing?" And I did my nana a bit and I said, "Father, how many of my fellow man have I got to kill before I'm a man?" and he shut up.

Fair enough.

Tape 7

00:31 **So, Ossie, when it did come time for you to leave the Echuca, how did you feel about leaving the ship?**

Well, for a couple of reasons I wasn't happy. One, I've explained the fact that the ship was coming back to Sydney for a boiler clean, which meant everybody was going to get a fortnight's leave and

01:00 I was a bit upset about that. And the other reason was, I remarked before that in the navy you're family; I'm losing my family. And I knew that I'd make another family, but this was the crew that I've spent the most productive time with

01:30 and that I'd had such close association. Here I am, I've got to go and do it all over again. And I was leaving a ship that was only a couple of years old for one that was about 150 years old in my vision. Although it was only built in 1919, it was a hell of lot older and dirtier and rustier than the Echuca.

02:00 That was it. But I read an article the other day that fellers who spent a long time in the navy were on all sorts of ships, like the… Well, the chap that's the secretary, president whatever you want to call him of our own Echuca Association. He spent time on the aircraft carrier Vengeance when the

02:30 British navy lent it to us. He was a permanent naval feller. He never joined the Echuca until after the war, but he was in all the minesweeping operations that it did but. He was on the Vengeance and couple of destroyers. You know, the glamour ships and that sort of thing. But the Echuca is one that he loves and I read, reading about

03:00 how many people felt the same way. They'd be on in their career eight or nine different ships but they loved the Corvettes and…

Why was that?

I don't know. I can't define it. And they were the most cantankerous things and they were the roughest thing at sea. Very safe ship, but the length of them wasn't long enough to start with to straddle two waves at once,

03:30 so any seas running you ran up a wave and you went bang, and you went down under the next one virtually, then up the next one and down again. Or they often say it would roll on a wet handkerchief. And it was rough living, particularly that pile driving, but we all loved it. And

04:00 fellers that had been on big ships had never been seasick in their life, they got sick in the Corvettes and we laughed at them. But no, I don't know. Whether it's that you're so close. That's part of it. You live close, so you become closer. In the big ships like the aircraft carriers like

04:30 Vengeance they've got something like 12, 13 hundred people on them. Well you're not going to get to know everybody. You don't want to know everybody and they don't want to know you. It's only your own

close little group you form an enclave with, and you can't get close to everybody like you can on the small ships.

How many men were onboard the Herros?

38 – that's peak, but we did go down

05:00 to 35.

So that was a small ship. Why wasn't the Herros as happy ship as the…?

It was, it was quite good. Particularly when we got our last skipper who was a gentleman and a brilliant seaman, was a Lieutenant Commander Duck. He had to be good – he was a Newcastle lad.

05:30 **So we were in the middle of talking about the crew on the Herros, and I was trying to make a comparison between the happiness of the crew on the Echuca and the happiness of the crew onboard the Herros?**

They were we were happy on the Herros, but we were unhappy about being on

06:00 the ship, I think. But, well, we didn't think it was as active as the Echuca. In essence it was because of the, you know, few of the jobs that we did that well, we got commendations for, but just that it was coal fired. No-one was happy when we had to coal

06:30 ship and I even met a fellow in '83 when we went over to Western Australia for a run and then this feller visited. He was about to do a round Australia trip and he'd not long retired. He lived in Western Australia, in Scarborough, a Perth suburb. So when they came over they visited

07:00 us at Redhead, we were then. And I said to him, "Frank, you mentioned you were in the navy during the war." He said, "Yeah." "Did you spend any time on Corvettes?" I've just got a beaut book by Iris Nesdale about all the Corvettes. "I was only ever on one ship," he said. "I was only ever on the Herros." And I said, "I don't remember you." We'd been shipmates 38 years before for about 15 or 18 months,

07:30 and he was the engine room artificer. When he said that I could remember then and I could place him, but before that I didn't remember him. Somebody said, "You didn't know him?" I said, "No." He'd got older and fatter and so had I.

Now you mentioned that there were a couple of commendations for?

This was just to the ship, particularly. Both in relation to the

08:00 floating dock, how we went out and we sort of rescued everybody and brought them in and then we took it over to Moresby just at the – I don't know, what do you call him these days? They'd call him the marine commander or whatever. Just that he wrote to the skipper and commended him and the crew for this job which, well, obviously

08:30 it must have been hazardous because we were so slow. You couldn't duck and weave and dodge and we had air cover all the way, so they must have expected there was a chance that something would happen to the dock, but we got it over there safely and it went into use.

And that's what you were describing on the last tape, yeah?

Just, you know, from the commander, "Well done!" sort of thing.

So did you, I know it was a floating dock but what

09:00 **did you actually save people from? What was there?**

Well we actually saved the dock. It, well, that's perhaps too strong a word, too. But the thing is, it was out there floundering. There was three other ships around it that had all broken down and couldn't… They could make their own way, but they couldn't tow it. And we finished up, we towed that and a couple of their broken-down ships as well

09:30 into Darwin. And it was, I don't know, probably six, seven hundred miles, something like that.

Now what was the other commendation for?

Well that's was then for getting it safely over to Moresby. One was for getting it into Darwin, the other for getting it to Moresby. But it was just that the… I don't know whether it was the commodore ashore at Darwin or one of the vice, whoever

10:00 it was, but it the skipper really was commended, which meant the ship was.

Now with the Herros, what was the range of sea that you covered, ocean that you covered, or ports, etc.?

Well our base of operations was from Darwin and it was

10:30 north east and west of there. It was pretty much the same as Echuca except we didn't go as far to the east of New Guinea or north of New Guinea, but other than that we were roughly in the same area. The Timor Sea, obviously, over to New Guinea

11:00 to Moresby, and…

Did you ever disembark at any of these places?

We went ashore at Moresby. We were there actually a couple of times.

What was your impression of Moresby?

Well there's nothing to do there, but it's visually magnificent.

11:30 I forget just where it was we went. We weren't there that long. It was a case of again, store ship, coal ship, get out. Another place we went to on that was Thursday Island and that was lovely; a very nice place.

Could you describe Thursday Island as it was then?

12:00 Well there was still the local inhabitants were about. I remember there was a big two-storey wooden pub there. I can't remember much else about it. That was over 60 years ago, you know, but I can remember I was impressed by that, too, visuall.

12:30 And it's one place I would have liked to have gone back to, but actually we were there, too. I was there for some reason or other on the Echuca as well.

And what were the relations like between the sailors and the local population?

Well generally they were happy to see us because normally, whatever it was, we were doing something for them. We'd either brought up a ship with

13:00 stores or, in the case of Moresby, we'd taken a dock over there. And generally anywhere we went was only troops in any case, except when we were doing the east coast convoys. See, when we were in Darwin there were no civilians except the Christ chosen children as I said. And other than that you were,

13:30 everyone was there for the same reason, and…

Now I'm interested to know, like at any of these ports that you went to, and I know that this would have been the case in Brisbane and in Darwin, that there would have been, I'm sure, places, you know, for men in all the services to frequent? You know, I'm talking about brothels, etc. And was that, like,

14:00 **something that was quite common amongst the men at that time?**

I never knew anyone on our ship that went to one except a couple of us were running short of money and they used to have these great queues, so you'd go and stand in the queue and, sure enough, along would come a Yank.

14:30 He was in a bit of a hurry so he'd give you a pound to get out and give you his place. So, right, we'd get drinking silver that way if we were running short yeah.

So you'd be, so sorry, just so it's clear, you'd line up in a line for the brothel?

Yeah.

And then an American would come along and give you a pound for your place?

Yell, sell your place. If one didn't you just dropped out and just got on the end of the line again till one did.

That's a pretty…?

Well, it was an easy way to make a quid.

Yeah, so

15:00 **where was that?**

That was Brisbane.

That was Brisbane right?

Yeah.

So what was the, what were the relations like between the Americans and the Australians in Brisbane?

Not real good. I think it might have been Anzac Day '44, but there was a pretty

15:30 fair service and they had a flame of remembrance up there, and there's a few Americans, I believe, the story is. I wasn't at it. I saw the aftermath, but I believe that there was some Americans and a couple of girls and they were going to toast some hotdogs over the flame of remembrance, and of course the lot of them finished

16:00 up in the pool of remembrance and they were damaged a little bit. So the story went around about what had happened and few of the Australian troops were, I don't know how they were feeling, but they started to play up a bit. And they marched in and they wrecked the American Red Cross. They, don't know whether they succeeded, but they were certainly

16:30 trying to tip a tram over. They went up, actually I was up at the Town Hall, you wouldn't want to know, at a dance, and this mob come marching up there. They were going to go into there as well. They had great big bronze gates – enormously strong things. It went right up and they shut them and locked them. They were a bit much for the crowd to break so they went and decided they'd go somewhere else.

17:00 But it was pretty nasty. And around about that time, too, there was an American serviceman, Kowalski I think is the name, but he murdered a few women up there and they caught him. And it was a Labor government in, and he happened to say, "Oh well, this is

17:30 all right. I'm not going to get hurt too much. I'll go to jail but there's no death penalty." And they said, "We've got news for you, sport. We're going to take you to New Guinea and court martial ya." So they took him up there and they tried him by courts martial and hung him. Kowalski doesn't sound right, but it was something like that, but they fixed his clock for him.

Yeah, there's always a way around things when you want

Yep.

18:00 **to? I've heard about the riots in Brisbane, but I'd never heard it told in that particular way. I didn't know that that's where it started from, cooking a hotdog over the…?**

Well, that's what I was told. I saw what was going on and they told me this is how it started. Whether that's right or not, I don't know.

Yeah, but I think it was Leonski wasn't it, Leonski was the American?

Leonski, yeah, that was it.

Yeah, that's, so just I mean, how,

18:30 **did you actually witness the mob as they were coming up the street?**

I saw them at the front of the Town Hall.

How big was the mob?

Look, I couldn't tell from where I was, but it was in hundreds and they, you know it was, to look at them you wouldn't think it was an angry mob. It was, you know, it looked like they were,

19:00 well, they were certainly letting off steam but didn't seem to be a mad mob. They knew what they wanted and were out enjoying themselves. That's, I think, why they didn't do any harm at the Town Hall. They said, "Well, this is a bit too hard. Let's go somewhere easy." And I believe it started to disperse after that. They quietened down and they broke up, but it was pretty nasty.

19:30 **What did you think of the Americans?**

Overpaid, oversexed and over here which was what they, everybody, reckoned. But a couple that I met more or less socially seemed to be all right. One I met in Milne Bay

20:00 I wasn't too happy with. He gave me a smack in the mouth for no reason. Just walking past, bang! So, but anyway, I got back to the ship with a bit of blood and when I left he was laying in the mud, so I didn't worry about it too much. But a couple of other blokes had met people like that, again in Milne Bay, and they weren't happy about it. So there was talk about going ashore and deliberately looking for some of them and,

20:30 you know, "Don't be silly." What they did, we had a lanyard and the seamen were issued with a pusser's dirk, which is a knife. The seaman have to have a knife and it was rather heavy. It was a big heavy pocket knife with a marlin spike so that you could splice to help you, and it had a fair lump of a blade which you kept

21:00 sharp because you had to cut a fair bit of rope. And it was on a lanyard and the idea was go ashore, open the blade, and swing this thing round your head on the lanyard. A vicious way to go looking for people. Not me, I'm the one that got the smack in the mouth. I'll stay on board and have a game of cards or something but.

So you visited Milne Bay when you were on the Echuca, is that

21:30 **correct?**

Yeah.

What was your impression of Milne Bay?

It was a big mud hole. It was always wet. You could never get your washing dry. The atmosphere that was there, everything would go mildewy. You had to pull it out, keep washing it, and hang it on. When you got to sea again, of course, you'd hang it out and you'd get it dry.

22:00 Not in Milne Bay. It was so humid and so many mosquitoes and whatever. Course you had to, we were all yellow. We all had to take our Atebrin tablets and we had to take them while we were there. But at sea of course, no mosquitoes, we didn't have to take it. So we were not too bad. And that was one beauty about the sea: no mosquitoes, no flies.

22:30 **Now did you ever come across any Japanese POW's [Prisoners of War] at all?**

I saw a few, but no, we never had any on board, never transported any or anything like that. Some of the Corvettes did. In fact, I think the Kapunda picked up two crews from

23:00 crashed Japanese aeroplanes, that they had them on board as prisoners, but we never struck any.

What did you think of them as an enemy?

Well, we were right and they were wrong. And after the war was when I really got to hate them because we went out alongside

23:30 Arantje, yeah, a hospital ship had brought prisoners back from Changi [Singapore, POW] camp and we went out alongside to give her water and some fuel, and when we saw some of those fellers, what they were like, you know, we thought, well.

24:00 I don't know whether they were as bad as or worse than the Germans. I think they were worse. They were inhuman but they never affected me personally. But I'm still not happy about them and I'd… They say, "Forgive and forget," and all those things, but

24:30 why should we? It happened and I know, and particularly because they have erased everything from their history books. Now it's not long ago that my mate down the road was over in Hawaii and he went out to the Missouri memorial.

25:00 And, you know, it's on its side and they've built this thing and he said they're all ex marines out there are the guides, and that and Alan went over to one of them and he said, "Look, I notice that nearly everybody that comes here is Japanese. These people that are having a look," and the fellow said, "Yes" And he said, "They read the plaques, and," he said, Tthey come over and say, "were we at war with you?""

25:30 "Yes." Next question is, "Who won?" Now you know that doesn't endear me to them. You don't say, well I know they're doing that in Germany. They reckon the holocaust didn't happen. It did and you can't erase it whatever happens, anyway.

I think a lot of countries are guilty of erasing history that they don't particularly like about

26:00 **themselves, yeah? That's really very interesting. So, I was just, in the some of the research that we did we noticed that there was a referral to 'Sea Daddies' and I was wondering if you might be able to tell us what a sea daddy was?**

Well, you've probably got that little bit there. What I said, that

26:30 in our day, as I said, you know, as a sea daddy it had… We were making homosexual insinuations. These days, I believe, they're trying to foster the older fellers to look after the younger blokes and sort of call them 'sea daddy'. But in my day, no, we called 'em that but it wasn't like what they mean today.

27:00 **How common was homosexuality in the navy?**

There was insinuations, but the moment that there was any, you were out. They'd have you out of the navy in 24 hours. No doubt it happened but, you know, not, well…

27:30 I don't know whether it's still tolerated or is tolerated today, but certainly wasn't in those days. And again, something I didn't see. Young and innocent; didn't know about those things.

So, I mean, you say you were young and innocent. Was it a case of that you know

28:00 **that there just wasn't an awareness that that kind of thing existed?**

No, we knew it existed because of this sea daddy bit, as we'd say, and we used to make ribald remarks about it and pretend something was happening perhaps to somebody, you know, get their back up a bit. But I never knew of any of it; never saw any

28:30 of it. And it was only having a shot at people. But there's no doubt if there's anything like that on the

Herros we'd have known about it because it was so small. And again, the Echuca wasn't all that much bigger. There wasn't much went on that people didn't know about.

Now did we talk about who the captain of the Herros was?

29:00 Yeah, well we had two. Well I was just getting onto them a while ago. Two in my term on it. And the first one was a Lieutenant Paulson. He was the feller that broke regs [regulations] and got the keg of beer and such. But then he was replaced and we got a fellow, Lieutenant Commander Duck. Naturally, affectionately, and I mean affectionately,

29:30 known as 'Donald' to everybody behind his back. But, as I said before, he had to be a good bloke. He was a Newcastle boy and he actually lived within about 150 yards of the place where I served my apprenticeship. And he knew all the people there, as I knew most of them, and we were able to talk about it. He talked to you like an equal

30:00 and we got on pretty well. In fact, when I was coming home I asked him could I bring a message or anything back to his family for him, which I did. And he was a thorough gentleman and a brilliant seaman. Actually, he was senior captain in the Australia United Steam Navigation Company. And he hated the navy,

30:30 and we'd be steaming along and here's this nice looking thing going past. He'd say, "Look at that, that's what I bloody well should be on." Do his 'nana a bit, but he never let it interfere with his abilities. He was a good skipper and a good guy.

Now was there ever a time during your naval career where you felt in danger?

31:00 Not specifically. You knew it was there all the time. Like all the time you're at sea, whenever you're at sea there were – what's the word? You're in harm's way sort of thing, but you didn't, just didn't think about it. I'm

31:30 sure in the back of everybody's mind, if something happened the fear that you had was that you'd show fear and let your mates down, but that was all in the background. If it happened it happened and such, and we certainly weren't in a position to defend ourselves against anybody. Like the pop gun that we had on the Herros, particularly, and we weren't much better off on the Echuca. We were quite a bit...

32:00 And we had a fair defence as far as submarines were concerned because we were pretty well supplied with depth charges, but I don't know. Just consciously there was no thought.

So would you have regarded the sea as a friend or as an enemy?

The?

Would you have regarded the sea

32:30 **as a friend or as an enemy?**

No, never thought along those lines. I loved the sea but I liked being there. Sometimes,

33:00 you know, if we'd had day upon day upon day of heavy weather I wasn't too keen on it. I hated it. Just that was the times when you didn't necessarily get fed well. Like if the ship's going up over 35-foot waves the cooks are not going to do too good getting tucker together. They did marvellously well when you think back on it, but

33:30 you wasn't going to get anything fancy.

What kind of things would you get on a rough night?

Well, if it was easy, if there was some bread you got a corn horse sandwich, or whatever they could do. It was hard to get a decent cuppa and that was very, very important. The things people used to do with their

34:00 coffee. Used to make coffee in a big urn like so, and they'd throw a couple of handfuls in and want something to kick it along. "I'll put a handful of salt in." Wouldn't be a handful, but it'd be a good tablespoon of salt and salt's all right. A little bit of salt's all right in coffee. It really lifts it.

34:30 You want to try it some time, but only a little pinch. I can remember one feller once, he made it and he put a great big spoon of mustard in it. We drank it that was a hot drink. It was hot. But it was generally accepted that whether you made tea or coffee it had to be strong. And it was rumoured that if the spoon

35:00 would stand up in it, it wasn't bad. But if you lifted the spoon off and the bottom had melted off, it was perfect. And that's about how they made it. God, it was strong! But the best drink we ever got was kai and they always made a cup of kai for everybody on watch in the middle watch. This is that midnight till four a.m. And kai was a

35:30 great big block of chocolate about that thick, hard as the hobs of hell, and they'd give it a thump with a hammer and break it up and then you got a knife. Push a piece against your stomach and you'd scrape

this thing down till you got, you just about filled the cup with the shavings. Then you'd fill that with boiling water and a bit of tinned milk. And it was

36:00 a magnificent drink and everybody got a hot cup of that during the middle watch. It was great.

That sounds great. Sounds much better than the coffee with mustard, I must say.

Yeah, yeah, it was. And too you didn't have to put anything in it because there was sugar impregnated in the chocolate. But it was a great yeah, kai.

That sounds good.

K A I.

36:30 **They should bring that back, I think.**

Yeah, they still have kai in the navy, yeah.

Now what about lucky charms or superstitions when you were on board – anything like that?

No, no, but I used to make rabbits.

What could you tell us how and why?

Well, have you heard the term 'foreign order'?

No, I haven't.

Righto, well, if a feller,

37:00 let's see, well, when I was working as a joiner, if a feller said to me "Look, one day can you make me a little box about that big, Os?" and whatever, I'd make it for him in the boss's time with the boss's material and then take it out to him. That was a foreign order. The boss knew nothing about it and it wasn't on any worksheet or anything. That was a 'foreigner'. Well,

37:30 rabbits were foreigners that you made, or little jobs that you did on the ship or in dockyards. And allegedly it came from Great Britain in the sailing ship days when the dockyards were overrun with rabbits and they were trying to get rid of them. So the feller would make something for himself

38:00 and when he went out the watchman would say, "What have you got in the bag?" "I've got rabbits." "Righto, we're getting rid of a couple, so away you go." Of course the bloke gets home and he gets out whatever it is he's stolen. So in the navy they're not foreign orders, they're rabbits. I used to make quite a lot of things. I'd get old lumps of dunnage timber off the wharf and I'd…

38:30 We had a few carpenter's tools on the ship, so I used to make jewel cases and line them with padding and satin and French polish them, and that sort of things, for the fellers. And they'd do favours for me when I wanted things. And on the Echuca we'd have the only ship in the navy that had a rudder that was made of cedar and was French polished, cause I did it, yeah, but it was for the ship, of course.

39:00 **Did you ever send one of these jewellery boxes back for Shirley?**

No, I don't think I did. I did make some for her later in the joinery shop that were, you know, a well-finished job. The others were all right, but it was hard to get materials to make them. But it filled in time. Something I'd forgotten about doing that, but I did quite a few of them.

39:30 And a few fellers I've met since have remarked about the boxes I made for them – they've still got them, or did have, yeah.

Tape 8

00:31 **Now we talked a bit about the Americans before, and overpaid oversexed and over here, and I know that from other people that we've spoken to that there was often a lot of resentment towards them because the Americans would steal men's girlfriends or wives. I was just wondering, did you ever hear of any of those kinds of instances?**

01:00 I heard of them. Can't remember any specific, but you know these were allegations that were made all the time and I thought, "Well, it's, you know, possibly a bit natural because they've got the money to spend and nobody knows whether

01:30 they were going to get home ever again, and, well, let 'em spend it." It had to boost our economy. I didn't think of that in those days but I think about it now. It had to boost our economy a bit and it was funny, too. The government got a bit of that, cause back in those days, we've got our GST [Goods and Services Tax] now, but they used to have an entertainment tax, and on every ticket sold for the picture theatre, tax.

02:00 I think it was sixpence tax to go to the pictures.

I'd never heard of that.

Yep, yep, they had the entertainment tax on it. You go to the dance, extra tax, and that went on for quite a while, too.

Now, to what extent did the men aboard the ship either ship that you were on find it difficult to be away from home during the war?

02:30 Trying to think, no, I can't remember anybody complaining about it. I didn't find it hard personally. Again, I don't know whether it's just something that you expected to be expected

03:00 to do, and it was no good complaining about it, you were there. As I always tell everybody, you know, about the war years, I tell 'em "I fought and I fought and I fought but they still made me go." And that's about how it was.

So were you ever homesick?

No, not really. There might have been times when I wished I was home and

03:30 when I did come home on a bit of leave I can remember getting on the tram to go out home, and as I passed various places, thinking, "Oh, gees, that's still the same, that's still the same." Like, I don't suppose I was away more than 12 months at any span without getting a break, but I was surprised. Like, it was such a short period and I was surprised it was still the

04:00 same, hadn't altered, but no, I was never homesick as such. Sometimes, as I said, I did wish I was home, any place rather than where I was, but no, never worried me.

And what about, did you ever have a Christmas on board either of the ships that you were on?

Yep, yeah.

Can you describe?

Well, I was resentful for one. That fellow I showed you the

04:30 photograph of, Lou Rishen, he and I were to be on watch. It was Christmas Day and the skipper decided there would be an issue of beer, a bottle per man and he came round, he said, "Who's on watch this afternoon?" And up went the finger and Lou put his up. "Well, you two better share a bottle, see. You're going to be up

05:00 there on your own." So we got half a bottle of beer for Christmas and everybody else got one. I was resentful of that. Like, to think you couldn't handle a bottle of beer. We're at sea hundreds of miles from anywhere. We're not going to run over somebody, but, yeah. Not that it mattered much, but traditionally in the navy at Christmas

05:30 they dressed the youngest ordinary seaman on the ship up as the captain and the skipper as an ordinary seamen, and the officers served the men at the table and that sort of thing. Only happens once a year, Christmas lunch. We couldn't quite go on with that on the Herros. There wasn't enough of anybody, you know. By the time you put your watch keepers up, there's hardly anybody left.

06:00 But that's a tradition, particularly in depots, and that, that goes on. Still does, I believe, but yeah.

Sounds rather amusing?

Yeah, but I've never forgiven him for that half bottle of beer.

Now where were you when the war ended?

We were in Darwin Harbour. We got word that it was over and then the next day we got word

06:30 that it wasn't over, and then the next day we got word, "Oh yes, it is." And we got this three or four times. It's over it's not, it's over it's not, and then finally, bang, it is over. And that was very expensive on distress rockets. We didn't have much else to have fireworks about, so they got out the rockets and they were aiming them flat across the water and trying to hit the ship somewhere else with it

07:00 and that sort of thing, or banging them up in the air. But yeah, we fired until we had none of them left. We never had that many, but we got rid of 'em all.

What went through your mind when you had heard that the war was over?

Immense relief – it is over. You know, for months it'd been nearly over. As soon as Germany fell we thought, "It's finished."

07:30 And even before that we thought, "Well, it won't be long, it won't be long." And in fact this Lieutenant Commander Duck, I was quarter master, and he said to me, we were about to go on a job somewhere. I forget what it was, but I know we were off to sea, and he asked me to get the engineering officer. So I went down and, "Captain's

08:00 compliments, Sir. He'd like to have a word with you in his cabin." "Goodo." So up he came and I had to stand by in case there was a message or whatever, and before we sailed, before any ship sails, the chief engineer has to tell the captain that everything's shipshape, the engine's will turn over and everything. So, "Engines, he said how's everything?" "Top line, Sir, ready to go."

08:30 He said, "If it wasn't, we couldn't sail, could we?" "Just a minute, Sir, I'd better check." So next thing he came back and reported three boiler tubes or something were blown and we couldn't sail, and the skipper justified it. He said, "Well, why go out now? There'd be some crazy out there that doesn't know the war's over or there might be, or making a suicide bid or whatever. I'm not going to risk my troops."

09:00 We didn't sail and then, yes, it was over and the job we were supposed to go on wasn't necessary, so I was quite happy, yeah.

Now what had you heard about the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Well we… What happened? I know the army had

09:30 reopened the Darwin radio station, 5DR, I think, it was and we were getting good news broadcasts from there. That's how we heard it. Of course, in that area when we were at sea the most popular radio program was Tokyo Rose, the Japanese program. They had all the latest American hits and such, better than we had, and

10:00 we listened to that. But no, when radio advised us that, you know, this devastating bomb had been dropped, then the second one and such, all of a sudden, they've surrendered unconditionally. Then they decided they were going to have a celebration barbeque on Mendel Beach, which is a big beach.

10:30 I went out there and came back. I thought "God. You know you'd be a month getting up there to get something. I'll go back aboard." And that big feller you saw with the beard, he came and asked me to lock him up on the ship so no-one could get to him. He wanted to bring his beard home and he reckoned that someone would get him down or some group and they'd shave half his beard off. And I said to him, "You're frightened they'll take all your beard?" He said, "No, I'm frightened they'll take half of it." So

11:00 anyway I locked him up for two days, I think, I kept him on the ship and back he went. He was all right. I run into him about three, four years later walking down the street in Hamilton. There he was. He was unshaven, I mean he was shaven. I didn't know him but he knew me, so we got together. I took him out home, but, yeah.

11:30 Gerry Gerard.

Now when did you return to civilian life?

Well I got my discharge on the 23rd of May 1946 and that was it. I was out. All of a sudden I'm a civilian and I s'pose I might have had a bit of a holiday, 10 days, a fortnight, something

12:00 like that, and went back to the job and had to pick up and do my last two and a half years and…

Of the apprenticeship?

Of my apprenticeship. It was a five year apprenticeship in those days and not easy like it is. Seven thirty till five, not four o'clock like now or earlier and

12:30 you, well you had to put in a good day's work. It took me a while to adjust. I was definitely unsettled for a while. I must have been a cow to live with. I don't know, but I know it's total turn around and I can understand some of the fellers. There was lots of reports about fellers

13:00 who were in the army, particularly, they'd go somewhere, they'd get in a brawl and they'd beat the living daylights out of somebody for what looked like no reason. But they'd been secluded somewhere, taught how to fight and kill for three, four, five years. They come home and they get into, what are they going to do? They just haven't adjusted enough, and that's I think where the

13:30 bad publicity came about people not adjusting. But I was just unsettled and if I hadn't had the apprenticeship… And then we decided or talked about marriage, and Shirl's parents said, "Well, you know, we think you're too young, but if you can get somewhere to live,

14:00 okay." So we got a bit of a flat to live in and got married on the 14th of December '46.

Now how old were you at this point?

22. And Shirl was what? 19, 18, anyway,

14:30 round about there. I think she was 18 at that time, but those days you grew up pretty quick and what anybody says must have meant to be after all these years. But my apprenticeship, here comes

15:00 the plug. I was helped so much, I didn't realise it was so much, by what was then the Repatriation Department. Without any hesitation they gave me 10 pound cash money to buy tools of trade, and you

get a lot of… You had to wait for them to be available, but you could buy a lot of tools for

15:30 10 pound back then. In fact, among them I brought a trying plane, which isn't used much these days; you use machines. But it was a plane about that long, and you use that if you wanted extremely straight edges, but you didn't get any dips in them. It was so long it had to be straight and,

16:00 be 10 years ago now, I was offered four hundred and fifty dollars for it. I haven't got it. I gave it to my son. He's in the building industry. He's got use for it but. I had a few things still there but. I brought chisels and bits and a brace and bit but, heaps of stuff with that 10 pound.

16:30 Then, because I would have been finished my apprenticeship, the boss, Gus, he paid me the appropriate apprentice wage and repat [Repatriation Department] made it up to full journeyman's wages while I was finishing my time, so I got the money I would have been getting if I hadn't gone away. And,

17:00 you know, in those days that worked out, although wages were only about seven pound 10 a week, was a lot of money in those days though. And I certainly couldn't have managed if I'd only got apprentice's money, so that helped me and I've really been grateful about that. I haven't moaned about anything I've got from repat. I'm grateful for everything I get.

Now, could you give us a summary a brief summary of your life

17:30 **from the end of war to present day. What did you get up to work-wise and family-wise?**

Well, with a bit of help, produced two children, one of each. I worked in the trade, I don't know, about another six or seven years

18:00 and I decided that, you know, I lacked education, that I wouldn't, that I wasn't going to get anywhere. But I did get a job over at the BHP [Broken Hill Prospecting] in the office. I'd worked for them in the trade for a couple of years and then I became a procurer. I got a job in the procurement office at BHP,

18:30 which involved checking plans, having certain things done. They used to get a lot of contract work done outside and I had to watch the progress of them and get them delivered and that sort of thing. And this was my first experience of office work, and I decided, well, if I want to get anywhere against all these young people I've got to improve myself a bit.

19:00 So I went to Hamilton evening college for 12 months and did my Intermediate. I got it. We broke for the Christmas break and I was walking down Hunter Street and I met two fellers that had gone through, they were much in the same position as me although they were a lot younger, but they'd gone

19:30 and done this. They said, "What are you going to do this year?" I said, "Nothing. I'm finished." "We're going down to the school of accounting." "I'll come with you." So went down there, qualified as an accountant, as a registered tax agent, and I thought, "That wasn't too bad," so then I decided I'd do my Leaving Certificate

20:00 and enjoyed all of it. Anyway, I applied and got a job in the Commonwealth Public Service in Social Security and that's virtually where I stayed. I'd worked for a few other people on the way through, but this was it. I was there about 24 years, I think, and

20:30 I was appointed as a – it was a terrible name. When you got into the real pension side of it, you was appointed as a special magistrate, because when people made an application what they told you was considered to be evidence in support of pension claim.

21:00 We even had to swear them in on the bible that the evidence they will give, and all that sort of thing. Frightened hell out of them, you know. I hated it, but one of our fellers lost his bible, Tich Graham, an ex serviceman, ex POW, so he said, "It's going to take me a while. I don't know what I'll do with the next interviews. I know, I'll fix it." So he threw the dictionary up on the bench and he swore them in on the dictionary. He said,

21:30 "Well, it's got all the same words, they're just in different order." I thought, "Well, fair enough," but anyway. Then up came this position as senior counsellor for the rehabilitation branch. And we had the director's son working

22:00 in our office in Newcastle and he fronted me one day. He was junior to me, but he fronted me and he said, "Have you applied for that job Os?" "No mate, can't see me doing that. I'm not a tea supper," and all that sort of thing. "I think you're the sort of bloke you might be looking for." And I thought, "Oh." This bloke used to go home to Sydney to his father and mother every weekend and no doubt that his father said something to him about, "What's that Tolhurst bloke like?" Or

22:30 he's made a remark to his father. So I applied for the job and I got it over and above quite a few people that were senior to me, and that was it. That was the job I wanted all my life. I didn't know it but it was, and I loved my work and I did the last 13 years in the service there. Well they sent me to the University of New South Wales

23:00 and to Prince Henry and to Prince Alfred Hospital and whatever on an intensive course. And actually it

was a competitive course right throughout Australia, and there was 12 people selected to go to it and I, fortunately, was one. And from thereon, you know, it was great. But then it got too much. I had a

23:30 territory to cover from the Hawkesbury River to the Queensland border and out to the South Australian border, and I had two people on the staff in Newcastle. I had to do all the travel and such, but I did it and still loved it.

And what was this work involved in doing?

Well it was rehabilitation of disabled, the idea being that

24:00 if a person was in receipt of sickness benefit, shall we say through a traumatic action, if they got benefit for more than six weeks then the file was referred to me. And I'd study the file and say, "Oh yes, possibly we can do something for this person." And if you'd been there then, I could use your money you know the taxpayer's money.

24:30 And providing I had a reasonable chance of getting that person into employment, in extreme cases, I could send them to university. I could pay their fees, pay them a good living allowance, buy their books and equipment, pay their transport costs. And providing they'd performed, get them through uni[versity].

25:00 If there was medical attention they needed, like I told you about sawing this blokes' legs off, I had two specialist doctors that I worked with and we'd get together and decide what could be done. If I came up with a viable thing,

25:30 they'd provide the money and arrange the medical attention. And again, the Commonwealth would pay for it, hopefully. We didn't have to get them back to work, and if they went to a training program and didn't succeed there was no penalty. They just, well, they'd already, they would have benefited to start with, with confidence and such. And at that time, too,

26:00 we also had a training scheme for widow pensioners and I could do much the same for them and put them through schools and colleges and God knows what, cause I've always said they were just as disabled, or a lot of them were, if they'd go inside, shut the door and hope the world left them alone. But this brought them out again, made them useful members of the community, or we hoped it did, and I loved it. It was great.

Well that sounds like very important work

26:30 **that you did yeah, very, very impressive?**

Yeah, I used to tell everybody, "No way they were spending my tax money on buying F1-11 fighters and bombers." I knew where my taxes went, I spent them but.

Well, thank you for looking after our hard-earned tax money for us, Ossie.

Yeah.

So, now, tell me, have you maintained contact with your mates from the war?

Yes.

27:00 Not the Herros crew, but with the Echuca we've been meeting since 1983. We've been meeting at Echuca every second year for a reunion. We've one of the crew has always been asked to give the Anzac address at Echuca. On these occasions, it's always over Anzac

27:30 that we meet and that feller I've pointed out a couple of times, Lou Rishen, and myself, we've each done it three times, I think, which is a fair whack of the times, but they treat us very well. This year they gave us a civic reception and the RSL [Returned and Services League]

28:00 down there gives us a dinner and that's, you know, and we spend about four days telling lies to each other. Now you've got to be careful. You've got to say to the feller, "Now, were you on the ship when we went to so and so?" And when he says, "No," you say, "Good, I can speak with impunity," you know. But it's great to get together and we're all afraid that the one

28:30 we've had this year might be the last. It's our last official one that we're going to. If we can, in two years' time, unofficially go down there and meet. And they come from everywhere. One feller's never missed; comes from Western Australia. There's a couple of them come over, but one's been a bit sick and didn't make it. Come up from Tasmania. One feller's been coming up from,

29:00 poor old Todd, he was coming up from Tasmania in a wheelchair. Another one, Bob, actually he's the only feller that's improved in his health since we've been meeting, and he was in calipers and with crutches. Then he away with the callipers and crutches, and then next thing I see he's on two sticks.

29:30 This time he's only got one stick and doesn't use it all the time, so he's got a bit better. I'm afraid the rest of us have deteriorated quite a bit.

How important is Anzac Day to you and your mates?

Now it's very important, very, very. Actually, I did a bit of research into Anzac Day this year

30:00 through the website, the War Memorial, and I learnt a bit more about it and how it really started and such and it was very, very quick after ANZAC, [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps] actually, that they got the thing going. They had various items, the jolly things they did playing cricket and God knows what

30:30 over in the desert, but the main thing with me is, you know, that's the time I see my mates at Echuca over Anzac. But I'm pleased that there's a resurgence in the interest, the young people that are interested, and the

31:00 young adults these days, and the crowds are getting bigger and bigger down at Echuca every year. The little park that they've got where they have it behind the council chambers just isn't big enough now. It used to be plenty big enough but. And mercifully each year they make the march a little shorter and a little shorter, and until this year they were making it slower and slower as well.

31:30 But this year one of the fellers that, a chap that lives down there who has become a very good friend of all of us, Hank Horsvell, he was in the band and he used to keep it back to a nice steady march. But Hank's not well enough now to march so they've got younger people, and they're starting to race and it's no good to us.

32:00 I had trouble, I can tell you, this year with the ankle and I needed a stick. They insulted me though. They offered me a wheelchair. No way. But I hope to go again.

Well, Ossie, we're probably coming to the end of the interview now. But before we do finish, I'm wondering if you have anything that you'd like to add that hasn't already been said today?

32:30 Well, I don't know. I think you've drained me. I don't think there's anything that you've missed that I could say. I if I was young and it was on, I'd do it again. Perhaps I'd have stayed in longer. They did write to me about three

33:00 times after I got out and asked me would I go back for another year, and I wasn't game even to reply to the letter and say no, because I thought they might be like that feller that said, well you know, "If she says no, she immediately means yes." And I thought, "No, they might misconstrue that and say it's yes." So I didn't bother answering. In a way I'm sorry, but I owed a debt to the employer to finish my time.

33:30 I had a debt as far as I was concerned to repat because of the way they'd supported me. I couldn't give it up while they were doing what they were doing. And then when we got wed and I thought. "Well, that's it. There's no chance of going back now." But, as I say, if it was on I'd do it again.

34:00 Particularly, too, because I was lucky. I never got scratched. My war wounds are on my arms and I've got them now 50 years afterwards and I don't want any more of them. They give you hell, but I've been lucky with them though. Only one wasn't malignant and only once they didn't get it all, but they had a second chop at it and they got it the second time, so…

You're referring, of course, to your

34:30 **skin cancers that you've got, yeah?**

Yeah, and they weren't too bad, the skin grafts themselves, but where they took the skin from, there's a big one there and he took a big piece out of there then he just pulled it altogether with stitches. And they went round and round and round like a spring, just the one piece, did it up. Then, when they

35:00 took the stitches out, they just cut this end and they pull that end and it unwinds inside.

Lovely.

Yeah, real good. And actually, I taught them something cause I've had, I think I've had one that was the donor site, and I think four from that side. And the last time he had a look at that

35:30 and he said, "No, I'll take it from here. Don't want much I'll take it from there. We'll save that for later." Said, "Oh yeah, thanks a lot." But with this big one, it hurts on there, so I went in for a redressing and the sister, never seen that before. I said to my wife, "Go over the road and buy me a packet of the biggest sanitary pads you can get." I put that on there it was lovely, like a pillow.

36:00 So the sister said, "I'm going to spread the word about that." And it gave me that relief, but it's terrible. That bit hardly hurt at all but.

Well, Ossie, thank you so much for sharing your story with us today. On behalf of the war Archive and Graham and myself, we'd like to thank you for sharing your story and the incredible detail that you had was quite amazing. And

36:30 **we really appreciate you welcoming us into your home and for the lovely steak and kidney pie.**

Look, it's great. I only hope that you get something out of it.

Yeah, we definitely have.

You know there's none of this wild, shoot 'em up adventure or anything like that, but there's a bit, I s'pose, about how we lived.

It's wonderful, wonderful detail.

And that was it. I'm sorry I didn't get, didn't realise that, that I

37:00 would have got young Catherine's interview and showed you because it was very good. And not as detailed by any means, but very, very much along these lines. So thank you. Thank you for coming. I'd like to get hold of the bloke that dobbed me in and thank him.

Good, good we're glad you enjoyed it. Thank you very much.