

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Harry Bentley (Benny or Junior) - Transcript of interview

**Date of interview: 10th October 2003**

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/924>

**Some parts of this interview  
have been embargoed.**

The embargoed portions are  
noted in the transcript and video.

### Tape 1

- 00:42 Good morning everyone. My name is Harry Bentley and I was born in Victoria on November 23rd 1923. I'm coming up, with a bit of luck to eighty next November. I was one of two children. There was my brother and I.
- 01:00 We came from a middle class family and I was brought up in Brighton, Victoria. I had a very happy childhood even though things were tough at certain times due to the Depression. I've been asked if I can relate some of the things that have stuck in my mind. The earliest memory I can recall is being in a room, which I assume was a hospital room
- 01:30 with my Dad holding me and my mother breast feeding my younger brother who had just been born. His name was Kenneth and he was two years younger than me and he's been deceased for about 8 years. He died in Queensland. We lived in Brighton and most of the people in our street were ex-servicemen from World War I. My Dad had an injury and he was unable to participate.
- 02:00 But he was a good man and my Mum was one of the finest ladies I've ever met. Some of the things that I recall in younger days. I was doing things I shouldn't have been doing. My Mum was pretty strong on discipline and things I shouldn't have done and I knew it and I would be whacked with a clothes brush which really hurt. Dad never struck us but Mum was the
- 02:30 disciplinarian. At the age of around about six or seven I developed whooping cough which was a real problem in those days. I found it very distressing and it was practically incurable in my case anyway. In those days my grandmother was living with us at the time and
- 03:00 she used a number of cures to try and get me going. She cut up garlic and she knitted me bed socks and she put the garlic in my bed socks and I had to sleep with that in, but I still had the whooping cough. My Dad took me out to Essendon Aerodrome. The thought was that if I got up high in the aeroplane that might get rid of the whooping cough. Then my grandmother hit on a brilliant idea. I don't know where the hell she got it from
- 03:30 but she took me down to the Brighton Gas Works and there I was introduced to a big labouring man about six foot six tall, and he had a steel pipe about six to eight feet long, and it was about a foot in diameter. He put that into the furnace, one end was red hot, and when he pulled it out he put it into a bucket of tar and the smoke
- 04:00 which was generated came out from there and I had to breathe it in. I breathed it in all right and I fainted and when I woke up I couldn't talk. My vocal cords had been damaged and I was left speechless for about 7 or 8 years. My grandmother was a bit upset about that but not as much as me though. So to a certain extent I became a bit of an introvert.
- 04:30 I could speak if you listened to me very closely and put your ear up to my mouth. You could hear me. It was a real problem at school. I was educated firstly at a convent. My Mum was a Catholic and Dad was a good Mason and they got on well together. I went to this convent and it was just so so as far as me participating in games and things like that, but I got by. Later on in life

- 05:00 I think about eight or nine I was moved to another school, the Christian Brothers College at St Kilda and it was a problem not being able to speak, particularly in lessons when we took it in turns to read. The Brother would say skip him. But I was just an average
- 05:30 pupil but the first year I came second in my class which wasn't too bad. I was very keen on cricket and sport and footy and those things. I was aged around about 14 and all of a sudden I was whispering to someone and this terrible noise came out. My voice had broken and I could talk and I nearly wet myself.
- 06:00 So that was something that wasn't so hot for me.

**What was your family's reaction when you got home and you could speak again?**

It was hilarious. My poor grandmother had died since and she missed out on it. But my Dad...we had a phone on. I think we were about the only house in the street with a phone. He phoned up his brothers and everybody. So

- 06:30 that was that. I was a normal pupil. I got into strife. Bill Matheson who's photo I'd like to show you later on was my special mate, and a bloke by the name of Bill McDonald, he was a special mate. We were all about the same age. They both went to private schools, or public schools as they call them in Melbourne. Bill Matheson went to Scotch College and Bill McDonald went to Wesley.
- 07:00 I was the only Mick [Catholic] and they were good Presbyterians or Methodists or whatever. But we were great coppers. Some of the little tricks we used to get up to...would be nick knocking. What we would do would be to get a long piece of cotton and tie it on the knocker of a door in one of the neighbours houses and get down behind the fence and pull it. Bang bang bang the knocker would go off and everyone would come out
- 07:30 and look and they couldn't find anything. But then they did and they'd chase us like buggery. Another little thing we used to get up to which was quite dangerous actually was we'd get a piece of wood about six inches by twelve inches and wrap it up in nice brown paper and take it up to the Nepean Highway and put it on the road and drive a four inch nail through it. The motorists would stop
- 08:00 and go back to pick it up and they couldn't get it off the road and we'd be behind the fence laughing our heads off. Another little trick we used to get up to too was up at the corner of Nepean Highway and Cambridge Street there was a colonel who lived in the house there and he didn't like us very much. There was a low brick fence there and we'd get down behind that because there was a milk bar just close by and when anyone walked passed in the night time, we'd drop a penny on a brick and they would think they had dropped some money.
- 08:30 They'd go and get their torches...because a penny was a penny in those days. So they were the sort of pranks that we got up to, but as I got a bit older I saw the light. But they were good days.

**What about sports and things? You mentioned cricket and ...**

Yes. We had our own cricket team. The Hurlingham Eleven.

- 09:00 I was known as the fast bowler from Dimboola because it was on radio. My best score was six wickets for eight and I wasn't a bad batsman. When I went to college I played cricket in the Under fourteens. Then a new sports master came and he saw me batting and he said I didn't have to go to practice. He said I was in the team, the Under Fifteens which was the Second Eleven for the school.
- 09:30 So instead of training I used to go down to St Moritz in the afternoon and do ice skating with the girls at St Michael's. When he found out about that I got six of the best and I got dropped from the Under Fifteens. But I was not a bad cricketer. I played Australian Rules football. I was average but I was a trier. I did play handball.
- 10:00 I was open school champion in doubles for handball at the college I went too. By this time I was about fifteen and the war had commenced and I said to my Mum one night when I was doing my homework, "Do you reckon the war will last long enough for me to get there?"
- 10:30 She had lost a brother in World War I and she said, "I'm afraid it will. I would hope it wouldn't but I'm afraid it will." In those days we were very patriotic. All my generation was and I'm sure the current Australians are as well. But I was keen on joining the air force. I was always mad on model aeroplanes
- 11:00 and I enlisted at age seventeen in the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. I did my medicals and was passed and took the oath. I was put on Air Crew Reserve. The Air Crew Reserve required training after hours. I've skipped a bit, about my job. I'll come back to that. In the Air Crew Reserve we were trained at Hampton High School. The Headmaster used to work
- 11:30 after hours in the evening to get us through twenty-one lessons before we were accepted into the air force. We needed to get up to eight words a minute in Morse code and the post master at Brighton used to take us for that on Saturday mornings. When I left school...to get a job it was pretty difficult because the
- 12:00 first job I applied for was at John's and Waygood. They were a big steel company in Melbourne. I applied for a job as a junior clerk. The interviews were from nine o'clock in the morning. I thought I'd

get there early. I got there at eight thirty and the queue stretched from John's and Waygood across Spencer Street to the station. There were about five hundred people in the queue. By the time I got to my interview, the poor old chief clerk was saying, "Look son, all I can do is take names."

12:30 We only want one and I've got five hundred applicants. So that was how tough it was to get a job then. Through some friends of my Dad's I eventually got a job as a junior tally clerk working on the wharves down in Melbourne. My first job was to boil the billy for the blokes on the wharf.

13:00 I used to start work at seven thirty in the morning and work to five o'clock and I got twelve and six a week for that. I got tired of that after a while. I wanted to have a little more of a sedate existence so I applied for a job as a junior clerk at the Australian Dairy Produce Corporation and I was lucky enough to be selected.

13:30 Mum bought a new suit for me and I paid her back for that and my salary dropped to 10 shillings a week but I was working in Phosphate House in Collins Street and I thought that was good. I was there until I was called up for service in the RAAF.

### **Can you**

14:00 **remember the war breaking out? Can you remember hearing about it?**

I vaguely remember hearing about it, yes.

### **How did you hear about it?**

It was in the newspaper and on the radio. We had a radio in those days. My first introduction into radio was when my grandfather was alive. He used to bring a crystal set down and my Mum and Dad and he and my brother would sit around the table and listen to the Test [cricket]

14:30 from England...or it was supposed to be from England but it was all done by a bloke named Charlie Vord, and...I forget the other fellas name. They'd pretend they were broadcasting from England but it was just done by telephone. As far as the war was concerned, the newspapers I think was the first I heard. I got home from school and

15:00 mum was appalled. And I didn't know just what to think then. I had very strong views on...particularly about the refugees coming from Europe. The Jewish lads who got out of Germany just in time and they told some horrible stories even then.

15:30 Do you want anything more about before war stuff now?

### **Oh yes. At home did you have any chores or that? Did you get pocket money?**

I had chores to do, not much. Just make my bed and things like that.

16:00 It was a very relaxed household. My Dad was battling in his job. He was in business with his father and they made badges. Some of his clients in those days were the Melbourne Cricket Club and a lot of sporting bodies etc. He was a heavy smoker. If you followed him...we had an outside toilet, and

16:30 after he had been out there you couldn't see for the smoke. He had a stroke when I was around about five and he lost the use of his left side, his arms and legs. And that made it a big problem for him to roll his cigarettes. So we used to help him roll his cigarettes. He bought a machine and we rolled his cigarettes for him. He eventually recovered from that

17:00 but went backwards. I found out later on, post war, when he died that I had not only a first mortgage to fix up for Mum but a second and a third mortgage. He was really in the shit financially. He had another stroke post war and he died.

17:30 **What about with the Depression, was food a bit scarce?**

Yes food was fairly scarce, good food. A bread and dripping sandwich was something we had with pepper and salt on it to give it a bit of flavour. My grandmother who was good at these things, she used to fry bread and we would get fried bread and dripping.

18:00 That was a meal. My Mum was born in Bendigo, which is a regional town in Victoria. She had a lot of friends up there on farms so during the school holidays we would go up to Bendigo and stay with these people on the farm. They'd fatten us up a bit, my brother and I. We went through the polio epidemic which thank goodness, we don't have these days. Schools were closed and a lot of kids I knew got polio.

18:30 They were walking around in leg irons and some were in iron lungs. We used to communicate by making bows and arrows and my mates about three houses up did the same, and we used to put notes in the arrows and fire them over three properties. We broke a few windows and that was hit on the head unfortunately.

19:00 But they were good old days, they really were. They always say your school days were the best. I couldn't agree at the time but they were.

### **Right, if you would like to go back to joining up?**

Well I enlisted in the RAAF as I mentioned and eventually I was called up. The day after I left Mum said there was a Military Policeman knocking on the front door from the army

19:30 looking for me because conscription had just come in then. She told them they had missed me. That I had joined up a long time ago but I had only been called up yesterday. I went into Lanes Motors where we had to meet and we were put in trucks and we were ferried down to a place called Somers which was 1ITS, the Initial Training School. When we got there they found they weren't quite ready for us so

20:00 after we unpacked everything, we got packed up again and my course was sent down...my course that is...I was Number twenty-seven course. I don't know how many were in the course. There could have been about fifty I would say. So we were sent down to Sale. We were given what they called goon suits and berets. That's about all we got. We went down to Sale and did what they called tarmac duty

20:30 down there. Tarmac and guard duty. We were all aged eighteen, most of us, although there were some older blokes in their thirties.

**This was before you had done...**

Yes, we hadn't even started.

**Why was that?**

Because they weren't ready for us at the Initial Training School. There had been a bit of a stuff up apparently. They thought, what are we going to do with them? So we were shot down to Sale on the East coast of Victoria about two hundred kilometres

21:00 from Melbourne I think. There was a bombing and air gunnery school there. Orchademen [?] aeroplanes, which were old bi-planes. They had a few ammunition dumps down there and fuel dumps. Our job was too...the first job was a crook job. It was winter and the mountains were not far away and there was snow on them.

21:30 We had to get up at 6 o'clock every morning and when they ran up the Orchademens which was a bi-plane with a tail dragging wheel, two Erks [aircrew ground staff] - which was us at the time - had to lay over the tail plane to keep it down so it wouldn't go up. It was freezing and it was a great place to get piles. You had this freezing backwash from the props.

22:00 We did that for probably 2 weeks on roster. One amusing incident that I can recall was a bloke named Frank McCarthy. His Dad later on was (UNCLEAR) Commission for Victoria. He was in charge of the parachutes and he had to hand the parachutes out to the pilots. One time he handed the parachute up to the pilot by the rip cord and the bloody thing went off and he got seven days for that. Then

22:30 there was another chap named Bob McIntyre on guard duty. He went to sleep on guard. All he was guarding were forty-four gallon drums. Nobody was going to knock them off. But we had to guard them and we weren't used to it. At that stage we hadn't fired a 303 rifle which we were given. But the orderly officer came around and found him asleep so he was court martialled and that was the last we ever saw of him.

23:00 After having survived that we were sent back to Somers and we were training on Number 28 course. The thing I remember more than anything was...we were first of all given a great big bag, a hessian bag which we filled up with straw and that was our mattress. We were given blankets etc. We were put in a great big hut...about thirty of us in a hut. We were divided into Flights...A, B, C and D Flight.

23:30 There would have been about sixty of us at that stage. We were introduced to the commanding officer. A bloke by the name of Bill Forrester and he was a tough auctioneer in Melbourne. He told us what he expected of us and how life would be. That we would be toughened up

24:00 We were introduced to the DIs, drill instructors and WOD, a warrant officer, disciplinary. The nicest bloke I met down there was a Salvation army man. He was very kind and very friendly. But we were excited until I went to the toilet. I couldn't believe it. Down one row there were about ten seats and there were no partitions up and

24:30 that was a bit embarrassing to me. I used to ...until I got caught I used to go in the NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] because they had divisions up. And this corporal DI [Drill Instructor] said... AC2 [Aircraftman Grade 2] was my rank. That was the lowest rank in the air force. He said, "If I catch you in our toilets again I'll put you on a charge." So that fixed me. I just had to sit down and talk to the next bloke.

25:00 But it was a bit embarrassing. It wasn't as bad as when I got to Sale, but I'll tell you about that later. We did various subjects there. The educational side didn't worry me too much. I had got to Intermediate Standard and I was just an average pupil. But I got through that okay. We had PT [Physical Training]

25:30 and we were very fit. I remember Sir Hubert Opperman. Does that ring a bell with you? Later on he was Sir Hubert, a great cyclist. We were intense for a while, and a bloke named Bill Dewire. He was inclined to swear a bit. And Opperman came around and said, "If I ever hear that man swear again I'll put him on a charge." So that fixed Bill. But I met Sir Hubert later on in life

26:00 because he and I were in the same Rotary Club down in St Kilda. But that was quite a few years ago. We had various medicals there for eyesight and we were categorised at the end of our stint down there into 3 categories. There was pilot – everyone wanted to be a pilot) – there was an observer which was the navigator; and wireless operator, air gunner. There were only 3 categories you could be. I was fortunate.

26:30 I was categorised as a pilot and I was posted to a place called Temora, to the Elementary Flying Training School up there on Tiger Moths. That was interesting. I had my first beer up there in the pub and we used to enjoy good steaks at the Greek Café. That was a good healthy life up there. It was a great day when I...

27:00 I had a very tough instructor. A bloke named Sergeant McGilvray. He sent me solo and it was a strange feeling. The instructor used to always sit in front in the Tiger Moth and the pupil behind. When I took off the thing that amazed me was I couldn't see his head, so I really knew I was by myself.

### **What was the Tiger Moth training like?**

27:30 Well as you put through normal student pilots today. First of all they took you for a familiarisation flight to see if you were going to be sick and if you were then out. You weren't going to be any good. We used to go up. One of the first things we had to do were spins because

28:00 it's a little aerobatic aeroplane the Tiger Moth believe it or not and they spun very quickly and easily. You had to sign a statement...it's in my pilot's logbook, saying I had been shown how to recover from a spin. During the course of my training up there I think we lost three pupils and three instructors. I think the instructors were doing spins and I think the pupils froze on the controls. I went to my

28:30 first air force funeral up there. That was a bit distressing. He was a young sergeant pilot and the LAC [Leading Aircraftsman]... we had been promoted from AC2 to LAC which was Leading Aircraft Man...his wife was at the funeral and she jumped in on top of the coffin in the grave. So that was very distressing. So that was my first taste of death. We did

29:00 steep turns, aerobatics, slow rolls. When you put the Tiger Moth on its back to do a slow roll the engine stops and we hadn't been warned about that. It was a gravity-feed tank and you have to start it again hopefully. On a windy day with a head wind, we had to have the Erks ...now the Erks...we called them Erks but they were the mechanics.

29:30 You would be coming in with a headwind so the Erks would grab both wing tips to help keep it down. So that was an interesting factor. The course was divided into...when you first went there you flew in the mornings because the atmosphere was usually more stable and not windy. But half way through your course you did

30:00 afternoon flying and night flying. I didn't go solo at night-time. It wasn't a pre-requisite. I did nearly... with the instructor. We landed on the main street of Temora. We got the main street mixed up with the Flare Path. But that was his fault as well as mine. We were almost down to a couple of hundred feet at he said, "Shit."

30:30 So I passed out of Temora with only one charge against my name which was a bit...pitiful I thought. Four of us went down to Sydney on leave half way through our course. We had to hand all our cameras in when first got there. So we picked up our cameras when we went to Sydney. I met a lovely lass there who, as it turned out I thought I could have married.

31:00 Her name was Gwen Smedley. I met her at ice skating. When we came back I was probably thinking about her and I forgot to hand my camera in. I had it in my kit bag and the sergeant said, "LAC Bentley you're wanted in the adjutant's office." I went up there and he said, "LAC where is your camera?" I said, "I forgot to hand it in. I'll get it for you now." He said, "You're on a charge."

31:30 So I was charged before the commanding officer, marched up and got seven days loss of pay for not handing my camera in. In England you could have cameras in the war. But we did have a very fine commanding officer. Wing Commander Hal Hardy. He was a man in his late fifties even then. But he was a great CO. He just did what he had to do.

32:00 Then at the end of that course you were recategorised again. After you had done your initial flying training the opportunity was to go onto either multi engines or single engines. Everybody wanted to be single engines because that meant you had the possibility of being a fighter pilot. Multi engines went onto Air Speed Oxfords and they were posted to Point Cook.

32:30 Those who went onto Wirraways went to Uranquinty. I was classified as a single engine pilot so I was posted to Five Service Flying Training School just outside Wagga Wagga. It was a big jump from the Tiger Moth to the Wirraway I can tell you. That was an interesting episode up there.

33:00 We did a lot of things we shouldn't have done in Wirraways too. We used to dive the Wirraways. I think the top speed you were supposed to dive them was at three hundred miles per hour, and I know some of us were driving them closer to four hundred. You got up high enough and put the power on. And then you pulled out your Black (UNCLEAR) which was fun, the

33:30 Gs [gravity] would take the blood from your head. We lost about four blokes there doing things they shouldn't have been doing of course. We were dog-fighting but we didn't know anything about it. I think there were four killed on our course. I managed to get through. I had one dicey experience. We had to do air-to-ground gunnery and we would fly out to a range. We had a Vickers gun on the cowling and we would fire through the propeller. And on this occasion when I was doing it something went wrong and

34:00 the bullet made a hole in the prop and it was very, very rough. But I got back okay. But it was a bit unpleasant.

**Did they do a bit of an investigation as to why that happened?**

Yes they did but I didn't hear anything more about it. I saw the aeroplane go in the hole which was a big jagged. It had been filed and made to look neat.

**How did that effect the performance of the aircraft?**

Oh it was running very rough but it was okay. I got back okay.

34:30 And that was that. I had a rather...the Wirraway was a very unforgiving aeroplane. We had to do night flying on the Wirraways as well. And I can recall flying at night and the flare path we had were kerosene lamps. I did about three circuits with the instructor and then he said I could go solo.

35:00 If you got below a certain speed on the Wirraway it was inclined to stall a wing and you could pick that up with full power and opposite rudder to get the speed in that wing. I took off and by the time I got up to what we would call cross wind...there had been a dust storm which had blown out the flare path. So I had no radio

35:30 and I didn't know how I was going to go. There were two lights on so I did my normal circuit and there was no radio of course in those days. I got a green light from the officer in charge of night flying, which meant I could land. How I found the fence I don't know. But I remember coming over the fence and just as I

36:00 was coming over the fence I felt a flicker in the wing so I knew I was in trouble. So I pushed full power on and opposite rudder and I got out okay. He congratulated me on that. He said I had nearly got into strife. One of my best friends who had done a tour with the Rats of Tobruk in the Middle East came back and transferred to the air force. He once did the same thing night flying in a Wirraway and he did stall and

36:30 the plane went over and his head was just hanging out and his head hit the ground and his neck was broken. He was a paraplegic for the rest of his life. That would have happened when he was about thirty and he died when he was fifty-five. I passed my Wing's Test and this was when I got into more strife.

37:00 After you did your Wing's Test you went to an Advanced Service Flying Training. It was on the same drome but a different area. The CFI who was the Chief Flying Instructor did several progressive checks with different ones. He did spot checks, probably to see if we were up to standard. Anyway I was lucky enough to draw him and

37:30 since then I've never been very comfortable with CFIs. After we got in and taxied out he said, "Take off LAC and climb to eight thousand feet." This I did and he said, "I want you to do a slow roll." I said, "Okay Sir." I did a mandatory three hundred and sixty degree circle so I could check down to see there was nothing below us and nothing above.

38:00 When I had done that I said to him "I'm going to do a slow roll to the right" and that's when the trouble started. He said, "Why are you going to do a slow roll to the right?" This was all talking through the tube. There was no radio so you had to yell and sometimes you could hear him properly and sometimes you couldn't.

38:30 He said, "That's the more difficult of the two." When I was saying Tiger Moths, my instructor gave me a tip. Everyone did a slow roll to the left. You would just put your hand on the wheel and just push it over. But he said if you going to do one to the right I'll show you a trick. He said invert your hand like that and then you've got the leverage and you can do it that way. So I practiced both and I could do them okay. So I said, "I feel quite okay sir about doing one to the right."

39:00 He said, "I'm not too happy about that, I think you should do it to the left." I said, "I'd like to have a go to the right if it's okay with you sir?" But then I forgot something. I should have said, 'Hatches and harness secure.' And I didn't say that and he wasn't strapped in properly. So I went into the slow roll and I heard a terrible screaming at the back. I see hairy legs hanging upside down. He didn't fall out of the aeroplane because his canopy was up, but I stopped.

39:30 I got thrown off track with the patter between us. I really, actually think he should have been strapped in but he wasn't and if he had fallen out he had a seat pack on and he would have been okay I guess if the parachute had opened. But he was furious as you can imagine. He was a squadron leader and I was a Leading Aircraftman. He said, "Turn to base." He used words I hadn't heard before. So instead of getting into the circuit at one thousand feet,

- 40:00 I did the circuit at two thousand feet. I had the Jo Blakes - the shakes - after having gone through that. I knew if I put the nose down I would be breaking the rules, so I side slipped in to get into the one thousand foot area and I came in and did a landing and he said, "LAC your flying training has been terminated as of now."
- 40:30 So that was a great kick in the arse I can tell you. I was very disappointed but anyway, I'm still here to talk about it so he might have done me a favour. When that happened, everyone was sympathetic towards me, my mates. I was given a temporary job in the kitchen at the officers' mess. That was rubbing in the salt a bit I thought. My boss there was a sergeant and they called him Mum Smith. I have no idea why but he was a
- 41:00 bit gay I think you would say these days. He had two offsidiers. One named Sparrow who hated officers and he me turned off rissoles forever because when he used to make the rissoles he would spit in them. So I didn't eat rissoles for a long, long time after that. I was paraded in front of the chief ground leader who was a squadron leader, a very nice bloke too. He said, "Bad luck Bentley. You were going quite well
- 41:30 there too." I said, "What have you got in mind for me Sir?" And he said, "We're going to make a jolly good navigator out of you." I said, "How long do you think that will be sir?" And he said, "About nine months training." I said, "Are there any other options available?" So he said, "There is a shortage of air gunners in the United Kingdom and they are in dire need of them." So I said, "How long does that course take?"
- 42:02 End of tape

## Tape 2

- 00:34 I said to him, "Is there any other options?" And he said, "Well they're very short of air gunners in the UK." And I know now, I can tell you for why. The Lancaster, the Stirling and other aeroplanes were coming in and they had an extra turret in them so they needed an extra gunner for that. And so I said, "How long will that course be sir?" And he said, "Six weeks." So I said, "Would you mind recommending me for that?" And he said, "Done."
- 01:00 Believe it or not in a couple of days time I'm posted down to 3 Bomber and air gunnery School at Sale which is where I started off doing the tarmac duties. We were on Fairey Battles. How it operated there, we were given extreme...that's not the right word...very effective instruction
- 01:30 on the 303 Browning. That was the gun we would be used in England. But as far as practical services were concerned, we used Fairey Battles. The Fairey Battle was an underpowered, medium bomber and they used them in France up until Dunkirk. Most of them got shot down because they were ineffective against the Messerschmitt and anything else that the Germans threw up against them.
- 02:00 They shot a lot of them out to Australia for training. Incidentally I should at this stage say, air gunners. There was not actually a section for air gunners in aircrew. As I mentioned there were the pilots, observers and wireless operators. The air gunner was the lowest of the low as far as pay was concerned. They were what they called Group Five.
- 02:30 The pilots were Group One, the observers were Group Two and wireless operators I think were Group Four and air gunners were those who had not been able to complete the wireless section of the course and they were Group Five. And the only thing they could do with them was to make them air gunners. So when I got to Sale I was a one-of because all the others were scrubbed wireless operators and
- 03:00 there were about one hundred of them and I had to roam around and do my own check ins. You had to go to the dental section and medical and get signatures and everything. Then we started our training, mainly on the Browning guns. We did firing with the .303 Enfield rifle and we used on the Battle what they called the Vickers Go Gun. They were a single barrel machine gun with a drum that went on the top like
- 03:30 the old Lewis guns from World War I. We would go up...there was the pilot and two gunners. There was no place to sit. You just stood up there. You each had three magazines. My magazine for example would have green tipped bullets on and his would have red tipped bullets on. And the other Fairey Battle would fly a drogue some distance away and we would take it in turns to shoot at the drogue. At
- 04:00 the end of the day they'd count up the red spots on the drogue and the green spots and they would know who was the better shot and you would be classified accordingly. I think I was just average. On our third trip we were flying...I can't remember the number of the aircraft but the pilot
- 04:30 was a Sergeant John Mulholland and for take off we used to just lay flat on the floor at the back because there were no seats or anything and being experienced with some thirty-five hours in command in Wirraways I had a bit of an idea and I think he might not have run up as much as he should have, in my opinion. So we took off and we were heading towards the coast where we would pick up the drogue.
- 05:00 We were at a height of about three thousand feet and all of a sudden the engine stopped and the Fairey

Battle used to glide like a brick. There was no communication between the pilot and us so I said to Huey...Huey Berch was his name. I said to Huey, "Nick up and see what the pilot's got to say." He came back and he was putting his parachute on and he's got one leg over the side and he said, "Bail out." So I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him back and said, "You can't, we're only about two hundred

- 05:30 feet above the deck. "We've got to ride it out." So the pilot dropped the undercarriage which I thought was a bit strange, but I couldn't see and he was captain of the aircraft and ahead he must have seen a place where he could land it. I was hanging onto the base of the gun and Huey, I think he got up in the front somewhere to brace himself. I was standing up at the time.
- 06:00 Unfortunately when the wheels were dropped, the right one hit a stump and it broke off so instead of going straight ahead we did a ninety degree turn to the right and we headed into a forest and we lost both wings. Luckily we didn't hit anything head on but the Fairey Battle was built a bit like a tank, but we lost both wings and boy what a disaster that was.
- 06:30 We got all right but I was bleeding profusely from there. As you can see I've still got a scar from hanging on. I hurt my neck quite badly and later on it was to be shown I had a hair line fracture of the 3rd vertebrae. But I was only 18 and so it healed fairly well. When we got out the sergeant said, "Do any of you blokes smoke?" He wanted to put a light to it see. So we said, "No sarge [Sergeant] we don't smoke, sorry."
- 07:00 We weren't recovered. The other drogue aircraft saw us go down and circled around. That would have been about eight o'clock in the morning and we were recovered about nine or ten o'clock at night. We were taken back to the base. I remember we were first taken to the First Aid Post
- 07:30 and there was a party on at the officers mess and of course these two doctors arrived and they said, "You two blokes look all right." And we said, "Yes we're all right sir." He looked at my hand and said, "I don't think we'll bother stitching that up. We'll put a plaster on it." My neck was pretty sore but I didn't want to say too much about that because I didn't want to miss out on the course.
- 08:00 Anyway the next night I could hardly move my neck. It was very sore. I was sleeping next to a bloke by the name of Johnny Shields and he was at the time a welter weight boxing champion. He said, "What you need is some ice on that Harry." So he went up and saw the cooks and put ice packs on my head. That eased things a lot
- 08:30 and it wasn't too bad. I'm going to divert a bit here because I previously mentioned toilet. I was accustomed to using the communal toilets, but down at Sale they didn't have seats on them so all you had was the porcelain and that threw us a bit. You just had to squat and you couldn't sit. I found out later on why.
- 09:00 I completed my course pretty well down there. I was the Course Captain and the training area was a long way from the mess and I had to march these 100 odd blokes up and back and I was good at my job. In the finish we were all expected to pass out as sergeants and there were a couple of dropouts, but I was commissioned
- 09:30 which was very unusual. I was still eighteen and air gunners just didn't get commissioned. I think the fact that I had had thirty-five hours in command on Wirraways showed some leadership qualities and the took that into account and I got commissioned as pilot officer. All the instructors down there were very happy. They made sure I got my things sewn on and they took me
- 10:00 into the sergeants' mess and brought me drinks and everything. I was a very mediocre drinker. I would have about three glasses of beer only in those days. But I did mention to Wing Commander Mann who was on the Selection Board for the officers and a Group Captain Bob Dolton. Bob Dolton I got to know later on. He led an expedition to the Antarctic and Bill Mann the wing commander
- 10:30 worked in the Department of Civil Aviation as one of the safety officers. I said, "Just one thing Sir, the toilets." He said, "Oh yes, the toilets in the ranks. No seats. But ever since we took the seats off we haven't had one case of crabs and that's a big plus."
- 11:00 So I in due course was sent home and everyone was thrilled. I had been given an officer's uniform by then. They paraded me up and down to the neighbours. Next door one of my finest mates, a man by the name of Ian Kenross was in the second last cadet course to go into the air force before the war. The permanent air force that is.
- 11:30 He was a flying officer, a pilot and so he was one of the first to congratulate me and he said, "Bloody air gunner pilot officer!" He became a squadron leader later on. He was a bit like me. He had a few problems and was a bit of a wild man. He died last year actually and his name is in the Australian History.
- 12:00 He shot down a Japanese bomber and he took over as CO to 77 Squadron after Bluey Truscott. He was my mentor and hero. It's great to be classified with him. Anyway I got six days leave and I was out at a place called Ascotvale. That was Number 1ED Embarkation Depot.
- 12:30 It got round that I was on my way to the UK [United Kingdom] and my two mates, Bill McDonald and



Bill Matheson...both deceased now. Bill as I mentioned to you was killed by a Japanese sniper at age nineteen and he was a fine boy. He was the last to shake my hand at Flinders Street Station and my Mum gave me a kiss and she had never kissed me before like that in her life. She never expected to see me again. And we headed

- 13:00 to Sydney to Number 2 Embarkation Depot. Then we were marched down to the docks and we got on a ship, a United States ship called the USS Mount Vernon. It was an American troop ship. The thing that I remember most of that was passing through the harbour and seeing the Sydney Harbour Bridge and wondering if I would ever see that again.
- 13:30 Our first port of call was Auckland in New Zealand. We picked up a lot of American marines there to take them back to the United States. The trip to America was uneventful. It was an American navy crew and it had a captain by the name of Power. I can remember that. Being an officer I was put in the wardroom. That's what they call the mess over there in the navy.
- 14:00 I got a hell of a shock. I was sitting at the table and a big black hand came over, putting the soup in front of me. It was a negro steward. I lived very well. My poor mates, the sergeants...we were all mates because we had trained together. They were in hammocks right down in the bowels of the ship. It was terribly hot. I was in a cabin, but I used to occasionally go out and sleep on top of the deck with them, just to keep the association going.
- 14:30 They weren't air gunners but three pilots I had trained with down in Somers. One day apparently the order came through that they didn't want the Aussie's sleeping on top of the deck so some United States sailors came down with some hoses and just hosed the deck down. The next
- 15:00 problem I got into was sticking up for some sergeants. When we went across the Meridian they had King Neptune up there. I was fined because I was Motor Magnet...the name Bentley, Bentley motor cars. And I was put on a thing and they shaved me and then dumped me in a pool. And the sergeants weren't involved in that but they got hold of the hose...
- 15:30 all the hierarchy of the American navy were sitting up at the front of this enjoying themselves and our blokes turned the hose on them. Some of them got it right in the chest. And they called out the Marines and our blokes were put in the brig [prison]. Our flight lieutenant, the escort officer, I think he had a heart attack. I'm sure he finished up with ulcers. His name was Flight Lieutenant Cook
- 16:00 and he was what we called a shiny arse. He was a ground crew bloke and he was the escort officer for all us blokes and boy he had his hands full, there's no two ways about that. Actually his problems hadn't really started. We got to San Francisco and we disembarked there and we were put on a train to go across America to the East Coast where
- 16:30 we went to a place called Miles Standish. The trip across on the train was very interesting. We stopped on occasions and met some of the people. We would get out and I found that a lot of the American people didn't know much about Australia. They wanted to know what the roads were like and we said we didn't have any roads, we came by ship. Then there were Mormons.
- 17:00 They were very friendly and they still had quite a few wives over there. Salt Lake City. We got to New York and then we were posted up to Massachusetts to a United States Army Camp called Camp Miles Standish. In the meantime, poor old Flight Lieutenant Cook...five of the blokes shot through at San Francisco to see the States privately.
- 17:30 So they hitch hiked across the States. I don't know where they got to. One of them was Bill Tooey. He's deceased now but he went onto Sunderland Flying Boats. He sunk a submarine and got a DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross]. Another one was a bloke named Col Jackson. They were blokes in their thirties then. They were very old for aircrew.
- 18:00 He had a butcher's shop in Footscray and he later became a well known publican and he went onto Halifax and became a squadron leader and he got a DFC. He and Bill Tooey, they just worked their way across. They had stacks of dough and they met up with us over there. And of course Flight Lieutenant Cook was thrilled to see them. He thought they had shot through completely and he was wondering how he was going to tell the government.
- 18:30 They were both sergeants too at the time. Camp Miles Standish was a staging camp for the United States Army and you had to be in camp by 10 o'clock regardless of your rank. That didn't suit some of us. We liked going to the nightclubs. There was a place called Thornton nearby and there was a nice nightclub there and we used to
- 19:00 go there. I used to always eat at the airmen's mess because the officers' club was too dear. The Yanks [Americans] frowned on that because they were very rank conscious over there. My mates Frank Sullivan, Ted McGindal, Ralph Bailey, Ian Arrow-Smith, they were all sergeant pilots and a bloke named Frank Green he was an air gunner. We would go down to this nightclub and
- 19:30 we'd rarely get home before one o'clock and as soon as we got there we'd be taken up by the guard to their jail house and we'd have to sign our names in the book. They would read it out next day, "Pilot Officer Ned Kelly was late coming in and Pilot Officer John Curtin and..." All step forward.

- 20:00 And of course they didn't...but they woke up after a while but we got away with it for quite some time. Then we managed to cut a hole in the fence and come in that way. But we were there for quite some time. We visited New York and that was an eye opener to me. Going into New York
- 20:30 and seeing their 45s [pistols] hanging down and they looked like bloody cowboys and at home you never saw a policeman with a gun. We went to the Stage Door Canteen. That was a place for troops. I met Betty Grable there. You wouldn't know who she was. She was a film star and lots of other nice ladies who took us to their homes. But the place I remember more than anything
- 21:00 was the Gypsy Rose Lee. Now Gypsy Rose Lee was a strip show. I hadn't seen boobs ever in my young youth. We went down there but she didn't do the full thing but by crikey we talked about it after. Then we went to Jack Dempsey's bar in Times Square. There were four of us: Ian Arrow-Smith the pilot; Ted McGindal
- 21:30 a pilot, Ralph Bailey a pilot, Frank Sullivan a pilot and me. They were all sergeants accept me. We started drinking American beer. American beer...can I use this expression, was real cat's piss. It had a very low alcoholic content. In our days there was no light beer in Australia, it was just one or the other. It was a very light beer and we said to this bloke in the bar,
- 22:00 Jack Dempsey wasn't there. He was in the navy actually. He was a lieutenant commander. At the table there were bottles everywhere and we hadn't even got a spark up. And this bloke said you're drinking it the wrong way. He told us to have one of these and he brought out these little glasses and it was Bourbon, or rye whisky. He told us to have one of those and then the beer on top of it. So we thought okay and so we got stuck into that.
- 22:30 Well by the end of the night I could hardly walk. And every time I had a drink of water for a week after I nearly fell over. So from that day on the smell of whisky makes me crook. So how are we going now?

**Is there any other mischief you can tell us about?**

I met a

- 23:00 WRANS [Women's Royal Australian Naval Service], Teresa was her name. And I corresponded with her. She was very nice. We went to the pictures and a few things like that. I said, "I'm knocked up." And she said, "Oh don't say that." And I didn't realise that that meant you were pregnant.
- 23:30 She was very nice and I kept corresponding with her for a while and I met her family. But generally speaking they didn't know much about Aussie's over there in those days. But eventually...There were one or two other things. We were staying at a hotel called the Henry Hudson and we got into a bit of strife there. Me and Arrow-Smith my mate. He was married just before we left Australia.
- 24:00 Ted McGandal he's around still, and Ralph Bailey...we were at the Hotel Henry Hudson and they had one special floor there and you weren't allowed on it. So we thought we'd see what we could do for ourselves so we got on this floor and we started knocking on a few rooms just to say hello, until security
- 24:30 arrived and we were asked to leave. So we left the next day. We were going back to camp the next day anyway, but that was interesting. I've never heard of that before have you?

**I was wondering if some of the girls were just as keen to see you fellows?**

Well I think most of them were business ladies. They were probably

- 25:00 not in your age group. They were older and they weren't very interesting. I think they took it as a joke but someone rang security and said some wild Australian people are knocking on their doors.

**Then you went back to camp?**

Yes we went back to camp and a few days later...we did make one more visit to Thornton

- 25:30 which is not far from Boston to this nightclub down stairs. They got to know us pretty well. I remember coming back in a taxi. Frank Breen was in the back seat and he vomited on the back of me. I had my uniform on and I wasn't very impressed with that. Then we were ferried down to New York and we climbed aboard the Queen Elizabeth. And just for the record, there were 21,000 troops on the Queen Elizabeth
- 26:00 And she sailed from New York to Scotland because they reckoned she could outrun the U-Boats and we were glad she did.

**Twenty one thousand men?**

Yes.

**What was that like?**

Well being an officer I was pretty right. We had a cabin and there were 21 of us in the cabin which was a bit crowded.

26:30 But the poor troops. They were on the ground and sleeping where ever they could. They got one meal a day but being an officer we got turkey and goodness knows what and as much as we could eat. When boat drill was done once a day, if I was in the cabin, by the time it had finished I may have got about ten feet. You couldn't get any further. There were just too many people.

27:00 If it had been sunk very few would have got out of it.

**How big a problem was boredom?**

Well it was only a four day trip. We were just keen to get there and have a go at the Jerries [Germans]. Anyway we arrived in Scotland I think it was twelve o'clock at night

27:30 and it was broad daylight. It was the English summer time. I forget the name of the place where we landed and then us Aussie's were put on trains and we went to a place called Brighton right down in the South England and that was Number 11 PDRC. Personnel Depot Reception Centre.

28:00 Once again as an officer I was very fortunate. I was billeted at the Albion Hotel and the sergeants were billeted at the Metropole. The first thing we did...there were pub crawls. There were six hundred and thirty pubs in Brighton. We didn't get very far but we did our best. So I was down there for probably about a month

28:30 until I got a posting to go to an operational training unit.

**Were there any highlights from that month there?**

Oh yes. There were highlights. The thing that struck us more than anything. The coast was barbed wire all along. There were big pieces of steel

29:00 to stop the tanks and landing craft coming in. They had been subject to a very real threat of invasion. There were anti aircraft guns everywhere and we woke up one morning and there was a Halifax bomber laying on its back. I can recall on one occasion I was down stairs

29:30 in the dining room and a Foxworth, which was a single engine German aeroplane one night flew across at zero height and blasted the hotel with canon fire. When I came back my room was a bloody shambles. There were just interesting points.

**Did that give you a bit of a shock suddenly being in the thick of it like that?**

Oh yes.

30:00 When I come to think of it, the three of us if we had been in our room we would probably have been killed. They were just nuisance raids. Britain did have radar of a type but when they were very low they would come over and fly at around three hundred and fifty miles an hour just to make a nuisance of themselves.

30:30 There were a few Yanks there. We got into fisticuff on occasion with them. We didn't get on too well with them.

**What were the fights usually about?**

We could pick a fight with the Yanks without too much trouble. Mainly about women and their loud mouth talking.

31:00 But nothing really serious. We always fixed it up with a beer after. I was eventually posted to Number 27 OTU [Operational Training Unit] at Litchfield and I had to get on a train. I got friendly with...

31:30 I could tell you a little story about Brighton before I go. I got friendly with a bloke by the name of Doug Cottee. He was a Queenslander. His family were well known for their jams, Cottee's Jam. He and I were about the same age and he was a pilot officer air gunner as well. We picked up two WRENS [Women's Royal Naval Service]. Mine was Elizabeth Slater.

32:00 She was a nice young lady. I don't remember who Doug's was. We had a couple of drinks with them and they said would you like to take us to the movies and we said we would only be too pleased. So we went to the movies. In England in those days you smoked in the movies. Each seat had an ashtray. We got on the front row of say the back stalls

32:30 for a bit of leg room and the ashtrays were on the seats there. I hadn't smoked in my life. Anyway Elizabeth passed around some Camels and I said oh yeah I'll have one, and Doug had one. I said, "I've left my matches at home." And she had a lighter so she lit up. I did a hail in and

33:00 I fainted. And she said, "Harry don't you smoke?" So I worked on it after that and I was smoking thirty cigarettes a day. So that was a bit of a.....but I corresponded with her for quite a while. She was a lovely girl. I had a photograph of her and she got married to a Canadian Ranger I think they call them. He got killed in Normandy. That was just a little off side.

33:30 So that was my first cigarettes. There was a bloke named Bob Squires. He was a pilot. When they got two...two blokes got as far as England, Brighton and were both sent home. One was a wireless operator

named Chris Nixon. His family were on the land and his brother died and he was needed back on the farm so the government sent him back.

34:00 Bob Squires was a pilot and somehow or another he got there without them realising that he was colour blind. He probably sneaked in and saw the books and memorised them. So he was not posted and I like a bloody dill. I had been out the night before and I had forgotten my kit bag. So when I got up to Litchfield I had to send a telegram to Bob and asked

34:30 him to send my kit bag on to me. I got a telegram back saying "She's right mate she's on the way." So Litchfield was in Staffordshire and it was called Number 27 OTU. The aircraft they used there were Vickers Wellington's. They were a twin engine bomber and they had a crew of five.

35:00 There was the pilot, an observer, a bomb aimer, a rear gunner and a wireless operator. What they did in those days, they put you in a big hangar and you had to sort yourselves out. But when I got there all the crews had been crewed up. This was where I ran into trouble with my adverse report.

35:30 So I reported to the gunnery section and there was a flying officer who had done a tour in the Middle East. It was a flying officer who signed that thing in my Log Book, as a lazy type. And there were a couple of warrant officers and they were all Australians.

**Sorry Harry. I know you've shown it to us, but could you just set that up a bit more as to what it was he wrote in the book?**

36:00 **Just explain a bit more to the people?**

I could come to that a bit further on. I reported to the Gunnery Section. All the sergeants I had trained with at Sale were there,

36:30 about fifty of them. When we walked in, we were given a syllabus. It was ground training, and once again on the Browning gun. I knew it backwards anyway. And various objects in sighting and deflections and things like that which were very important. Then we also had to do flying in Wellington's with semi-camera guns against Spitfires.

37:00 The Spitfires would attack us and we would use our camera guns. This is where I first ran into trouble. When I went in there they were quite surprised to put it mildly. The Instructors, the flying officer had done tours of operations

37:30 and the sergeants had all done tours of operations. And the flying officer said to me, "What have we got here?" And I said, "My name's Harry Bentley. I'm reporting for duty." He said,

38:00 "How old are you?" He was a bit unpleasant and I said, "For your information Mr...I'm nineteen." And he said, "Sir." And I said, "No, Mr." That was what I was entitled to call him because I was a pilot officer. He said, "We'll let you know when you're required." So I went down with the sergeants and he said, "Hey you can't go

38:30 down there, you're a commissioned officer." And I said, "Well then I'll stay up here if that's the case." And he said, "No, this is for instructors only." So because of inexperience on my part he got me into a bit of a corner. So I said, "So you don't want me to go down there." He said, "No. We saw you doing Indian wrestling with one of those sergeants." I said, "That's right. He challenged me and I beat him."

39:00 And he said, "You can't come up here because this is for instructors only." And so I said, "Okay when you want me...I'll go up to the officers mess, give me a call and I'll come down and fly." So I off I went to the officers mess and started reading the papers up there. About an hour later I got a phone call from this bloke saying, "This is flying officer so and so. If you're not down here in five minutes I'll have you on a charge for not being on the job."

39:30 So that was a very unpleasant atmosphere and it lasted the whole time. I wasn't lazy. I was far from it. I was as keen as mustard. My results were average, very seldom would you get an above average comment from the air force. Below average, average or above average. There were only 3 categories. And if you got above categories it was put in your log book. I

40:00 didn't expect to be below average and I wasn't. At the end of my course the flying officer said, "We've found you've been unsatisfactory and I want your log book." He wrote in my log book, "Could have been well above average but appears to be a lazy type." Signed by PO [Pilot Officer] R Crofts.

40:30 They said you have to be paraded before the wing commander and he will sign it as an adverse report. I said, okay, there was nothing I could do about it. So I went before the wing commander and he said "I hope your laziness will not result in your death or the death of your crew." I said, "I'm not a lazy type sir." And he signed it and I went.

41:00 At that stage we had to be crewed up with the current crews. Those who needed gunners. I was in the hangar and this little short arsed flight sergeant came up to me and said, "What will I call you, sir?" And I said, "I'm Harry Bentley, pilot officer." He said, "I hear you're a lazy type." I said, "That's all crap." And he said well we need a gunner. We've got three Aussie's in the crew already, do you feel like flying with us? I'm quite happy to take chance with you." So I said, "That would be great." So he introduced

me to the crew. There was a bloke named Geoffrey Granger Abbott, the navigator. We used to call him Bud. He was five foot tall. I'll tell you a story about him later on, and Smithie the bomb aimer. He was a scruffy looking Aussie.

## Tape 3

00:38 **Yes, we'd just like you to introduce us to your crew?**

Right yes. When I met the Flight Sergeant Bill McKay, we agreed that I would be happy to fly with him and I told him it was a lot of crap about me being a lazy type and he took my word for that. He introduced me to the navigator, Geoffrey Granger Abbott. We would call him Budd Abbott because it was the Abbott and Costello days.

01:00 He was very short, just five foot tall. Then there was Smithie the bomb aimer who was a scruffy Aussie sergeant. Then there was Lance Chalk who was the wireless operator, a big tall bloke. A grazier from South Australia. The rear gunner

01:30 was a Scotch bloke named Jock McFarlane. He was a sergeant RAF [Royal Air Force]. I don't think I've missed anybody. There was the pilot, the navigator, the bomb aimer, the wireless operator and the rear gunner. That was the crew. And I made the sixth member of the crew being a mid upper gunner. We flew a number of exercises sharing the rear turret with the gunner on

02:00 cross countries and things of that nature. Then we were posted from there to Skellingthorpe where we picked up an engineer who was a Rhodesian bloke. Apart from the five I've already mentioned and the mid upper gunner and him. There was no second pilot on the Lancaster. The B24s and the B17s carried a second pilot.

02:30 Early in the war the Wellingtons carried second pilots too. But it was nominated between the crew somebody who could fly a course or fly the aircraft if the pilot was killed or injured, and the fact that I had had thirty-five hours in command in Wirraways, I was nominated. So when we got to a conversion unit which was converting

03:00 onto the four engine Lancasters, I flew under instruction with one of the instructors for a few of the trips. When we finished our conversion unit which was probably for a month I would say, we were posted to an operational squadron. The one we were sent to was number 467 RAAF Lancaster Squadron at a place called Bottesford.

03:30 I arrived there I think early October 1943 and I was duly introduced to the gunnery leader, Flight Lieutenant Hare DFC. The CO [Commanding Officer] was Wing Commander Sam Barmmer who was an Australian and who had already done a tour of operation in the South West Pacific. We were still under training there.

04:00 We did cross countries and our first operation as a crew was just at the beginning of the Battle of Berlin. We crewed up for that. We took off. That was a very tense period for me and probably the rest of crew as well. It was our first experience of actual combat.

04:30 I could explain a little bit of it to you. The trip was a very heavy one. There were about seven hundred Lancaster's involved. At night, of course. My main job as mid upper gunner was to not only look out for night fighters in a three hundred and sixty degree area of search but to look out for other aeroplanes as well. When we got to the target

05:00 it was a real eye opener. There must have been about twelve hundred search lights...if you can imagine twelve hundred search lights and probably about a thousand heavy ack ack [anti-aircraft] guns and it was just like day and there were aeroplanes going down in flames all over the place. I remember Bill McKay saying to Bud the navigator, "Do you want to have a look Bud?" because he was in his little office

05:30 and there was an astrodome above. He had a look and that was the last time he ever looked. He never went up there again. He didn't want to see it again. The thing that struck me, we were getting hit by flak. It was like corrugated iron banging on the fuselage. It was pretty close. But you could smell the cordite. That surprised me. At twenty-thousand feet with oxygen masks on.

06:00 You could smell cordite. However, we got through the raid okay. We dropped out bombs and as it turned out we got an aiming point for it so it was a good raid, or a good result to the operation as far as we were concerned. On the way home we'd been in the air I suppose about six hours at that stage...my conditions and the conditions of the rear gunner were not the most comfortable

06:30 because the cockpit area and the flight deck were air conditioned and it had heating. Our temperature was the same as the outside temperature. If it was minus seventy-two degrees it would be minus seventy-two degrees in the turret. So we wore what we called a 'big tailor suit'. Like a spaceman's suit these days. First of all we stripped off...we had our thermal underwear on.

07:00 Then we put an electrical inner flying suit on with electrical wires which you could plug in to keep

warm. Then you put this big suit on. You then had...as gunners we had a silk glove, a woollen glove and then a leather gauntlet on top. Getting back to that trip to Berlin, on

- 07:30 the way back there was a bit of communication between the navigator and the pilot...to cut a long story short, we got a bit lost which was a bit disheartening actually. On our first trip we weren't too sure where we were. According to dead reckoning we should have been over the UK,
- 08:00 so the Skipper Bill said okay fellas, we'll go down. We had been reducing height. The atmosphere was... in those days they called it 7/8th Cumulous cloud. When we broke the cloud we would have been at around about three thousand and we went down low. The bomb aimer got in the position where he normally bombs from
- 08:30 to try and find something, and I couldn't see anything. And then I saw an outline which was whitish. We went a bit lower and our petrol was around about fifteen minutes. We only had about fifteen minutes fuel left. So the bomb aimer said, "Skipper, I think I can see cottages. I'm pretty sure that's what they are." So
- 09:00 we still didn't know where we were exactly, so the Skipper said, "What we'll do, we'll climb up to two thousand feet and I'll point the aeroplane in a easterly direction and we should come down over the sea. So prepare to abandon aircraft." That was bloody nice, our first trip. Then a squeaky voice from Bud, "Skipper I've got a fix."
- 09:30 They had what they called DF [Direction Finding], it was radar and that came good. He said, "I know where we are?" We were over the Wash. They weren't cottages they were wave tops. So he got a fix and we got a quick clearance to come in. We'd been in the air for eight hours and ten minutes. As we landed, the port engine cut out and then the starboard engine. We just had enough to taxi. So that was our first operational trip.
- 10:00 The sent us on nine days leave after that. They'd written us off.

**You said your mum was home praying for you. Do you think that was one of the things that got you home?**

My Mum was more than praying. She was going to Mass every day for me. It was her prayers and our luck I'd say, and our professionalism that got us through.

- 10:30 But she gets top marks. So we went on leave. I can't remember to be quite frank except some which stood out in my mind. They were all just a phase. We just flew. For the Battle of Berlin we just flew two nights in a row to Berlin and back and then three nights in a row. I've got all the dates there. You can have a look at it later.

- 11:00 **Can you tell us when you're on a bombing run like that, do you get flak as you get to the site or are you likely to get it along the way?**

No you get it along the way, depending on where you're routed in. Quite often Bomber commander used to send you in an area...say we were going to Berlin, We might be pointed towards Stuttgart to try and confuse the Jerries so they might think we were going to go there,

- 11:30 and then at the last minute turn and head towards Berlin. I could show you, if you want to stop the tape for a minute. It will give you an idea....

**Okay, about getting flak on the way?**

Well the German night fighter system had radar.

- 12:00 There were two types of German night fighters. One was what was called a Tame-Boar and the other was the Wild-Boar. The Tame-Boar was one that was vectored from radar onto the bomber stream. They had the ability to get under the aeroplane with the guns pointing upwards. And they would get underneath the Lancasters or Halifaxes or whatever the case may be.

- 12:30 And they would get that close that it was usually curtains for the bomber. The Wild Boar was one that would come into the target area and as I mentioned the target would be lit up like day and they would brave the flak and because it was just like day they would attack us as if it was a day light attack.

**So they were just as likely to get hit?**

Yes that's right. That's why they called them the Wild Boar. On this particular one, I think it was on the first of January, we were on the way to the target, Berlin.

- 13:00 Fighters were prevalent because I could see aeroplanes being shot down at various places. The Jerries also used Condor aeroplanes which were a big plane and they would fly at thirty thousand feet and they would drop flares if they knew where the Stream was and it would light the place up like day. On this particular occasion

- 13:30 we were flying and there was a Lancaster on our port bow which was the left front about fifty feet away from us. It was that close. Then all of a sudden there was a spurt of tracer from down below and both the wing tips - the Lancaster - were on fire. The Lancaster was destroyed. I hadn't seen the German

fighter and neither had the rear gunner. About two or three seconds later another aeroplane

- 14:00 on our port bow suffered the same fate. It was lit up like daylight. The two wing tanks were on fire. I still hadn't seen the fighter and then all of a sudden, formatting on us, was a Messerschmitt 110. He was about twenty feet below us and a little bit to the left. I looked at him. He had black glasses on, a black helmet and he gave
- 14:30 me a salute. I said to the Skipper, "Drop the starboard wing." And as soon as he saw...because I couldn't get my guns onto him...he was away on a flash. I think he must have run out of bullets. But in five seconds there were two Lancasters destroyed, just like that. I watched one and it exploded so nobody got out of that one. I had to take my eyes off it because otherwise my night vision would have been spoilt.
- 15:00 I felt really angry at that to think that in five seconds two were shot down like that. But that was happening all along the route. I can tell you of another raid...as I said before, I can't remember all the raids we went on. Over a period of time it was just so continuous. I went to Nuremberg with a bloke named Dave Gibbs.
- 15:30 I'm jumping the gun a little bit here, but I'll tell you about that one. I had only just been appointed gunnery leader of the Squadron. I was getting into my parachute and Wing Commander Brill came up to me and said, "Benny, you're not in the battle. What are you doing getting into your parachute tonight?" I said, "Flight Sergeant Gibbs is sick sir and I'm flying as spare gunner."
- 16:00 He said, "Well have a good trip but in future, before you decide to fly as spare gunner will you check it out with me first." How this happened was....I was going into Nottingham that night. I had the night off and Bill McKay our skipper had recently got married and we were having dinner with her bridesmaid and her mother. The phone call came through...as I said, I was gunnery leader then...
- 16:30 my corporal came to me and said, "Sir Flight Sergeant Gibbs is on the phone. His Mid Upper Gunner is sick, can you arrange a spare gunner for him?" I said, "Yes, tell him it's okay." Off he went and then he came back and he said, "He wants to know who's flying with him sir." And I said, "Tell him I'm flying with him." He said, "He said thanks very much. He's looking forward to meeting you." I hadn't met him before. We were in a different mess. I shouldn't have been flying because I took over from the gunnery leader
- 17:00 and he was with the previous wing commander. The wing commander was killed, the bomb aimer leader was killed and the gunnery leader was killed. So that's the story of how I got the job of gunnery leader. We were briefed to go to Nuremberg. Nuremberg was a very important target as far as the allies were concerned. It was full moon period.
- 17:30 Now Bomber commander never flew in a full moon period because full moon period in those days was just like flying in day time. But the Meteorology Section said there would be 10/10 cloud all the way to the target; there would be a break for the bombing and there would be 10/10 cloud all the way back. Well you know what weather reports are like these days, they were worse then. It was like daylight, full moon and there were bombers going down in
- 18:00 all directions. To top it off the rear gunner of our plane wasn't working and Dave Gibbs said, "What will we do? Press on without the rear turret." So it was decided we would. So we pressed on. I was particularly vigilant of course and we were attacked by a Messerschmitt 110
- 18:30 and I was fortunate enough to shoot it down. That saved us on that one. But that night ninety-eight aeroplanes were shot down. ninety-eight! That was the highest Bomber Command loss. It was the 31st March 1944. We lost ninety-eight aeroplanes and multiply that by seven and that's a lot of young blokes who got killed. For years after Dave Gibbs used to ring me up on the thirty-first of March. He
- 19:00 lived in Queensland and I lived in Melbourne and he said, "Skipper to Mid Upper, how you going?" Poor old Dave died a couple of years ago and I was the last person to speak to him before he died." So that was Nuremberg. That was one trip I remember. Can we stop...
- 19:30 Can I do a bit of a break here and tell you how I got the job as Squadron Gunnery leader? The Squadron Gunnery leader was a flight lieutenant by the name of Roy Nordon-Hair. He was a Pommy and he had done a tour of operations and he was DFC. He flew with Wing Commander Barmmer as did the Bombing Leader and the Engineer Leader. And they were just about finished their second tour of operations. I was deputy gunnery leader to him and
- 20:00 he had nominated me...they had one more trip to do...no two trips to do I think, and he had nominated me to take over as gunnery leader. Everyone was in favour of that, but they ran into a snag. Group which was Five Group...467 Squadron was a number of say six squadrons that flew under Five Group. The gunnery leader down there who was a squadron leader refused to accept me as nominated gunnery leader. He was
- 20:30 wanted to put a RAF fellow in. And the reason he gave was that I hadn't done a gunnery leader's course. So Sammy Barmmer who was the CO said, "Bugger it then, we'll send him to do the course." And that was most unusual. To be pulled out in the middle of a tour of operations. So I was sent to RAF Catfoss which was the Gunnery leaders Course. There were Americans there and Canadians.

- 21:00 To become a Gunnery Leader for an operational squadron I had to pass out of that course with A B or C, and anything lower than that wasn't any good. It was the most concentrated course I ever had. From the flying aspect of it. We flew a Spitfire...we were sent to flying school and we were working with Wellington's with camera guns.
- 21:30 And we had to give a lot of lectures. It was a very intensive course. But to cut a long story short, I graduated as Gunnery leader B and was sent back to the Squadron. I found that Sammy Barmmer the wing commander had been killed in action. The gunnery leader had been killed in action and the Bombing Leader had been killed in action, and Bill Brill, Wing Commander Brill was our new CO. He called me in and said, "Listen Benny. Do you know
- 22:00 what's happened? I'd like you to carry on as Gunnery leader if you wouldn't mind." I had done about twenty trips at that stage and I said okay. Bearing in mind that the number of air gunners in a squadron were twice as many as other sections. You've got navigation leader, bombing leader, but with the gunners there were two of each and usually about half a dozen. So I had
- 22:30 about forty or fifty air gunners to look after. And to put it mildly a lot of them were rough diamonds. And they were a lot older than me. It was my job...if someone needed a spare gunner, they wouldn't be very happy if I had to say, you're flying with so and so tonight. And I could have had a mutiny. But I had a talk to them. I told them that I had a job to do and I said that if you play ball with me I'll play ball with you and I'll
- 23:00 look after you and I won't overdo the spare gunners. The way I felt I could do that was, I was young and I was keen and I led from the front. So that's why I was flying with Dave Gibbs that night and that's when the wing commander said, "Have a good trip but don't fly as a spare gunner unless you check it out with me first." I had done that once before with Dave Symonds.
- 23:30 Now Dave Symonds was a flight lieutenant, Australian and a bonzer bloke. He lost his mid upper gunner two weeks before this particular raid to Berlin. He got hit in the head with a piece of shrapnel and his head was just about blown off. So Dave Symonds was without a mid upper gunner. He was acting flight commander on A Flight and he came to me and said, "Benny I need a gunner tonight."
- 24:00 And I said, "I'll go." I think I called him Sir, and he said "That will be fine thanks." So we went to Berlin and dropped our bombs. It was a pretty easy going trip, no fighters, no combats. On the way back I started to sing and I thought we were flying upside down. What had happened was, I had had a faulty valve in my oxygen and we were at twenty-four thousand feet. Once you're in the mid upper turret
- 24:30 they can't get you out. You just have to stay there. They couldn't get into help me or do anything. So Dave Symonds brought the aeroplane down from twenty-four thousand feet to seven thousand feet which was bloody dangerous over Germany. And they got me home okay but I had no idea what was going on. It was lack of oxygen and next day they found there was a fault in it. Even today I say to Dave when we go to a reunion...he's still living...
- 25:00 I tell him he's my second favourite skipper. I tell the story. And he said, "Well I never saw any money for that. And we just couldn't stand the bloody singing." So Dave I'll be seeing next month hopefully. He's a great guy.

**So did you have a theory or a way that you picked the spare gunners?**

- 25:30 There was no system. I wouldn't pick one bloke twice in a row, put it that way. But I warned them if they didn't pull their heads it that I might. And I could do it after I flew four spare gunner and I shouldn't have. I flew with a bloke named, a Pilot Officer Bones Quartermaine. He's a grazier up in the Gulf Territory now.
- 26:00 I think he might have retired. He was a big gangly bloke and he had sacked his two gunners because he reckoned they weren't good enough. That was what I was told and it happened when I was away at gunnery school. So I flew with him on a couple of occasions as a spare gunner. And on the second time we were coming back from Brunswick,
- 26:30 we were at twenty-four thousand feet and we got coned by searchlights. Searchlights were in groups of seventy or eighty, but there was one master beam and that was a blue colour. If you got a blue beam on you then in a flash you were coned. And we used to see it from a distance. Once you were coned either the night fighters would shoot you down or the ack ack would get you. So at twenty-four thousand feet, he was a very strong bloke,
- 27:00 we were attacked by a Messerschmitt 109 and I'm pretty sure I got him. I fired at him several times. But I had to shut my eyes at that stage because my night vision would have been gone completely. Up there in the turret all I could see was just blinding. Bones Quartermaine brought the aeroplane down with aerobatic turns and things. He was at twenty-four thousand feet and he brought it down to four thousand and we got out of it and got home.
- 27:30 That was a terrifying trip. I can remember that one too. So I think if you can cut for a minute. It's important I give you the date on this one...It would have been May.



- 28:00 On May nineteenth we were briefed to fly to a place called Tours. At this stage Operation Overlord [D-Day invasion] had been planned and the bomber raids to inner Germany and Berlin had been suspended. Not completely suspended but reduced in numbers.
- 28:30 We were bombing the ports where the invasion was to take place. And this night we were briefed to bomb a place called Tours and it was the railway installations, right in the middle of the city. It was a very dicey operation...by dicey I mean very dangerous. There were I think
- 29:00 300 Lancasters but it was low level. We were to bomb at night between three and four thousand feet. So you can imagine the timing was very important. We were just about ready to taxi out. The engines were running and a staff car pulled up in front of us and an officer got out. I think he was a local...he was a pommy flying officer for the day and he was telling us to cut the engines. In my position I
- 29:30 could see exactly what was happening. The skipper said, "Benny what's going on?" I said, "He wants us to stop engines." He said, "Bugger that for a joke. We're on a special time to bomb etc." Then another car arrived and the group captain got out. This was not Group Captain Ellworthy...I must tell you a bit about Group Captain Ellworthy later. It was Group Captain Carter. He took over from Group Captain Ellworthy.
- 30:00 We used to call him DR9D. It was the name of a radio set...he used to wear a hearing aid and he would switch it off and switch it on. Anyway I said, "No we have to cut it Bill." And then another car came up and a bloke with a camera got out and I said, "Now there's a bloke with a camera, how about that." And he said, "Well we're not getting our bloody photographs taken that's for sure." Because it was bad luck to get your photograph taken before an op [operation]. So we cut the engine and we all piled out and then another car turned up and
- 30:30 who should get out but our great Prime Minister. It was such a thrill to see John Curtin there. And he shook hands with us all and he wished us a good trip and we got back in. We were really thrilled. He was over there for a Commonwealth Prime Minister's meeting.
- 31:00 We were the only squadron he visited and we were the senior crew. I've still got the photo. I'll show it to you after. It meant we were a bit late on our bombing run. We had a new bomb aimer a bloke named Snowy Craven. They used to call him Cookie because he was a good bomb aimer and they used to always call a four thousand pound bomb a cookie. So he got that name. I was Benny. The pilot was Macka. Jeff Abbot was Bud
- 31:30 and then there was Chalky, and Jock was Jock. His name was Tom actually. He was a courageous young bomb aimer. We were late on our run, we knew that but we stuck to our height. Coming up to Tours, the target had been marked and he said, "Skipper, I can't do it." So we had to go round again.
- 32:00 We had to be so precise there because the railway installations were right in the middle of the residential area and last thing we wanted to do was kill French civilians. So I said to Jock, "Keep your eyes open Jock, we could be in strife here." So we did a left hand turn to go round and coming back on our second bombing run, I was ringing my turret all the way round, and just out of my peripheral vision I saw a Lancaster heading straight at us from the port bow
- 32:30 and in those days if you wanted to talk to the pilot you would say, "Mid Upper to Skipper", but I said, "Up Macka!" And he knew who it was so he pulled the aeroplane up and the other Lancaster came underneath us and its propellers hit behind our fuselage, behind the bomb bay and I expected to be blown right out of the sky. I was the only one who saw it. Bill saw it eventually out of his peripheral vision. He said he saw it and it clipped us
- 33:00 and we had a hole about that bloody big. We got back okay. But we did another, a third bombing run and spotted them right on the target. But for months and months after than I used to wake up sweating at night. That was probably the worst episode that I've ever had. I can never forget the next day the Group Captain said to me in the mess, "Benny your Prime Minister rang and he wanted to know
- 33:30 if you got back okay?" And I said, "Yes of course we did."

**Did the other Lancaster make it back okay?**

Yes he did. One from 50 Squadron. That was horrifying actually.

**Did you cop much flak over France?**

Oh yes. Particularly at that height. We were at four thousand feet and there was a lot of light flak. When it comes up it looks like it's coming up in a hose. Oh yeah.

- 34:00 I can tell you one about D-Day too. But that's another story.

**Obviously what you're saying is that you cop a lot of flak on the way in and you never know where you're going to cop it, but how different does the mission feel once you've dropped your stick?**

Oh well...Smithie the bomb aimer...I remember him saying, "Bombs gone, let's get the fuck out of here."

- 34:30 That's what he used to say. When the bombs went...about fifteen thousand pounds of bombs, the aeroplane would automatically....up you'd go. We might have bombed at twenty thousand feet but we could be assured of about twenty-four thousand feet which is on the way home. The higher you got the better. Another big danger
- 35:00 with a heavily concentrated target like Berlin would be...aeroplanes on top...the bomb aimer saying left, left, left and I as the mid upper turret saying no right, right, right because there might be a bomb coming down from up top. So we had to be careful of that. A lot of aeroplanes got hit with bombs. So that was another danger apart from night fighters and flak.

**What sort of relief came over you when the bombs had gone?**

- 35:30 Not much relief really. Not for me because the job was still on as far as we were concerned. When we got to the White Cliffs of Dover... I can remember one particular night, the twenty-third of November when we came over I heard this voice coming over... 'Happy birthday to you...' It was the Skipper...it was my birthday. I had just left my teenage years behind. I was twenty.
- 36:00 That was a pleasant thing, but we had to be careful, Peter [interviewer]. Once we got over to England the Jerries got pretty smart. They would send intruders over and they would shoot bombers down in the circuit area when they were coming in to land. And that happened on many occasions so there was no relief until we were on the ground.

**36:30 And what was the normal procedure once you had landed?**

- Once we had landed we'd get out and have a cigarette. That would probably be the first thing. One of the WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] drivers...most of the transport drivers were WAAFs. They'd pick us up and we'd be taken into a big room and we'd sit down at the table and we'd be debriefed by an intelligence officer, given a mug of tea and then after that was over we'd be given bacon and eggs for breakfast.
- 37:00 One thing I might mention here is that as an air gunner I had another run in with a senior officer. On my second trip I got a stoppage in my machine gun, and I couldn't clear it without taking the gloves off and once you took the gloves off and your hand hit the steel it stuck, and I was frost bitten from there to there. So I went and saw this flight lieutenant Australian doctor...Vern was his first name....
- 37:30 I said, "I've got a bit of frost bite Doc." Everybody else called him Doc so I thought it was okay for me to call him Doc. He gave me a hard look, and he gave me some cream to rub on it. And then he said "Certainly pilot officer, and you're grounded for seven days." I said, "You can forget about that, I'm flying tonight." He said, "If you fly tonight I'll have you on a bloody charge. You're grounded, and it's 'Sir'."
- 38:00 So I was frost bitten four times after that but I never reported it. It was so cold on occasions...minus seventy-two degrees was the coldest we ever recorded. We loved it because the aeroplanes would climb better in the cold but the oxygen masks we used to wear...you'd dribble and you had icicles hanging from there down to your crutch. It wasn't a very comfortable spot to be, the gunner.

**38:30 Is there any eating or drinking at all once you're airborne?**

- Yes. They gave us...nothing to eat. Oh, I should mention this. The medical officer who was a pretty good bloke...Doc Howard was his name. I got to know him a bit better after our little run in. He said, "Listen Benny I want you to come and see me before you go on operations from now on." I think he may have thought I had a better chance of survival.
- 39:00 And he would give me caffeine tablets as big as my thumb. He told me that I was to take one when I take off, one when I get over the enemy coast and one when you're approaching the target area and one when you're on your way home. By the time I got home I felt like going to a ball. And since then I've always had a problem sleeping.

- 39:30 Caffeine tablets were to keep me alert the whole bloody time.

**Are they what they called 'Wakey Wakey Pills'?**

Yes. So that's something I've had to persevere with. Even today I have trouble sleeping.

**How would you take those Harry? Would you chew them?**

Just swallow them with something liquid. I've got it in my log book on my twentieth birthday,

- 40:00 no grog, just orange juice. They used to give us a tin of orange juice. But every time I had a drink it was frozen. It was frozen solid. So I had to wait until I got home before I had a drink. We had some pilots who had bladder problems and they used to have a little bucket up there. I couldn't have a leak. There was no hope of me getting out to have one. I had to make sure I went before I took off.
- 40:30 Then we had a bloke named Len Ainsworth. He's dead now. He's been dead a long time. He used to always get airsick so he had a bucket. He was a great guy too. We used to call him Ghandi because he didn't have a hair on his head.

## Tape 4

- 00:35 Sometime in March, I think it would have been before Nuremberg, we had to bomb Brunswick. It was a very heavily defended target and the losses were very heavy. I think the night that night in relation to aircraft destroyed was around about five per cent Bomber Command reckoned they could handle four per cent
- 01:00 but anything over that the crews would probably become demoralised. But they didn't as it happened. When we got back towards England, the whole of England was practically fogged out. We couldn't land at our place and we didn't have that much fuel that, but we were diverted to a place called Little Snoring. It was an American fighter base,
- 01:30 and they managed to get a flare path lit for us and we were okay. It was a real dump. The Yanks had all the good accommodation and we weren't even given beds. We were given a Nissen hut and we had to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. It was pretty cold. But the next day
- 02:00 we were given breakfast. We went to the officers mess and we couldn't get over the Yanks. They all had .45s slung on their hips and that. I was issued with a Smith and Wesson. I didn't take it on the German raids but I did take it to France with me on occasion because if you were shot down in Germany and you had a firearm then it was a pretty good chance for them to shoot you. But if it was in France then there was a good chance of getting
- 02:30 caught up with the Resistance. We had breakfast but we were still clagged in. We couldn't get the aircraft off. We got a signal to say come back by train. The American air force will drive you to the local station and you're flying again tonight. So that meant another operation...but we're short of machine guns. We had to remove all the machine guns from the rear turret and the mid upper turret and we had to take them with us. Which we did.
- 03:00 So here we are, we go through London in our flying boots and we had a bloody big machine gun on our back. There were military cops everywhere wanting to know what the hell was going on. We didn't have any money because you didn't take money if you went overseas, and at the station we had to plead for some sandwiches but we couldn't pay for it. But when they saw us with our...we told them we had been flying operational
- 03:30 and they gave us watercress sandwiches. Have you ever had watercress sandwiches? There was no meat in England in those days so we had watercress sandwiches and diluted tea. And that got us back to the mess. We were then briefed and then went to Berlin. We hadn't had much sleep. But that was a trip that did stick in my mind.
- 04:00 Having to go through London to the main station with each of us carrying a machine gun over our shoulder. When we got on at Petersham we were standing room only on the train and in one compartment there were four shiny bum RAF officers and a corporal stuck his head in
- 04:30 and said, "Why don't you lazy bastards give these Aussie's a seat." They gave up and gave us a seat. The name of the field was Little Snoring. I've got a photograph of Little Snoring in the main bedroom, I'll show you later.

### **What was it like having to fly two and three nights in a row?**

- 05:00 Tiring, but bearing in mind we were young, naturally. And to be quite frank, we lived on our nerves, there's no two ways about that. Every six weeks operational air crew were given nine days leave. I don't know if you've ever heard of Lord Nuffield?
- 05:30 Lord Nuffield used to make Morris cars and for all Commonwealth operating air crew he would pay for a hotel anywhere in the British Isles to go on leave and he would also pay the fares and the hotel expenses. That was a way which we were relaxed a bit. Some
- 06:00 of us used to drink. I used to enjoy a drink and we were heavy smokers in those days. I must say I think we were encouraged to smoke. We were given a ration of American cigarettes each fortnight. Lucky Strikes and Pall Mall. You know, really heavy smokes and I'd have three of them before breakfast in those days. It was one way of combating the operational twitch, if you know what that means.
- 06:30 Some blokes used to go like that... [eye twitch], and they used to call it operational twitch, and cigarettes and drink and getting away from it was one way of relaxing.

### **Tell me a bit more about your leave?**

Oh the leave. I can remember

- 07:00 going to Torbay in Kent. We stayed at a place there. He would pay for any hotel except London. He wanted us to go out to the regions. So I went to Scotland and places like that, all on Lord Nuffield and then I was sent down to Lord Cordeaux-Thompson's home, Dawny Woods.
- 07:30 He was a member of the War Cabinet. I missed Winston Churchill by one day. We stayed there. I got in

there by false pretensions. There was nowhere else they could send me. It was usually a place where wounded aircrew were sent. There was a Polish flying officer, a Spitfire pilot and another one, Freddie... he was a Spitfire pilot. They had both been wounded...and myself. We had our own room. We had the butler and

08:00 the bathrooms were exquisite. Towels that were heated. Every night Lord Cordeaux...he lived with his sister and they were both unmarried. He'd come back from the War Office and we would have to give him a report on what we did during the day. Freddie said, "We won't tell him about those popsies Harry." Popsies are girls. That was interesting too.

08:30 And there was a big sign up in everyone's bedroom: 'By arrangement with the staff, no tips are to be given.' Usually Butlers were tipped in those days by visitors to establishments.

**Did you feel safe when you were staying in places like that?**

Oh yes. This was in Sussex in Dawny Woods. It was in the country. I've been in London when it was being bombed with Doodle Bombs [V1 flying bombs] and things like that.

09:00 That was something a lot more safer than flying aeroplanes. It was a relief yes.

**Tell me about being in London when those bombs were being dropped?**

Michelle [interviewer], what impressed me and which I'll remember until the day I day was that London in those days was very smoggy and people used to die on account of the smog. You couldn't see...

09:30 and it's not an exaggeration. It was like a pea soup and you couldn't see in front of you...but the London cabbies could get you around. There's no two ways about that. They were remarkable. But when we used to get into the Underground, we would have to tread between all the people in there. Every night, probably from about three or four o'clock when they knocked off work, they would go into the underground and they would sleep

10:00 on the station platforms. I've got a lot of respect for the English people. Later on in my career after I did the Bomber Command Tactical Skill, I was invited to talk to some of the Pommy people who were in factories making machine guns for the boys.

**How were the spirit of the people when you saw them living under ground?**

Great, absolutely. They were frightened but they were great. It was like us. We were probably... everybody who says they weren't scared would probably be telling a fib. But you just couldn't show it. In my particular case, if I felt not too happy about things, I couldn't show it because I was in charge of a section.

11:00 So I just kept that within myself.

**Was that tough, not being able to speak to anyone about how you felt?**

You got used to it. I remember talking to one of the padres. I got sent to an officers training course when I first hit the squadron. They had one look at me and said, this bloke needs some sort of training

11:30 as an officer. I got pulled up in Brighton, I was walking down the street and a RAF officer came up behind me and said, "Pilot officer, if you don't put your gloves on I'll have you on a charge." I thought, bloody gloves, for crying out loud! But that was what the RAF expected. So I was sent to RAF Scanton

12:00 and did a weeks course on how to become a good officer. I reckoned I was a good officer anyway. But to be a good officer, Pommy style, they wanted the T's crossed and the I's dotted. So I struck a happy medium I think between being an Aussie and what they wanted me to do. I met a Catholic Priest there. He was a nice sort of bloke. He got my address and he wrote to my family and said, 'Your boy's being a good boy and he's well and happy.'

12:30 Then on the Squadron we had two padres. We called them padres in those days. Nowadays they're called Chaplains. There was the Church of England padre and the Catholic one and they were both squadron leaders. They were both great blokes. You could have a yarn to them. The first funeral I went on the squadron was for a young bloke named Glen Frizzle. He was a

13:00 rear gunner with a captain named Curly Reynolds. We called him Curly because he was bald. And they crashed on takeoff with a full bomb load on. The bombs didn't explode but the rear turret was knocked out and the gunner was killed. At the service the next day...it was conducted by...I don't know what religion this young lad was

13:30 but it was conducted by the two of them. The padre from the Church of England and the Catholic padre, Father Barrow. He was a worry to me Father Barrow. I could have a yarn to him, being of his faith, and we used to bare our souls to him on the odd occasion and he would say, don't worry about it. You're in good hands. He used to say to me, "Benny, how about..." - and he was very serious - "...taking me on an operation, a flying operation

14:00 with you blokes." And I said, "I don't think that's a good idea Father." But he kept at me and he would

say, "Have you spoken to Macka about this yet Benny?" I couldn't tell a lie and so I said I would speak to him very shortly about that. And so I said to Mac...he was a flight sergeant and when we got into the same mess we saw a lot of one another. I told him that Father Barrow, the padre, wants to come on an operation. And he said, "Bullshit."

14:30 So I didn't say that to the padre but I told him that I had spoken to the Skipper and he said he would prefer not to take you. But he probably would have got his trip with someone else. The old group captain, DR9D, he used to fly with the RAF in India so he was pretty long in the tooth. He took over from Sam Ellsworthy who I must mention shortly too...maybe in the next session.

15:00 He used to take his Brownie camera. He was flying as a second dixie with a crew that couldn't dodge him. He was a great man. Group Captain Carter. He took a very kindly view of one of my rear gunners who was testing his machine guns. He didn't think they were loaded and he fired a burst through the group captain's windows.

15:30 If it was peace time they would have court martialled him. Is it time for lunch yet? I'm all ears Michelle.

**When you think about being in London during bombing raids and so forth, What are the sights and smells that really come back to you?**

16:00 One of the dangers of the bombing in London...at the time I was there, they had the Doodle Bugs, you've heard of them? They were being shot down by fighters originally. The fighters in some incidence could get along side them and tip them over with their wings. When the V1's came, they were the start of the rockets as we know of today,

16:30 they were what we used to call 'Flying Lampposts'. They were huge rockets. But there was a terrific smell of cordite on a still night or day in London when that happened. We used to just have to take it as we could. We had

17:00 our favourite little spots that we would go to in London. The Cumberland Hotel was a good spot. We'd go there. And we would go to Greasy Micks because you could get a steak there. It was horse meat but he used to do it up and it looked like steak and eggs.

**So were there certain pubs that the Aussie's went too?**

Yes Codgers was a very well known Aussie pub. That was in Fleet Street. We used to go to the Cumberland ourselves. We used to like that.

17:30 But any pub was a good pub. I met a lovely young lady named Florence Sempole and her mother at the Red Lion in Ronstead. I'll tell you about that later if you like.

**Tell us about it now?**

Well I met Florence. I was by myself. I was having a lot of trouble with my feet. I went into the Red Lion.

18:00 I was on leave in London for some reason by myself. I must have been passing through. So I sat down. I hated their beer because it was warm...it just wasn't my thing but I drank a pot there. And this beautiful blonde lass about my age was sitting there with her Mum. So they invited me to join them, otherwise wouldn't have because I wasn't forward.

18:30 To cut a long story short they invited me...they said where are you staying tonight and I told them I hadn't booked in anywhere and they asked me if I want to stay with them. So they took me home to their home and they asked if there was anything I would like? And I said I wouldn't mind a bath because I had recently had a problem with burning and frost bite of my feet. I didn't report this. I think I might have mentioned that the inner flying suit was electrically heated and on this particular

19:00 occasion, the wires fused and I got my feet burned on the right side and then I got frost bitten. So I was a bit of a mess and having a nice bath there and dressing them properly cleared it up. So I kept in touch with Florence and I did have a photograph of her but one of my kids chucked it out I think. She

19:30 had a boy friend in the British Army, a lieutenant servicing in India. I kept in touch with her by mail. We were having a big mess party at Waddington. It was a peacetime station and we moved over there. The officers mess was more like a hotel.

20:00 Group Captain Ellsworthy was the station commander and Air Commodore Hescot was the base commander. They decided we would have a party and we were all allowed to invite guests. So I wrote down to London and asked Florence if she would like to come to the party...with her mother's approval. I got an affirmative reply saying yes she would love to come,

20:30 and I booked her in at the Saracen's Head. On the night of the party I got a taxi and brought her to the party. And she was the most glamorous one there. As soon as she walked in ...I was a flying officer at the time and she was surrounded by squadron leaders and I hardly saw her. They were all giving her gins and tonics,

21:00 and after supper Group Captain Ellsworthy came to me and said, "Regarding your guest. She's delightful isn't she?" Then he said, "The air commodore passes his compliments to you, but he thinks it

might be an idea if you took her back to the hotel. She's being given too much attention.

21:30 And with the air commodore's compliments you have his car and driver." Then the air commodore said, "Benny, don't wait, come back with the driver because you're flying tomorrow night." So that was a real night and a half. The air commodore was a wonderful man. He looked like a boxer. He had a flattened nose.

22:00 And Group Captain Ellsworthy was a Kiwi [New Zealander], a lawyer by profession. I can tell you a bit more about my dealings with Group Captain Ellsworthy a bit later on if you like.

**Now would be good.**

Oh okay. I was in my office just after I had been appointed gunnery leader...after the other bloke had been killed, and the CO's inspection was fairly lax. Anyway the corporal said, "Sir the group captain's here to see you."

22:30 And there's me in my little office. The group captain doesn't usually come to see the gunnery leader. He came in and said, "Benny, how are you going?" And I said, "Not too bad thank you sir." He said, "That bed that's in the other room there, I've been trying to get rid of that for quite some time." My predecessor...

23:00 how can I put this, was having an affair with one of the WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] transport drivers. And he said, "I've been trying to get rid of that for a long, long time. You don't want that do you. You've got the Harley Davidson motorbike, you got that with the job." I said, "No sir." So he said, "Well do me a favour and make sure it's not here the next time I come around." So I said to the corporal, "You heard." The bed disappeared and

23:30 I gave the Harley Davidson motorbike away because I fell off four times. I couldn't ride the bloody thing so I used a push bike. Then he came to me another day and said, "Benny..." - he came around to see me again. I thought, "This is too good." - "...I've been having a yarn to the air commodore and we know you've got a pretty tight schedule, but I've got some restricted information that I

24:00 must pass on to you." They had in those days what they called the RAF Regiment. They were the infantry for the RAF. They were there to defend the aerodrome. He said, "Intelligence has told us that we can possibly expect parachutists from Germany to attack us.

24:30 Bearing in mind that you are busy, but you are the gunnery leader, the air commodore and I am a bit concerned because the RAF Regiment don't have a commissioned officer in charge of them. We'd like you to take that on as your job as well." I said, "Okay sir. What's going to happen?" He said, "The flight sergeant will be in touch with you."

25:00 The next day this flight sergeant arrived, RAF style with these big boots on, about six foot six tall. Bang them on the floor and saluted and said, "I've booked the Sten Gun range for 1400 hours tomorrow sir." I said, "Okay flight, I'll come around and pick you up tomorrow." So I came round and he gave me a Sten gun and he said, "Sir it's very important that you become very proficient with this."

25:30 When you fire a Sten gun for the first time, you point it and it goes up there like that, it pulls up to the right. So after quite a while I got proficient with that. And he said, "The next thing is the Bofors Gun." I said, "Flight I don't think there's any point in me being instructed in the use of the Bofors gun. They have a simulator." So he said, "Well sir, only on account if one of the crew get killed, you might have to take over."

26:00 So I thought that was reasonable. So for a period of time I was also commanding officer of the RAF Regiment.

**And how did you all get along?**

All right. It was very military in their attitude...flight sergeant, officer, Sir, Flight, you know. Not relaxed put it that way.

26:30 But then when the pressure came off I just relinquished it. With D-Day [June 6, 1944] arriving there wasn't any chance of German parachutists arriving.

**Can you talk about mail and how much correspondence you got?**

I used to send not enough letter because I was so bloody busy.

27:00 And there was not much I wanted to talk about. But I used to write to my family and let them know. In those days the public relationships department for the Air Board was pretty active. My family knew I was on operations because the Melbourne Sun might say, 'Flying officer Bentley was involved with a number of other Victorians over Berlin.' So they knew

27:30 I was in the thick of it. But they were good. We used to have what they called...a little letter, which they used to copy and send them. I got lots of letters from friends and relations to keep up the good work. An interesting point

28:00 our air officer commanding the RAAF in the UK was Air Vice Marshal Rigley, a fine man. And there were occasions when it was reported to him that a number of white feathers were sent to operational air crew on account of the fact that we were over there and the Japs were over here. Well that was something we could do nothing about. He told me after the war that he mentioned this

28:30 to Arthur Drakeford who was the Minister for Air at the time but there was nothing ever done about it.

**Just going back to when you were talking about the pubs and stuff, what can you tell me about pub culture in your time?**

I think the beer was weakened some how or other, except in Yorkshire. The beer in Yorkshire

29:00 was very strong. It was a mining district and they kept the alcoholic content up. I got to know Yorkshire when I went on my gunnery leaders course because that was Catfoss in Yorkshire. I went to Scarborough a number of times and met two nice ladies there at a hotel. I thought they were sisters but they were mother and daughter. I got to know them very well and

29:30 they invited me to their home. As a matter of fact I think her Dad was a bit disappointed when I didn't put the hard word on his daughter. When I say that I mean I didn't ask her to marry me. She was a lovely girl. Her name was Barbara Wood and I met her when I went back to London in 1992. It so happens someone dug her up for me. She had married an army captain at the time and it was the Managing Director of Atlas Steel works.

30:00 They're a lovely family. Her mother had died but I used to call her Sis because we thought they were sisters. A friend of mine Jack McManis who came from Western Australia. And I used to take Jack on leave with me up to Middleborough where they lived. They lived at Martin on Cleveland which

30:30 is where Captain Cook was born. We went to the local church and saw the entry in the Baptismal book where James Cook son of John Cook was baptised. They were great people.

**What was it like seeing Barbara again over all those years?**

It was...I got some letters from her. She was married with about four kids and they were a lovely family. I stayed with some people up

31:00 in Yorkshire and they drove me up to see her. It was nice to meet her again. The last time I had seen her she was going to the University in Edinburgh and her Dad asked if I could take her up. So I drove her up to Edinburgh University and plonked her there, and I had a tear in my eye when I left her. She was seventeen and I was twenty.

**Sorry just going back to the pubs, were they fairly crowded?**

They were choc a block, mainly with servicemen, servicemen and service women. The people who were working in the war effort they were working odd hours and they were probably too tired. But it was mainly United States, Canadians, Australians, Poles, anybody,

32:00 and all on leave. They would all go to the pubs. A good place to meet people.

**What about the locals. What was their morale like?**

The morale was good. The British morale, the civilians was absolutely superb I reckon. They were really top people

32:30 because early in the days as you know, the Battle of Britain was on, Dover, Coventry, London, Birmingham, the were all bashed to buggery by the Germans. Bomber Command didn't get much publicity in those days but they were the only offensive arm of the RAF. They were bombing the channel ports where the barges were ready for the invasion.

33:00 So they played their part in that area there, but Hitler missed the boat on that because of the British and Commonwealth Battle of Britain pilots who destroyed the Luftwaffe.

**Did you notice much distinction in the class society in England during those years?**

Well there was definitely class distinction. That was quite evident I found in the air force. The higher ranking officers.

33:30 Yes there was definitely class distinction, but as far as the civilians were concerned, in my opinion they all pulled together.

**Can you tell us some stories about the officers' mess?**

Oh yes. I can remember telling you about Geoff Abbott our navigator.

34:00 He was five foot just. We had another bloke in the mess and he's still living...Geoff's dead. The other bloke was Ray Watt. He was about six foot four and he was a ruckman for Essendon Football Club. He would put Geoff on one knee and they would do a Mal Verko...a ventriloquist act.

34:30 Then there was ...the mess? That record that I've got...the theme song in the mess was the Inkspots.

Java Jive; Empty Saddles in the Corral...just to name a couple of them. After a night of ops and we weren't flying that night and there would be a bit of a lull.

35:00 So people would go into the mess...oh first of all, at breakfast time it was bad. All the waitresses in the air force were girls, they were WAF. English WAF and they were lovely kids. After a raid there would be empty seats at the table and they'd come in weeping with your porridge. And we'd say, "Can we have another one you've just spilt or your tears in that one."

35:30 And they would take it seriously. But it was very sad for them. When losses were heavy there would be empty seats at the table. Another thing we used to get up too...on one occasion there was a wild party and somebody bought their Smith and Wesson out and they shot all the lights out. Just to let off a bit of steam.

36:00 But that was pretty bad actually.

**You were going to tell us about night-time before you got to breakfast...about when you got back off an operation?**

After an operation. Well we would have our breakfast, ham and eggs or bacon and eggs. That was the big deal.

36:30 Before you went you were given two eggs and bacon and if you were lucky enough to get back then you got the same treatment. But then, for me, I couldn't go to sleep because of the caffeine tablets. I could stay awake for two days and I would still have a job to do you see.

**Did you ever consider not taking the tablets?**

Yes I did actually but I respected the doctor

37:00 and it was only mid-way through the tour that he gave them to me. I did say to Jock...me in my mid upper turret I could see his turret and I threatened him, I said, "If I see your turret stop Jock I'll give you a burst over your head, that will wake you up."

37:30 See Bill felt he might doze off you see. He was an elderly bloke for air crew. He would have been thirty-four I would say. He came from Glasgow. He was getting I think around about twelve shillings a week pay and he was being taxed on that and he had a wife and family to look after. So Jock never paid for anything and we always

38:00 supplied him with cigarettes too.

**Do you know of any other crew, even pilots who might have used those caffeine pills?**

I don't know. I can only talk about myself.

**So now being able to sleep, what kind of effect does that have on you?**

Well you

38:30 became tired, but when we ...as I mentioned before ever six weeks we got nine days leave. And we were young. I could get over it okay. I was lucky to survive a few crashes. I've told you of one. If you want to know I'll tell you about another couple.

**Yes sure.**

When I was at gunnery school we were doing

39:00 air to air gunnery which was...we were also being trained for Tiger Force. We would fly in a formation like the Yanks used to fly in daylight. I was the fighter controller as well. You'd stand in the astro dome and you'd direct the other aircraft to attack. That was part of the deal. We were going on a trip such as that

39:30 and there was a Pilot Officer Langley. I know his name because I had occasion to write to the Department of War in Gloucestershire after to confirm it, because I was injured in the crash. We took off in the Wellington and we got to about one hundred feet and the engine stopped and we crashed. I was in the rear turret and the turret fell off and I badly injured my right knee. I was in the middle of the Gunnery Leaders course and the last thing I needed

40:00 was to be admitted to sick bay and miss out on finishing the course. And the fact I was the only one on that course who was actually on an operational tour. He was a Lieutenant Tom Ernshaw, he was a South African bloke and he had done four years in medicine and he wrapped cold towels and dressings around my knee and changed it about every hour.

40:30 And I managed to get through it, but I've got arthritis in the left knee now.



00:38 **I think we'll ask about crashing in that plane...**

Yes and later on there was another crash so I can bring that in later on...when I was instructing.

**Were there any other incidents at Gunnery Training which stand out?**

Towards the finish

01:00 of my tour of operations...I'll just have to refer...

01:30 Towards the end of May 1944 our operational tour had just about expired. When we first started with the squadron the number of trips to finish an operational tour was twenty-five but I think due to the shortage of crews and heavy losses, the number was increased to thirty towards the end. I did

02:00 a trip with Bill McKay I think on the 24th of the May and that would have brought me up to about twenty-six trips. One thing about me doing extra trips as a spare gunner was it bought be back in line with a crew I started off with and their tour expired about the same time. Of course while I was at gunnery school I had missed out on those trips.

02:30 So I was going down towards the gunnery section at one stage. I think I had done around about twenty-seven trips and Wing Commander Bill Brill who was a fine CO came up and said, "Benny, I thought I just let you know your tour expired." I said, "I think you're wrong sir. I think

03:00 I've got another couple to go." He said, "What's wrong with your hearing, I just told you your tour expired." That meant I was tour expired. I then got hold of Bill McKay and said, "Did you get the news?" We got through and we couldn't believe it. And as you know, as I showed you on that list, we had a 2.59 percentage of survival at that time of the year.

03:30 1943 and 1944. So Bill who got married to Audrey some months before which I found surprising...I said, "I'm off to London." And he said, "Well I think I'll get a leave pass and join you." So we went through London for 48 hours leave. When we got back...we got back on the sixth of June 1944 and when we arrived back on the station

04:00 we found out that D-Day had started. Overlord. So Bill said to me, "Benny do you feel like doing one for the road?" And I said, "I wouldn't miss it for quids Macka." I was joking but he went and saw the CO and said, "Sir, Harry and I are a bit keen to do this last one for the ride. How do you feel about that?" So he said, "Mac if you can get a scratch crew together

04:30 there's an aircraft bombed up, a spare aircraft, you've got my blessing." So we found a Scotchman, an Englishman and an Irishman and a couple of Aussie's and we got the scratch crew together. The target was Argenton in the south west of France. It was about a four and a half hour trip. We were duly briefed and away we went. And as Bob Bolton mentions in the interview the scratch crew got their okay.

05:00 He mentioned that some aircrew thought they were being left out so they took things into their own hands and that's why we did this extra trip. Bloody crazy of course. Anyway we bombed Argenton satisfactorily and, this is not on the tape, but I said to Mac that I could see a bit of action going on over there, and he said, "That will be the invasion Benny. Do you think we should go over it?" And I said, "Why not." So we flew over and had a look.

05:30 We shouldn't have been there and I said in the tape that we got a bit off course but we went over to have a look and before we knew where we were we were being shelled furiously by the Royal Navy. Macka called out "Shoot the colours of the day off quick." And the wireless operator said, "Sorry Skipper, in the hurry I forgot." So we didn't have the colours of the day. Anyway we beat it and we got home safely but we had 14 holes in us when we got back.

06:00 So that actually was our final trip. It was one for the road. Following that I was posted to RAF Station Hickson as a gunnery instructor.

**Can I just ask you there Harry. Can you explain the feeling when you're told that you're tour is over?**

I was elated. I honestly didn't think it was. It was a stupid thing to say to the commanding officer. I said, "I think I've got a couple more to go."

06:30 I finished up doing twenty-eight instead of thirty so I thought I was right. But he didn't want me to stick my neck out. He said I had done a good job and he didn't like writing letters to parents saying I'm sorry your son's been killed in action. But we did do thirty but two were unsuccessful and he took them into account. We went over there. You'll see on the list that I give you, one of the motors packed up so we

07:00 came back and the same thing happened on another occasion.

**What was the air crew's reactions were when they were told it's not twenty-five now it's thirty?**

Bloody hell! We used to call Marshal of the Royal Air Force...that was his full title, and he was known as Bomber Harris. We used to call him Butcher Harris. We weren't very thrilled with the idea of having to do an extra five

- 07:30 but morale was always good. I only know of one possible LMF [Lack of Moral Fibre] case. And that was a terrible thing. Sometimes bloke's cracked and they just couldn't go any further and I thought it's most unfair for them to be labelled with LMF and be stripped of their rank and everything. I can think of only one possible case that I ever came across.
- 08:00 And I was there from October 1943 to July 1944.
- Do people understand do you think...the fellas in the army and the navy, they fight for the duration of the war, until the war ends or they cop it. Can you explain why there was a limited tour?**
- But that wasn't the end of our tour.
- No but the flying?**
- I think
- 08:30 because we were under action all the time. Every day or every second day for that period. The army and the navy, I don't know much about them. But they would have battles and engagements but it wasn't on all the time. But that tour of instruction I had, when I left the squadron, I was to be posted back
- 09:00 at the end of that period for another tour. I knew that. I wasn't finished. As a matter of fact, when I was at Hickson after I had spent five months there, I volunteered to join squadron leader Peter Sprong's Pathfinder force and that's where I was posted to. I was actually posted until Australia House heard of it. They stopped the posting and said they wanted me back in Australia and so I was posted back to Australia. That's another story.
- 09:30 I finished up in the South West Pacific area for a period of time. But the war was nearly over then.
- So do you want to tell us what you did after that last mission that perhaps you shouldn't have gone on, the D-Day one?**
- I think we knocked the rocker out a bit and really celebrated because we had already done it. But we got a lot of satisfaction from it,
- 10:00 to think that we had been in the lead up to D-Day, Operation Overload and as Rob Bolton aptly put it, some air crew thought they were missing out and they took things into their own hands. Our squadron leader knew that and he obliged us by giving us another shot at it. He was pleased to see us back too.
- 10:30 **So what happened from then?**
- I went to RAF Station Hickson, as a Gunnery Instructor. That was an operational training unit with Wellington's. I trained air gunners to the best of my ability. I got into strife with one wing commander there. Once again Bill McKay was at Hickson too and a couple of blokes off the squadron.
- 11:00 I was working late one day with the gunners and we didn't always drink in the mess. We might go to the Hickson village. There was a local standing order that we weren't allowed to leave the station in our battle dress. You had to put on 5A's the full uniform. We all thought it was a bit of bullshit and some of us did it and some didn't. On this particular night I was late. We all had our bikes.
- 11:30 And I said I'll see you down the pub as soon as I finish. I go down to the hotel and there's Bill and Ghandi having a few beers and they said, "We've got your spot Benny." There was a tap on my shoulder and "Bentley, you're unsuitably dressed." It was Wing Commander Kirby who was a pommy wing commander and he said, "Unless you're out of this hotel in two minutes I'll have you on a charge."
- 12:00 So I just looked at him and Ghandi said, "Don't worry Benny I'll drink it for you." So I got on my bike and drove back to the mess on my bike. It was a fair hike on a pushbike. I got into my uniform and got back just on closing time and he was still there with the group captain, and I he said, "We've got two pots for you Benny." So there was a bit of discipline there.
- 12:30 **Did you find the RAF officers gave you more problems than the RAAF?**
- Yes. See I was only in three areas. When I first got there being pulled up in the street for not wearing my gloves I think that was a bit childish to be quite frank. But that was the way it operated. I was pulled up again for not carrying
- 13:00 my gas mask with me. They had good reason for doing that I guess, but I was never pulled up by an Aussie officer for that. It was an RAF officer who did that. But by the same token I've got the highest regard for the RAF flying officers. They were great. There's no two ways about that.
- A few others we've spoken too have suggested that the Aussie's were really treated like the colonials and that they should be there to help.**
- 13:30 Yes it was that too. Every time I heard the word colonial used I would pull them up and say Commonwealth please not colonial. But they appreciated us being there, there's no two ways about that. Absolutely sure of that. They were a great team, the Poms.

- 14:00 I'll give you an instance of it in the mess at Waddington, going back a bit. I think I mentioned we had a theme song, the Inkspots. It would probably have driven a lot of people mad, but when we had heavy losses, someone would put the record on and it was the Java Jive and Empty Saddles in the Old Corral. One day we were all sitting down reading the paper and stuff after eating our lunch, and
- 14:30 an RAF flying officer, he was a tall skinny bloke, about twenty-four. He walked up to the recording, took the lid off and smashed the record over his knee. He said, "I can't stand that bloody thing any longer." And he left the mess. We all just sat there. Three weeks later we were all sitting there and the same bloke came in with a record under his arm and said "I would like to make an apology
- 15:00 and I've replaced the record" and he put it on. And that same bloke was killed a week later. He was an RAF bloke. The RAF blokes were great. We were all a good team. We were a mixed team. Our rear gunner was a sergeant from Glasgow and a solid citizen.

**Could you understand him?**

It was difficult but he only had to say about two or three things.

**15:30 So you're instructing now?**

Yes I was posted to Sunderlands. No, I went to Weekslly [?] before...when my posting was cancelled to go to Pathfinder Force, I went over to Weekslly on temporary posting

- 16:00 as a gunnery instructor on Stirlings. They were a terrible aircraft in comparison to the Lancs [Lancasters] and Wellingtons. They were a big four engine heavy bomber and one bloke Dave Gibbs, the fella I flew to Nuremberg with...he used to fly the Stirling as an instructor. He looked like being court martialled at one stage but I think Australia House stepped in

- 16:30 and didn't pursue it. Dave Gibbs later became Harbour Master at Shutt Island for about twenty years after he came back to Australia. But there was a bloke named Freddie Smith, he was a fine pilot and he went on to Stirlings and did a tour of operations and was lucky like us to get through. But he got killed the second time he went up in a Stirling. So Dave Gibbs knew what he was talking about I think.

- 17:00 This particular night I was a gunnery instructor in the Stirling. It was a funny sort of set up. I had nowhere to sit and there was a mid gunner and a tail gunner and I was trying to talk to them telling them what to do and what not to do. We were coming into land and the pilot overshot and he put on full power to go round but it lacked the power to do it. And we crashed in a field passed the end of the runway.

- 17:30 Both the undercarriages were ripped off. I was sitting down and finished up in a heap in the front of the fuselage. The wireless operator got two broken ribs and it was just me bruised. The undercarriage was ripped off...I think they would have written it off. It killed a cow and took out a couple of fences. So that was my third crash. After that I was

- 18:00 posted back to Brighton and met a very good mate who I hadn't seen for a long time. He was a bloke named Bill Falkiner. He was later to be a member of the House of Representatives for Franklin in Tasmania. He got a DSO [Distinguished Service Order] and a DFC. He was a navigator on Pathfinders. He and I played up a little bit once again and before we left we were up before the Chief Constable

- 18:30 of the area...it was because a barmaid accused Bill of jumping the bar and biting her on the ear. It was ridiculous. We did get into a fight with some Yanks but that was sort of a smoothed out. We then got a troop ship the SS Dominion Monarch and came back to Australia. On the way back I met for the first time

- 19:00 Wing Commander Spike March. He was permanent air force and past wing commander of 460 Squadron which was the number 1 Lancaster Squadron in the UK. The first one. They started off on Ambons, then Wellington's and then Lancasters. He was a very big man. A real tough character.

- 19:30 And he was the CO of troop ship, the Aussie contingent. We came back through the States [United States of America] and back to Australia.

**Were the rest of your crew with you there?**

No. No. Bill McKay had been posted to 37 Squadron, the C47 Transport Squadron, Bud Abbott...I don't know what happened to Bud Abbott. Smithie disappeared.

- 20:00 I tracked Jock down many years later and had a letter from his carer just before he died. And Huey was the Rhodesian engineer. I tried to contact him but missed him. So the only one who is still alive is Lance Chalk. And I was trying to think of the property he had. It was in Border Town, between Victoria and South Australia. He had about twenty-seven thousand acres there. We ring each other once

- 20:30 every year. So of that crew there's only two of us who have survived. Then I came back. We arrived at Sydney and were given two bottles of beer as a reward. Two bottles so we enjoyed that. We were welcomed home by Air Vice Marshal Shuger and sent on seven days repatriation leave.

- 21:00 So I went home, got off the train and my Mum and Dad were there to meet me. We didn't have a car but

one of the neighbours had supplied a car and they drove me home.

**What was your mum's reaction?**

It was unbelievable. Dad was jumping around like a Jumping Jack. When I came down the street all the neighbours were all out waving bloody flags.

21:30 It was great to be home.

**What about when you were coming through the [Sydney] Heads and you saw the Coathanger [Sydney Harbour Bridge] again... which you thought you may never see again?**

Yes, it struck me. I didn't know if I would see that again. I was lucky I reckon. So there you go. Back in Australia. Then I got a phone call one day from a girl

22:00 named...I'm just trying to think of her name now....Wing Commander Marsh's wife...Joan Marsh. I was in bed. Mother had just given me breakfast in bed and I was enjoying life immensely and she said "Harry, Spike wants to talk to you." I said, "Yes Joan, what's it about?" And she said, "He's cut his leg again" By that she meant he was going to go back flying on operations.

22:30 He said, "G'day Harry." I said, "G'day Spike." This was unusual of course...wing commander to flight lieutenant. He said, "I'm going north on Liberators I thought you might like to come with me." I thought hard and I said, "I think I might give it a miss Spike." He wasn't very impressed with that. He said, "Okay, righto. Well you look after yourself."

23:00 Well next day I got posted to Southern Area Headquarters to do an operational controllers course. It was a very intensive course. I was there for three weeks and then I was told I would be going to the tropics. And I thought that's interesting. So I was given another seven days leave, kitted out with tropical uniform and

23:30 we went via Adelaide. There were three of us. A bloke named John Craig and Fish Whiting. They had done the course and we went to the races there the first day and...I'm not a betting man and I don't know much about horses, but I saw one horse in this particular race. It was the Birthday Cup and its name was Grampian.

24:00 It was out of Peter Pan. Well I knew Peter Pan had won the Melbourne Cup so I put a pound on it to win, and it won at 120 to 1. So that night we were all picked up on a motor bike by the police in Adelaide, celebrating my one hundred and twenty pound win. Then we had to get the train up the middle

24:30 to Alice Springs. We were still pretty seedy. Then on an army truck to Darwin. I got a dose of dysentery. They dropped me off half way up there at an army First Aid Centre. I stayed there for a week doing nothing, swatting flies until the next convoy came through. So then I was posted to Darwin, to 85 Heavy Bomber Wing.

25:00 I was told to report to the senior staff officer of operations. And it was Spike Marsh! He said, "Harry, I see you made it." I said, "Yes sir" and saluted.

25:30 He was a tough man. I made a mistake once. We were planning a raid with the Liberators on the Celebes in Japan. He said, "Harry, which way should we bring them in?" And I said, "I'm not too sure about that Spike." There were sergeants and flying officers there, and he just looked at me and I said, "Sir." After that he came to me and said to me, "That hut you're in

26:00 the garden around it is shithouse, it's a bloody disgrace. No more beer until you can get that garden cleaned up." So it was his way...I deserved it. But he was a tough character. Later on he was at my wedding as a guest. I'll tell you a little story about that. My wife was a very strong Catholic and in those days Spike was a wing commander down at Point Cook, no Laverton and he

26:30 was the president of a mess committee. They had invited us down and supper was coming on at about ten o'clock and it was pork and everything. And my wife said, "What a shame it's Friday, we can't eat meat." I said, "Of course we can, we're travelling." She said, "I'm not eating meat on Friday." And Spike heard me, he said "What's the trouble Harry?" So I said, "My wife won't eat meat on a Friday." And he said, "What time does Friday finish?" And she said, "12 o'clock." So he put the supper back to 12.

27:00 Hundreds of people waiting and they had to wait until she said it was okay. You wouldn't read about it would you. He's dead now Spike Marsh. He retired as an air commodore and I was with him the night he retired down at the RAAF mess at 426 St Kilda Road in Melbourne. He gave a speech and that was the night he put me up for honorary membership of the support command mess and I've been an honorary member ever since

27:30 and that's close on twenty-five years. The name was later changed to logistic command but I've still got my badge and I'm an honorary member of logistic command. So that was part of that little story about Spike Marsh. I suppose I should refer to my notes a bit.

**Let's find out a bit more of what you did out of Darwin?**

Well we did a few unofficial things.

- 28:00 We had 23 Squadron and 12 Squadron. They were Liberators and I did a few trips with them. The war was over practically. It was still going but it was nothing like it was. One of my jobs was operations controller when the war finished at North Western Area Headquarters
- 28:30 and then I went to RAAF Darwin as operations controller. Spike knew I was interested in staying in the air force and he thought I was probably good material. So he had me seconded to the Judge Advocates Department, and they used to look after Court Martials and Court Enquiries and things of that nature. And it was all good training for me.
- 29:00 He said to me in the mess one night, "Harry you're sitting on a court Martial next week." I said, "I don't think so sir." I didn't call him Spike again. He said, "Yes you are, you've been seconded to the Judge Advocates Department." So anyway there were about four officers and there was a flight sergeant charged with an offence against a naval rating.
- 29:30 It was an unusual case. The rating woke up and the flight sergeant had hold of his penis. I think the flight sergeant was probably a bit that way inclined. So to cut a long story short the flight sergeant was found guilty and he was dishonourably discharged. I was on a few other Courts of Enquiry as a member.
- 30:00 I was appointed to a Court of Enquiry for a missing...this is post war...a C47. Now that name has just come up recently on the internet. I'll tell you about it after. From 35 Squadron. It took off from Morotai and then it went to Ambon and then it was to go to Darwin. On board it had sixteen army personnel and a crew of three.
- 30:30 There were three nursing sisters on board and the rest of them were repatriated prisoners of the Japanese, and that went missing between...as far as I can remember, between Kopang and Darwin. There were only two of us on that Court of Inquiry. A bloke by the name of Kevin Mitchell and myself. He's now deceased and we had to follow the track of the aircraft. We went from Townsville
- 31:00 where it had taken off. We checked the maintenance release and then went up to Morotai and then to Ambon. The Japs were still floating around in Ambon. We were supposed to have had side arms but we made sure we were with army personnel all the time. They had all the Japs lined up. Morotai was interesting. I was an observer at the Japanese War Criminal Trials and I was given a conducted tour of the Japanese prisoner of war camp there.
- 31:30 It was under the control of ...you're a pretty big bloke Peter but he was a much bigger man than you. He was a warrant officer second class AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. If you can remember the Beast of Belsen. Have you ever heard that expression? He was known as the Monster of Morotai. He looked after the Japanese prisoners of war up there. He said to me, "Sir there's a Japanese Admiral over there who would like to talk to you."
- 32:00 I said, "I don't speak Japanese." So he said he would get an interrupter. And the interpreter said, "Am I going to Tokyo?" I didn't even feel like talking to him to be quite frank. The interpreter was a British officer and I said, no I don't think so. And I said "Why?" He said that the Admiral wanted me to take a letter to the Emperor from him personally
- 32:30 if you were going. So I said, "Well I'm not going and even if I was going I wouldn't do it." He was shot. He was executed later on, the Admiral. I sat in as an observer. One of the prosecuting officers a chap by the name of Group Captain Phil Opas. He was a legal QC [Queen's Counsel]. I don't know if you remember the Ryan case in Melbourne, the last man who was hanged? Phil Opas was his defending officer.
- 33:00 So that was an interesting part of my career as well. We were still seething from the effect of Bill Newton having been shot down. He got a VC [Victoria Cross] and he was beheaded by the Japs. So I was never very happy with the Japanese. Later on in my professional life with a West German company, they took an interest in a Japanese company
- 33:30 of some 51%. When I was State Manager I had a memo from the Managing Director of the company saying that two Japanese gentlemen were coming to Melbourne where I would be expected to see that they were well catered for. He mentioned they would like any meat because it was very scarce in Japan. So I took them to McDonalds five times. They enjoyed it and they were very nice.
- 34:00 A month or so later I got a memo saying they were aware of where I took the Japanese and we're not amused, but that was me. The young Japanese blokes were very good. They were with a company called Kabuto. And they sent me Christmas cards for quite a few years after that. And that was before McDonalds was in Japan of course.
- 34:30 **Can you recall speaking to any of your former squadron fellows about...did any of them bail out over Germany and end up in any prisoner of war camps over there?**
- Bruce Simpson for one. He didn't finish up in a POW [Prisoner of War] camp, he evaded. He was the first aeroplane shot down during the Nuremberg raid. That was an operations loss, ninety-eight aircraft. He evaded capture. I mentioned Ray Watts, the big tall
- 35:00 fellow. He was his navigator. He was a POW. He came back.

**I just wonder when you spoke to them; did you get any first hand accounts of how they were**

### **treated by the Germans?**

They were treated reasonably I'd say. Most who were POWs said it was no picnic but nothing like what the Japanese put our blokes through up there.

35:30 At one stage there was a break out at one of the German war camps and the Jerries executed a number of those that they recaptured. A bloke named Bill Tricket, he was in that. And from what I can recall it was a pretty boring existence but at least they survived far better than our poor blokes who were captured by the Japs.

36:00 **So what happened during your time up there?**

I was pretty busy in RAAF Darwin postwar as operations controller.

36:30 That was about the time that the C47 went missing. I was given another job. I was also bar officer at the officers mess. That was a part time job. I learnt to drive a motor car for the first time up there.

**I'm still staggered by the number of pilots who have told us they couldn't drive a car.**

No, I couldn't drive a car. I learnt...I had a lesson with

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36:58 He's still alive.

37:00 He was officer in charge of the officers' transit mess. He always had plenty of beer over there because of the people coming through. And the wing commander of the day, my boss, was Kevin Springburt. He said, "Benny, I think we'll have a party. Do you think you could get enough grog together?" And I said, "I'll get back to you." So I went to a few places where there were caches of grog at different islands. So I

37:30 commandeered a C47 and we got lots of beer that way. Then we went to Melville Island. In those days the word "boong" could have been used and they were getting oysters for us and they were as big as bread and butter plates. We had the navy, the army and the air force invited to this bang up party.

38:00 As a bar officer I had a fair bit to do with it and unfortunately, exception was taken by some members on the base. When the navy people came out to their car, their tyres were down, the army's steering wheels were painted black....it was a disgrace. The CO said, "What are we going to do about this?" I said, "Well Sir, we can inspect the barracks and see if we can find people

38:30 with black paint on their hands." Which we did do. And then he said I would have to drive these other officers home. He didn't know I didn't have a drivers licence. So

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38:48 had a weapon carrier and he said, "I'm a bit pissed Harry, do you want to do the driving." I hadn't been drinking much because I was on duty. So I said, "I haven't got a licence. I'm not too good." So he said, "I'll show you."

39:00 So we put these poor army officers in the back and he was issuing me instructions on how to drive on the way. A weapon carrier was sort of an extension of a jeep. It would have two in the front and two rows of seats in the back. We had four army officers, two in each.

39:30 The weapon carrier was allocated to Bob and he had to teach me how to drive it. We had all been drinking...I shouldn't perhaps mention his name because this will be made public won't it? It might be upsetting for him. Can you scratch that out?

40:00 We'll just call him Bob. He would be quite happy with that. Not so much him but his relations might not like it. So to cut a long story short, we were taking a bend and I didn't take the bend too well, I went over the bend and there was a fire hydrant there, and I took the top of the fire hydrant off. There was water spouting up fifty feet high and I woke up with my left ear underneath the back wheel.

- 40:30 No one was hurt fortunately except the army blokes were a bit bruised. So Bob rang up the barracks and said, "We've had a bit of a problem with the vehicle, can you get someone out to take the army officers home?" They did and I felt pretty bad about it and I said, "We'd better find out if those blokes are okay." So we rang up the army. Got the barracks' officer to do it I think.
- 41:00 Spoke to the commanding officer and he said they had enjoyed themselves immensely but they were pretty sore the next day. I don't know what happened to them.

## Tape 6

00:34 **You were talking about driving those fellas home?**

Yes right. When it was all over there was a bit of an enquiry but nothing much happened about it. It was internal as far as the air force were concerned because it was a bit of an embarrassment after their tyres had been let down. The most indignant was the RC [Roman Catholic] padre because

- 01:00 not only did they let his tyres down, they painted his steering wheel black. His name was John Buckley and he was a great padre. How he used to get up and say Mass the next day I don't know. He knocked the grog around a bit. He's probably still living, but it was very true. But he was a good bloke. So about that time I was

- 01:30 interested in staying in the air force and I had put in for interim air force duties with the possibility of remaining as permanent air force. But then I got word from home that my Dad was very sick and things were just fair to middling. I had then thought of doing a rehab course in architecture and I put my name down for that. When I did get home I found out that

- 02:00 what was really needed was money because things were very tough. So when possible I retired from the air force and took my discharge in other words and I applied for a job with Woolworths and I became a trainee manager with them.

**How distressed was your mum when she found out the state of the family finances?**

She had a pretty good idea that things were pretty grim. But she

- 02:30 was a pretty strong lady. She was a loving mother and a loving wife. She was a really nice person. So it wasn't long after that that Dad died and that's when I found out how really bad things were...first, second and third mortgages. I had a 1946 Vauxhall van, a new car which I had had to wait 12 months for. I sold that and it helped to pay the bills.

- 03:00 I continued working for Woolworths.

**What sort of company was Woolworths in those days?**

It was an Australian company. They just had the Australian name. It was founded in 1923 in Sydney by some people named Christmas. I think there's some relations still living on the Gold Coast. So I managed most stores in Victoria because

- 03:30 I was single and I was a leading manager of various ones. I was fairly active in the RSL [Returned and Services League] in those days. I was on the committee of the local RSL, in the debating team, represented them in table tennis, and playing RSL competitive Australian Rules football.

**When you first left the air force did you find it hard to settle?**

Oh yes. Very difficult.

**Can you speak about that?**

- 04:00 Well it was a completely different life altogether. I didn't react too well to Woolworths at first. But I knew I would have to put my head down and my backside up to get anywhere. I had my first job as a store boy. I had to work as a store boy and I had a bad reaction with the storeman who was a corporal in the army and he knew I was

- 04:30 a flight lieutenant. He made me know that and would tell me I had to clean the windows twice a day. In the finish we became good mates. So I worked my way right through Woolworths' training scheme which was very good. From storeman to counter hand, floorman, section leader, stock control, buying.

- 05:00 And I became quite good at my job, and then I was appointed Branch Manager permanent at Woolworths North Melbourne. I spent a lot of time in court there with shoplifting. Basically I was a good manager.

**What do you mean you spent a lot of time in court?**

North Melbourne, Collingwood was very high in the criminal element and there was a lot of shoplifting. More so

- 05:30 than in the other branches. I can remember pulling a bloke named Herb Green up for the third time. He had only been caught that day for getting a hand full of socks and I chased him. Have you ever heard of Lou Richards? He had the pub next door with his Uncle Arty and Ron his brother. I chased Herb into the men's toilet down
- 06:00 there and he was feeding the socks down the toilet. I turned around and there's his mate with a .45 saying "Don't push any more of those socks down Herb, I've got him covered." He had this big pistol pointed at my head. And on the way out I said to Tom...I can't remember his second name. We had a permanent french polisher who used to polish the counters. I said to Tom, "Ring the CIB [Criminal Investigation Branch] and tell them I'm after a baddie."
- 06:30 He rang them straight away and just then I heard pitter patter coming down the stairs and a bloke name Jim Ryan and John Daley from the North Melbourne CIB and they grabbed this bloke. He got put away for a couple of charges I think. Firstly, for pulling a gun on me and secondly because he wasn't supposed to have one, and Herb got charged for pinching the socks. Just one of the things that happened at North Melbourne. And shoplifting was prevalent out there. I remember
- 07:00 being abused by one bloke. On one side of the shop we had self-service as we know it now, and he abused me. He said, "I nearly died the other night mate. You put the wrong bottle in with the metho [methylated spirits]. You put turps in with it." He had been drinking metho. So he got a bottle of turps by mistake and he blamed me for that.
- 07:30 **Roughly what year was this that you were working for Woollies?**
1946. I was with them for twelve years. I met my wife during that period and we got married. She was always very keen for us to have our own business. I was managing Woolworths in Brunswick which was a B Class store, a fairly big store. And then Dandenong and then I resigned to start a business with my wife and her brother and sister-in-law.
- 08:00 When I left Woolworths I missed the environment of a large company. Her brother-in-law developed cancer and died so the partnership broke up. We had a few other milk bars which we carried on with for a few years. But I decided I wanted to get back into direct selling and the only one I could get was with National Mutual Life Association.
- 08:30 Although I was management material with Woolworths, I hadn't had direct selling experience. It was an intangible but pretty hard and it made me a better salesman in years to come.
- What were people's views of insurance in those days?**
- Not very exciting. Insurance
- 09:00 has had a bit of a bad name for years. I can remember my Mum before she died, she made sure she took out a decent insurance policy. My Dad didn't agree with insurance. He would say they were a mob of thieves. They weren't of course, but the insurance industry didn't have a very good name. I concentrated on selling self important superannuation. I did it all by cold calling. I hated
- 09:30 the thought of calling on people cold but I managed to cure myself. I got on top of Manchester Building and called on every office from the top to the bottom, and by the time I got to the bottom I was cured. It didn't worry me from then on, and I did fairly well there. I was snapped up at one stage with an insurance broker who I had done business with, to join his company. That didn't work out and I won't go into details.
- 10:00 He's now since deceased He was a bit heavy on the grog and it wasn't my cup of tea. I still drank but only social drinking. Then I did a bit more training and joined ADS Anchor Data Systems as a sales rep. That was a West German company. I worked there pretty hard and I got good results and I was promoted to Retail Sales Manager
- 10:30 and then I was promoted to Special Divisions Sales Manager which looked after all government departments and big corporations, Kentucky Fried Chicken and things like that. Then a new Managing Director came out, a chap named Carl Seller who was a very astute person and who incidentally had been a member of the Hitler Youth.
- 11:00 And we used to talk about that. He was a fine man. We became great friends. He retired and has since deceased. He asked me if I would become Company Secretary as the company had been incorporated in Victoria and I agreed under certain circumstances. And I was appointed State Manager for Victoria and it was a position I held for about twelve years prior to my retirement. In the meantime my marriage was just about on the
- 11:30 rocks. I was flat out with work. I was working in Welfare for Ex-Service Associations and I had three terms as President of the Air Force Club of Victoria which was a licensed club with some twelve hundred members. I was also the Vice President of the RAAF Association of Victoria. So with that and four kids it was pretty heavy going.
- 12:00 **You were talking about the funny incident of taking the Japanese clients to McDonalds, what was it like working for a German company?**



It had its moment. The head office of the company was in Sydney although it was incorporated in Victoria. There was a lot of rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne and there always is in that respect. I got on okay.

- 12:30 What the Jerries didn't like about it was...Paul Van Bochoff who was the General Sales Manager, he's the fellow who said he was one of Rommel's intelligence officers, he didn't like the fact that I was getting more orders than he was. So that created a few problems. But in the finish I think he...when Carl Seller came out I think he dispensed with his services and it became more
- 13:00 easy going. But Victoria was still the top sales territory and that was because of my efforts and the fact that I had been able to train good people. But then it was getting me down. I felt I was on the edge of a bit of a breakdown. The stress was getting at me. At that time I told the Finance Director, a pommy that I was
- 13:30 thinking of retiring. I put in a superannuation scheme that was handled by National Mutual in those days. Superannuation was fairly new actually. I wanted to find out...I couldn't get any statements on the account. I was paying so much a week and they were supposed to be paying so much a week. I found out that they were a long, long way behind in their
- 14:00 contributions and things were just fair to middling there. Not that there was any dishonesty I don't think. It was just the fact that it was a slap dash way of doing things I had decided to give it away and I was silly enough to tell the Finance Director that I had it in mind to retire and I
- 14:30 wanted to train someone else to take over my position. He said, "That would be fine Harry. We would be very sorry to lose you, but when you put in your letter don't use the word resignation. Make sure you use the word retirement so it won't effect your Super." Little did I know, as the psychiatrist told me later on, you must have known they would get you in the finish because they fired me before hand.
- 15:00 That was...that came from Germany and that was the decision. I had a letter from my doctor well prior to that which I had shown the directors. One of the words that my doctor mentioned was that I was a walking time bomb and that
- 15:30 I should take something not so demanding and that I should retire. Have you ever heard of Slater and Gordon, the solicitors? They were very good. If I had gone to them I would have got all my money but I didn't. So I didn't get my superannuation. I got a couple of barristers' opinions on it but they weren't very good barristers I found out later on.
- 16:00 So I let it go. I got what I paid into it. I mentioned it to my Member of Parliament and he said he was quite sure I had been diddled to about twenty or thirty thousand dollars which was a fair bit of money in those days. He said he may be able to pour a bucket of water over it in parliament but it's not going to get you your money. So I let it go at that. My wife at the time had decided she wanted to go back to university.
- 16:30 She decided the marriage should be terminated so I then lost the support of my kids which was very distressing for me, and that's when I decided to come to Queensland.

**Can you tell me that funny story, the one you told at morning tea about the German...**

Oh Doctor Hursa Needen who was the President of the company. He didn't speak English. He did but it was always translated

- 17:00 at meetings. His offsider was Fritz Frowsier. He was the Sales Director and he was a good bloke. He was the one who told me I should learn German by the pillow. But Doctor Hursa Needen...he was congratulating Victoria on the fact that we were top sales in Australia which the Germans in Sydney didn't like very much, and he said, Herr Bentley
- 17:30 is the only member of staff that has bombed the factory. There was a big viaduct at the factory and they -- Bomber Command -- dropped a 12,000 bomb on it and a lot of people were killed. Pre-war the factory made sewing machines and during the war they made bayonets and machine guns. But that's war. That was written up in the London Times those comments.
- 18:00 **Could you just go back now and describe what it's actually like being in the turret?**
- It was uncomfortable to say the least. Getting in the aeroplane to start with with the big heavy flying suit which we wore except if we were doing low level jobs,
- 18:30 I had to be pushed in by Chalky the wireless operator and someone else. They had to push me in because I just about fit in and that was all. When I first got into them they had a swing up seat but when the swing up seat was there I couldn't get in properly so they finished up putting a modification on it and I think they put it in all our aircraft later on. There was just a canvas hammock sort of thing and you sat
- 19:00 on that. You couldn't wear your parachute because there was no room. In the rear turret, the parachute was stowed in the turret with the gunner. In the mid upper there was a bracket on the wall where you put your parachute.

19:30 I was comfortable in the turret because I knew what I had to do. And I preferred to fly in the mid upper turret because I had more control on vision. And I considered myself very alert and very good at my job and that was the place for me. The turret was a Frazer Nash turret which was a hydraulic turret which was susceptible to freezing up when you got up ...sometimes the oil would freeze in them and your turret was U/S [Unserviceable]. In planes

20:00 like the Halifaxes. They had Boulton Paul turrets which were electrical and they were faster. But they used to use anti-freeze oil in the guns and they themselves would usually operate but sometimes the turret themselves would...and you had a handle...which was a hopeless job if you were trying to keep your eye on a fighter.

20:30 Basically it was what I became accustomed to. I thought it was good and it was a good position for me to be in.

**How well could you see?**

The turret would rotate three hundred and sixty degrees so you could see all around. You could see above. There was a clear turret over the top. You could see if the bombs were coming down. The only blind

21:00 spot was there and there. You couldn't see over unless the pilot dropped the wing. Really it was the best spot on the aircraft to be as a protective measure and an alert gunner to be. I've flown in the rear turret but you could only see there and there and part of the way up there.

21:30 **You talked a bit before about having to be careful and not looking at the searchlights and so forth. Can you talk about how your eyesight may be improved because of having to fly at night?**

My eye sight at the age of seventy. I have to have an eye sight test ever year and it's six by six. Spot on. I use

22:00 glasses only for close ups. Except for this problem which I've just got now and which has just happened. My eye sight is good.

**Was it something you got used to seeing more of when you were flying? Like you got used to seeing in my detail when you were flying at night?**

Well night vision was something that you became very good at.

22:30 You had to ...particularly, not so much fighters. You had to be able to pick out a fighter as well if it was going to attack you. But looking at other aeroplanes. In the bomber stream there's no navigation lights on of course. And the only indication that you're getting close to another aircraft which could be dangerous in the aspect of a collision...

23:00 if the aircraft jumped it meant you were in the slip stream. If there was one ahead of you, you could see their exhaust from their engines. From the moment I took off I was on the job until I landed. Completely. And I think that was probably one reason why the doctor gave me the caffeine tablets to make sure I stayed that way.

**Do you ever feel that because you had had pilot training**

23:30 **that you understood aircraft better when you got to be a gunner?**

Oh yes I'm sure I did because I was nominated by the crew as second pilot in case anything happened to the pilot. If they could have got me out of the turret. I flew the Lancaster on a number of occasions on cross countries. The pilot had to be out for me to get in.

24:00 The aircraft itself was a very good aircraft to fly, very sensitive and stable. A beautiful aeroplane. If you've got time before you go I'll just wait the first part of that tape and you'll hear the engines of the Lancaster.

**When you found out that you weren't going to be a pilot you must have been obviously very disappointed?**

Oh extremely disappointed.

24:30 **Later on in the war was there still any of that disappointment?**

Oh no not really because I had a job to do. I could have sulked about it perhaps but that would have been stupid. The thing was I had not only myself to look after. I had my crew and a team of about sixty gunners. When I finished my tour of operations, the flight commander, a chap by the name of Arthur

25:00 Doubleday, who was later in the DCA [Department of Civil Aviation] as Regional Director for New South Wales. He recommended I be retrained as a pilot and if I had stayed in the air force I'm sure that's what would have happened.

**Did you have cameras on your guns at all?**

No not on operations no.

**What about in training?**

Yes we used to use those when we were working with Spitfires or Hurricanes.

25:30 They were also fitted up with camera guns. And at the end of the day they could see who got shot down and where your errors were. If you weren't giving enough deflection. It was quite an art.

**What can you tell us about superstitions or rituals when you were flying for good luck?**

Me

26:00 personally I was not happy about having photographs taken. It was something I think we all felt before we went. I used to say a prayer before I went, every day. Every time I got in the aeroplane I would say, "Just one more Lord if you wouldn't mind." And I suppose the Jerry night flyers were saying the same thing too. No I wasn't superstitious at all, not really.

**Did you see any other funny things?**

I wasn't looking for that, so I didn't see anything no.

26:30 **What about...what can you tell us about mateship on the crew?**

Mateship on a crew was the greatest thing...the camaraderie. It was the only good thing as far as I was concerned. It was wonderful for one another. One or two of them used to get out of line but we would stick together like glue.

27:00 We were very professional in our work. I flew with five crews and they were all excellent.

**Can you recall incidents where you maybe used humour to break tension?**

It was tried once in one crew I was with and then it was really knocked on the head because it wasn't professional.

**Can you tell us about that time?**

No.

27:30 **What about just after an operation, letting off steam?**

Well Michele, it was difficult. When we hit the ground we were put in a truck and then debriefed and given a cup of hot tea, and then a meal. But we had to try and get some sleep because we would be doing the same thing the next night.

28:00 And the next night, and the next night after that. So, there was no relaxation, really unless it was what we called ops [operation] were scrubbed for weather. If there was a stand down for two or three days well that's when we let our hair down, and that was mainly playing up in the mess.

**Can you talk us through a briefing before you**

28:30 **go out on an operation?**

A general briefing? First of all, when it was decided that operations were on that night all telephone lines were cut from the outside world. No phone calls were allowed in or out. Armed guards were put on the briefing room. RAF Regiment would do that. And we would be told that briefing would be at such and such a time.

29:00 And all the crews would assemble in the briefing room. Curtains were drawn so nobody could see. A map of the target area was on a big black board like that on the wall. That was covered and then when all the crews were in and they had been checked in, the doors secured, the commanding officer of the squadron would arrive and he would be accompanied quite often by the station commander, the group captain.

29:30 And maybe another stooge or someone, or someone like the met [meteorological officer] officer. They would come in. Everybody would rise and the wing commander would say, "Good evening gentleman," or, "Good afternoon," whatever the case would be. "...the target for tonight is..." And someone would say, "Shit the big city again." You'd hear the sigh go up.

30:00 And he would go through the route where we were going and point out areas where we should be careful. The intelligence officer might say watch out for Archen, there's ack ack there. You'd be going north of Stuttgart and then they would tell

30:30 us whether Bomber Command were putting on a diversionary raid and what the details were in that. Quite often...have you ever heard of Window. Window was a metal strip which was dropped in bundles and it gave the impression there were a lot of aeroplanes. So Mosquitos and even with our own aeroplanes we would throw these bundles out

- 31:00 and it would confuse the German radar. Then when that general briefing was over he would say, 'Good luck and good flying.' One of them used to say 'God bless you' too. And then it was section briefings. I would have the gunners in and brief then on what type of aeroplanes they should be looking for and how they should
- 31:30 tackle them. And then the bomb aimer would brief his bomb aimers on the run up areas to the target. The navigation leader would do the same and then when that was all finished we'd go to the mess and have a meal. It would usually be take off time after that and then we'd go down and try our parachutes out and put the big chutes on. Then we'd be driven out in the trucks.
- 32:00 Then we'd wait there until it was time for us to start up. The aeroplanes used to be started by external batteries. They'd do one engine at a time. The starboard inner engine was the one that used to operate the mid upper turret. The outer would operate the rear turret. And there was no radio communication at all and we would take off.
- 32:30 Say there were thirty aeroplanes and we would take off at thirty second intervals. So it was a continual stream. We would go on a green light and all the aeroplanes would take off every thirty seconds.

**When you're all sitting on the tarmac waiting to take off...**

That's when the tummy used to give you the butterflies, just the waiting. Once you got in there you were right.

- 33:00 And you could see it with some blokes. They might be smoking cigarettes...the last smoke before we got in.

**So in the briefing session was that a one way dialogue or could you ask questions?**

Yes you could ask questions.

- 33:30 The odd captain asked a question or two I think. They might say any questions but what can you say. You were told to go and that was it. We used to get questions mainly in individual briefings, like in the sections, but that was just normal routine stuff.

**So how good was the intelligence?**

- 34:00 Well the worst part was the met usually. It was very difficult to give us accurate meteorology reports. They used to give us winds and that. It was not the best and the met reports were the worst I'd say. The intelligence reports...we knew where all the heavy flak was after a while. We knew what to expect.
- 34:30 It was a matter of form.

**I'm just wondering how hard it was to have your bacon and eggs before you went out?**

Considering you couldn't get bacon and eggs in England, so it was great. The tummy nerves never had any effect on that.

- 35:00 **When you get back from an operation can you talk us through a general debrief?**

Right, first of all we'd walk in and they'd give us a cup of tea. I never drank tea. There'd be a table about six or eight feet long. It was rectangular. Two at the top and tail and the crew would sit around it. There would be a list

- 35:30 of questions that he would ask. I remember can't remember all the questions, but one of the questions might be, did you have any attacks from night fighters on the way in? Or did you see any aircraft shot down to the target? And then up to the target he might talk about the target area. Was the target satisfactorily marked by the Pathfinder Force?
- 36:00 Did you see Wild Boar fighters in the target area? Did you see any aircraft shot down in the target area? By whom? Did you have any problem with other bombers bombing on top of you? Then he'd ask us about anything special on the way out...did we have any problems? It was pretty routine stuff.

**So if everything's**

- 36:30 **going really fast when you're in the thick of it, when you come back to a debriefing, is it difficult to recall things clearly?**

Oh yes, it's only a matter of hours or minutes since it happened so it's fresh in your mind. That's why they had it so quickly. So you wouldn't forget what happened. We were asked if we saw any jet aircraft? The Me262 [Messerschmitt] was just coming into effect.

- 37:00 It was a jet fighter in 1944 and we used to see a few of those. And they wanted to know how many aircraft we saw shot down. Did we see any chutes coming out of them?

**When you're firing at aircraft and being fired at, what's your perception of time? Do things move slower. Can you talk about that at all?**

No time at all.

- 37:30 When you're in combat, you've got your sights on it and you fire. It's just a matter of time, just a matter of results. Adrenalin would be high. Did I tell you I was physically sick once. That was somewhere...I can't remember where it was.
- 38:00 I think it was not far from Munich. There was an aeroplane, a Lancaster about fifty feet above us. It was attacked by a fighter and it was completely enveloped in flames. I saw two blokes jump out and their parachutes were on fire. I didn't have any feeling of fear at the time and the next thing I know I vomited. Fortunately I
- 38:30 took my oxygen mask off because I feel it coming. But that's the only time I was sick. It didn't expect it but it came just like that.

## Tape 7

### 00:32 **Righto, tell us about the ASC [Army Service Corps] job?**

In the mess at Waddington, the air officer commanding the base was Air Commodore Hesscoth, a great man. He had a face like a pug. He looked like an ex boxer. He and Group Captain Sam Ellsworthy, they made a great team. The air commodore had a French Bulldog and

- 01:00 I forget its name now, but if you put your beer on the floor and you weren't watching, the bloody dog would drink your beer before you knew it. So that's where I got a liking for bulldogs. I came back to Australia and I was working for Woolworths, another trainee manager was a bloke named Bert Dunn. He was an ex lieutenant in the Armoured Division in the AIF.
- 01:30 He and I bred British Bulldogs and a bit of a funny side of that was...we had two bitches. One was Colleen of Kilkenny. She was a very good bitch and the other one was Kathy. We named her after Bert's fiancée. We were both at that stage working at the Woolworths store in Burke Street Melbourne doing what was called storemen or section heads.
- 02:00 The phone went one day and it was my Mum on the phone and the receptionist took the message and said, "I'll tell them straight away Mrs Bentley." She said to Bert, "Where's Harry, his mother's just phoned up. Colleen's just broken her water and he has to go home straight away." They thought it was my wife. Bert said, "Don't worry, I'll go." They couldn't quite make that out.
- 02:30 The bulldog was a manufactured breed. In the old days they stood about that high and they used to use them for bull baiting. But it was manufactured down to a small size with a big head. If the bitch had a breech presentation it was inclined to turn and pull the puppy out by its mouth and kill it. So you had to be present at each birth.
- 03:00 You had to break the sack and tie the cord. I got quite expert at it. Bert and I were making a business of that selling British Bulldog puppies.

### **Were they worth a bit of money back then?**

Yes they were about seventy pounds which was pretty good money in those days. I remember there was one called Percy. We thought he was still born and we wrapped him up in newspaper and put him on the ironing board and he fell off and starting barking and we got seventy pound for him. So that was my little adventure with Bert in dog breeding.

- 03:30 Cambridge Kennels we used to call it. I've still got the certificates for First Prize with Colleen of Kilkenny. A great bitch she was.

### **You told me before earlier on....you would be ready to do an operation and it would be scrubbed because of the weather over the target. What sort of feeling was that?**

In some respects it was one

- 04:00 of extreme relief. We used to take off sometimes when you could hardly see in front of you because of the weather. The weather was bad where we were but it was supposed to be good where we were going. On some occasions it was that bad it was dangerous to taxi the aircraft. When you remember there were four engine bombers taking off every thirty seconds. You just couldn't afford to...well, the odd one did crash.
- 04:30 As I told you, young Frizzle being killed. But Jack McManis who flew S for Sugar....now that was a very famous Lancaster. It's in the Bomber Command museum in Hendon It flew one hundred and thirty-seven trips. Jack finished up being a captain for Qantas and he died of a brain tumour about 5 years ago. Twice he had to abort his takeoff because it was swinging so hard to the right
- 05:00 and he couldn't hold it. Fortunately he went around and taxied and took off, but when the white light - the white Very cartridge went up we knew the op had been suspended - went up, it was great relief because we knew the weather was really bad.

**Do you think any of the blokes became fatalist when they knew that the chances of them surviving were so slim?**

Oh I think some of them did.

05:30 **Was that a dangerous thing?**

Yes it would have been a dangerous thing. A couple of times I did...part of my job as an officer first, going overseas on the ship...a few of the blokes were married men and they were missing their wives terribly, and I had to censor their letters. That was part of the job.

06:00 I had to cut out anything that shouldn't have been said. And there were a couple of incidences where they gave the impression that they doubted they would come back. I can remember my indication of that. We were lining up to go up onto the SS Mount Vernon at Sydney Docks to go to the UK. There was a sergeant pilot in front of me. I won't mention his name. He got to the bottom of the ladder and he said, I've changed my mind. I'm not going.

06:30 I said, "Off you go, don't be silly." But he said, "No, I've changed my mind. That's it for me." So I saw an SP [Security Police] and I pulled him over. It was my first job as an officer. I said, "The sergeant has decided not to go to war." The got another SP picked up his bag and just carted him away. So he had reservations at the last minute.

**Would that be the sort of thing**

07:00 **like if they were writing home and telling their loved ones that they didn't expect to make it home, would that be something you would censor?**

No. It was mainly where we were and what we were doing. No I wouldn't censor that.

**So who censored the letters of the censor?**

Nobody. Not that I know of.

**So if you sent mail, who would censor your mail?**

Nobody. As a commissioned officer I think that was something we were trusted with.

07:30 **Tell me, did you test fire your weapons after you had taken off?**

On occasions yes, we would test fire. We'd fire a burst out over the North Sea or something like that.

**You mentioned that time too when you had to take your three pairs of gloves off to try and unjam it. Can you recall any other occasions when the weapon jammed or the turret stopped working?**

08:00 There were occasions when the turret stopped working correctly but that was the only time that the machine gun jammed.

**So what happens when the turret jams?**

It's usually that it's frozen. The hydraulics have frozen up and you have to use a manual handle to turn it which was pretty hopeless. But we didn't have any attacks and when we got down lower it worked itself out.

**Did you ever do any parachute training?**

08:30 Not for me, but there was later on I believe.

**And you can tell me about your brother. He was in a reserved occupation wasn't he?**

Yes. Instrument making. I'm not too sure what he was doing but I think it was in relation to bombsight parts or something like that.

**So he did that sort of work prior to the war?**

Yes.

09:00 **And was that civilian?**

Yes civilian.

**I was also interested if you could tell us a bit more about the Wirraways. You're the first person we've spoken that's actually flown them. So what can you tell us about the Wirraway?**

I've got the logbook to start with if you're interested.

**No just describe it.**

It was a copy of the NA16 [North American]. It was manufactured down at Commonwealth Aircraft. It was a front line

09:30 aeroplane and there is a case where one did actually shoot down a Zero. You've probably heard of that. It was a big jump from a Tiger Moth to a Wirraway. It was like getting out of a shack into a two story building. Before we were allowed to fly them we had to know the cockpit drill completely. They had a Pratt and Whitney...I forget the number of horsepower but it was

10:00 a very heavy engine. It was an unforgiving aircraft. In my opinion you couldn't afford to make too many mistakes in it. I think I told you about my poor mate who dropped the wing coming in. He stalled it.

**You also spoke of the mid air collision when you only had time to shout 'up'!**

Well the skipper knew my voice and he didn't hesitate. He just

10:30 pulled it up and as he pulled up he could see the other one.

**Did you ever see any other mid air collisions between Lancasters?**

No, but there must have been. I didn't see them but I'm sure there were.

**What about bombs actually being dropped from one aircraft and actually hitting another?**

That was fairly common. Particularly in the way of incendiaries. The incendiary bombs were probably about two feet long. They were in canisters and they'd drop...there

11:00 were occasions when some aircraft had been hit by an incendiary bomb and it had pierced the fuselage. It had to be put out by the crew on board. I'm sure there were a lot of aircraft lost...when you get hit by a four thousand pounder, then you had no hope.

**And when you're on bombing missions...**

See you've got to remember too Peter, there might have been say

11:30 five, six or seven hundred aeroplanes in the air. They didn't fly in formation because at night there was just a stream and you had to just by vigilance keep out of one another's way. The Germans called it carpet bombing and that's a fair enough way of describing it. But towards the end of the war, 1943, 1944,

12:00 targets were clearly marked by the Pathfinder Force and they were done very accurately. They used to drop what we called TIs, Target Indicators. And that's what we would actually bomb.

**You must have had such a fantastic view. Like your position on the aircraft would be a lot more than a lot of other people...besides the pilot.**

I would have had a better view than the pilot.

12:30 I had a three hundred and sixty degree view. The navigator as I said got out of his office once and had one look and he never did it again. The wireless operator was inside. There was the bomb aimer, the pilot and the two gunners who ...and the engineer standing next to the pilot. He was a very important person as well.

**So what's running through your mind when you've got a thousand spotlights on you and**

13:00 **flak going off and there's hundreds of aircraft in the air?**

It's just a matter of getting on with your job and concentrating on what you've been trained to do. And if you didn't do that I think you would have probably gone bonkers. I just made sure I was kept busy the whole bloody time. Did my job and that was it. That saved me and saved the crew on more than one occasion.

**Can you tell us about your DFC?**

There's not much to talk about there.

13:30 I could show you the citations.

**But can you tell us about it?**

I got it for...the bloke that I went to Nuremberg, Flight Sergeant Gibbs apparently recommended me for a DFC after shooting down the Messerschmitt 110. He put it in an article in the paper. But the RAF don't accept recommendations from non commissioned officers.

14:00 I just got it for good service and staying alive.

**Weren't there any reasons?**

Are you ready for that now. It was awarded for...it mentioned the fact that I was involved in bombing raids in Berlin on nine occasions on

14:30 very heavily defended targets. I showed great accuracy and devotion to duty, courage and I was an inspiration to the other air gunners. That's basically what it said, and the King very graciously decided

to grant the award for gallantry.

**Where did the spent cartridges from your machine guns go?**

15:00 In the mid upper turret? They would fall into the fuselage all over the place.

**How many rounds...can you actually tell us the armament of those weapons was?**

We only had point .303 machine guns and the Americans had point fives so ours was a smaller calibre. The rear turret had four and the mid upper turret had two machine

15:30 guns. They used to fire rounds at eleven hundred rounds per minute. They were made up of armour piercing, tracer, explosive and ....so when you fired them...no, explosive,

16:00 tracer, armour piercing and I forget what the other ones were. But when you fired them you could see... it was a bit of a trap. You should never try and spray them onto a target. You had to use your sights properly. In other words you wouldn't hose the aircraft you were shooting at. I remember on one combat

16:30 I ran out of ammunition in one of my guns so I complained bitterly to the armourer. I told him to make sure he put a full amount in the guns. If I was to put all that into one tank...we had one tank on either side, he said you would probably bugger up the barrel and we'd have to get a new barrel. So I said, "Don't worry about getting another barrel, just give me enough bullets.

**What happened there when you ran out of bullets?**

Nothing. I had shot the aircraft down any way and there was one still firing.

17:00 **And were they linked and firing in synchronisation?**

Yes. You had a tank of ammunition on your right hand side and a tank on your left hand side for each side. So you actually squeezed...you could push one trigger and fire one gun or push two and fire two. The rear gunner had a lot more ammunition

17:30 because his was stored in the fuselage of the aeroplane. It was limited storage space in the mid upper turret.

**Did you ever do any sorties in the Lancaster in the rear turret?**

Not operational no.

**So they have four in the back in the rear, how many triggers do they have?**

Just the two.

**So is the top left and bottom left linked?**

That's right yes.

18:00 **The twenty-one lessons you were talking about on pre-enlistment, it's a tall order...do you know what all the lessons were?**

It would have been on mathematics; physics...basically that's what it was. For me it wasn't too bad because I was young and just fresh from school....just to bring us up to a standard where we could navigate a plane properly.

18:30 **So it was twenty-one lessons but not necessarily twenty-one subjects?**

No no. It was a step up each time.

**As a young fellow and as a result of your whooping cough cure that didn't quite work, how different was it for you as a young kid growing up in a world where you couldn't communicate?**

It was pretty bad.

19:00 As I said I think I had a bit of a complex about it. I managed to overcome that when I started to speak.

**How was your grandma received at home when she did that to you?**

Everybody loved her. She was doing her best. Like my Dad when he took me up in the aeroplane. That was terrible. He would never do it again of course.

**Can you tell us a bit more about the wharf work you did?**

19:30 I worked for a company called Timber Transport and Storage. They were on Lower South Wharf. They were timber importers. I was a junior tally clerk and I used to have to count the loads of timber that would come off the ship. I could add up very quickly in those days. I was fairly good at it. Then we went

20:00 over to the North Wharf, the wharfies had me as the cockatoo. What they had was cages. Valuable stuff



used to be put in locked cages so pilfering was kept to a minimum.

**Just about every single veteran we've spoken to at least from the army and navy**

20:30 **has a very low opinion of wharf workers. Was there ever any opinion gathered of them from an air force point of view?**

We had very little to do with them I guess really. I had nothing whatsoever to do with them really. The only time I was on a ship were the troops ships and they were manned by the American navy on both occasions. Except coming back from Morotai.

21:00 We were on an Australian troop ship going to Ambon and that was when we were chasing up the details for this Court of Enquiry.

**What was the washup of that?**

I'm not too sure actually. I'd like to get a copy from Freedom of Information of our findings on that and go back and refresh my memory because it has come up on the Internet where who ever it is who's looking for

21:30 information on that particular incident...I've got a squadron leader friend...there's a bit of a story attached to this...who had come back from twelve months training in England with the RAF. While he was over there he saw a flight lieutenant jacket in one of these shops where they sell second hand equipment and stuff like that. It had my name in the inside of it, and he got in touch

22:00 with me. It was my jacket. I could show it to you. I've got a photograph of it actually. He's now back in Australia. He's a squadron leader. I haven't met him but he got through to me via the people who marketed this photograph of the Lancaster, the Band of Brothers. He wrote to me and we've been in constant contact since. He's a nice young bloke.

22:30 He knew that I was on a Court of Enquiry and he said did I know that there's enquiries being made on the Internet now about VH CIZ [identification number for the missing C47]. The C47 from 35 Squadron. He said there were people looking for information on that particular event. I think it must be some of the children from the victims of that particular case.

23:00 He gave me the web site for it but I couldn't get it up. I don't know much about computers yet, but he's chasing that through for me. I did find an Internet address where people are asking for information and I've sent my name to them. I was unhappy about one aspect of that and I can't remember what it was. The

23:30 aircraft was missing. It was tragic of course, the prisoners of war and the nurses and the crew of course, they just disappeared.

**You got quite emotional before when you spoke of John Curtin's visit. You obviously thought a lot of him. Can you tell us about that?**

I thought he was one of Australia's finest Prime Minister's actually.

24:00 One, because he stood up to Winston Churchill. Winston Churchill wasn't going to send those troops back from the Middle East to Australia. He wanted them to go to Burma and places like that, but John Curtin just wouldn't be in it. He said they were to come home to Australia. I don't know if you know that John Curtin was an alcoholic. When he became Prime Minister he didn't have another drink after that. I'm sure the pressure

24:30 of his duties as Prime Minister caused his early death. There's no two ways about that. I thought he was a fine man. I've got a book on John Curtin. I know his life and the whole works and I'm proud of him. I thought he was a wonderful Prime Minister.

**How did you feel when you heard of his death?**

Pretty upset actually. Ben Chifley took over of course and he did a pretty good job to the end of the war.

25:00 He was an engine driver and they were sort of tarred with the same brush. John Curtin I think was a journalist originally.

**You said how they first turned up that night and the cameras turned up and you thought 'bloody cameras'.**

Yes.

**So, obviously who it was, turned it all around?**

Completely. We felt so proud as a crew that he had come to see us. We represented the squadron of course, and

25:30 the fact that he rang up the next day to see if we got back okay.

**How long did the buzz of that visit stay with you for?**

A while. You've seen the photograph in my study. I think that's in the War Museum.

**You mentioned that the mechanics were called Erks. Where did that come from?**

Erk? I'm not sure. They called them Erks

26:00 but I can't place it. But you could do a bit of research and find out.

**Were there any other nicknames amongst the ground crew and the aircrew?**

The flight sergeant was called chief. Someone who wasn't quite up to speed was a drongo. A few...I can't think of any off hand.

26:30 Being a polite lad I always tried to address people as they should have been addressed. My mother taught me to be polite. I would say too thank you both for coming and I've enjoyed meeting you and you're both fine Australians and I appreciate the time you're taking.

27:00 **Can you tell us a bit more about the debrief you had after the first crash?**

Ah yes, the debrief after the first crash. There wasn't much of a debrief. I think it was about twelve hours before we were recovered, then they brought us back. It was pretty late at night. We were taken up to the hospital or first aide section or whatever it was. We were presented there

27:30 and there was a mess party on and these two doctors arrived and they said, "You two blokes, you're all right are you?" We said, "Yes sir, we're okay." Nowadays we would have had collars put around our necks and checked over properly. It was pretty casual and I think the last thing they would have expected at that time of night would have been to come around and look at aircrew involved in a crash.

28:00 **You said the flight sergeant pilot wanted to burn the aircraft.**

I didn't say he wanted to burn it. I said he wanted a match. I don't know if he smoked. That flight sergeant pilot is a very well known airline pilot these days. He might have been saying that in fun. I'm sure he was.

28:30 **Can you tell us, before you went to war can you remember Anzac Day as a kid?**

No not much because my Dad wasn't ex-service. But I can remember it and I remember going. My kids have never been to an Anzac Day march in their life which was on account of their mother who was a lovely person, but her Dad served in World War I and World War II and he was an alcoholic.

29:00 She would use the expression that she, "Didn't like Anzac Day because it reminds me of my father." He died in a mental institution. I was with him when he died. So my kids missed out on it but with my grand kids, it's a different proposition. They like having a grandfather who was flying in the war.

**So you told us that when you came back to Australia you got fairly involved in the RSL and such, what did Anzac Day mean to you once you returned?**

29:30 It's an extremely precious day. A day of great ceremony and memory of the fellas who were lost. In the early days of Anzac Day the hotels weren't allowed to be opened until after 1 o'clock. Services in the morning and we went to the Dawn Service, then we marched and had our reunions.

30:00 But we never ever forgot the blokes who we served with and didn't return. I think that's common with all ex service people.

**So have you always marched?**

I've marched most of the time but there were the odd times that I could because of physical reasons. There were a couple of times when I was President of the Air Force Club of Victoria, it was necessary for me to be on hand

30:30 to do a few things.

**So where do your thoughts go on Anzac Day?**

To the blokes who didn't come back for sure. They shall not grow old as we grow old. We will never forget them. When you think of it, in Bomber Command alone there were seventy-six thousand casualties and fifty-six thousand killed. And as far as the RAAF the highest

31:00 casualties were in Europe, then the Middle East - don't quote me on this - and then the South West Pacific. Very high over there.

**When you were working in the Pacific theatre, did you fly any operational sorties up there?**

Only as an observer on a couple of occasions. It was unofficial remember.

**Were you ever fired at?**

No. The war was practically over.

31:30 **I was going to ask you about when you heard about the end of the war...how did you hear about it?**

I was in the operational room and we got signals through that any actions had to cease forthwith and then there were army up there to and they had submachine guns and they went wild. It was great rejoicing.

32:00 I was in Melbourne, down for the investiture of my DFC when the war in Europe finished and we marched from the top of Spencer Street down to Collins Street. We started off ten abreast and we finished up single file going past the Hotel Australia there. It was a pretty beery sort of a day that one.

32:30 **How did you find out about your DFC?**

I got a letter from Air Vice Marshal Rigley. It was addressed to H Bentley, DFC and a bit of ribbon in it. He said congratulations, stick it on your chest. My poor Mum...I got a photocopy of the telegram today for the project I'm working on....the telegram came and

33:00 anyone who got a telegram in the old days, they went white. But the little telegraph boy said, "It's all right, it's good news." It was just congratulations from the air force saying your son has been awarded the DFC and full details will be sent.

**What were the best things about coming home from England?**

Seeing the family. I loved my Mum and Dad and my brother.

33:30 **And that first night when you were at home, it must have been even worse than today with all the questions being fired at you?**

Yes, I can't remember it all though. All I can remember was going down that street, Cambridge Street which was a small street in Brighton, a middle class suburb and every house had a bloody Australian flag outside, welcoming me home.

34:00 So, now it's 1700 hours.

**The fact that you were the nominated second pilot on the Lancaster, when you're in a position in the upper turret...**

It was bloody hopeless. That was it.

**Was there anyone else who maybe should have done that?**

I don't think anybody wanted to do it

34:30 and I don't think the Skipper would have been happy with anyone else. See there was no dual controls. When he got out and I got in I was in charge of the aeroplane. There was no dual control on it.

**Was it easier to get out of the rear turret than it was the mid upper turret?**

Oh yes much easier.

**So was there any consideration that you should have been there?**

35:00 No when I say get out, the rear gunner would turn his turret on a beam and just push the doors out and jump out.

**I'm saying about if you had to get out of your position?**

Look, if I had to get out somehow or other I probably would have got out. Someone would have pulled me out. But it was a hopeless situation having only one pilot. I can think of only one occasion where Bill Reed the VC, he had his aircraft flown back by the engineer and

35:30 he was badly wounded. It's pretty hopeless really. If the pilot can't fly you've got Buckley's really. But it was just a thought I suppose. More like a back seat driver.

**And you spoke about the boss having the French bull dog...**

He wasn't the boss. He was the air officer commanding. air commodore.

36:00 **Were there any other blokes in the squadron who had pets or anything else like that?**

Not that I'm aware of. I think perhaps the Group Captain's wife had a dog, and I know Guy Gibson had a dog...from the Dam Busters. He had his own dog and I think Black Jack Walker up in the Pacific. He had an Alsatian. He was a Group Captain too.

36:30 **So how many girlfriends do you think you had all up?**

In England? Well you couldn't really count Elizabeth as a girlfriend. You couldn't count Maria or Teresa from the States. Barbara would be the only one.

**I've heard that the Royal Australian air force blokes were quite distinguishable apart from the**

**RAF blokes...**

Well we used to wear a different colour uniform to start with.

**And the ladies were pretty**

37:00 **attracted to them in that respect, can you talk a bit about the blokes in the Squadron with their quest for ladies?**

For romances and things like that? I think we all did reasonably well you know. Nothing special. I was pretty young. Jack McManis was about my age. We didn't know much about sex until we were taught hygiene in the air force. That's really true.

37:30 Being two boys in the one family I knew very little about the female anatomy, I can tell you that.

**Were there any long-term romances that blossomed out of those...**

Oh yes. Bill McKay, he married a girl from Nottingham. She came back to Australia and she died of cancer years ago. He's deceased now too Bill.

**You don't recall any blokes getting into trouble with different things?**

Oh yes I can.

38:00 The thing that surprised me were the blue light outfits and the blue light stations. When we were in camp there was always this hut with a blue light. I never knew what it was for. But you had to pick up your condoms there.

**Just quickly, do you want to tell us about that photograph you showed me...was it your uncle?**

Oh yes, Uncle Fred. His name was

38:30 Fred Fielding and he was Captain of Sandhurst Football Team. He was a full forward and he was a great footballer and he was a fireman in Bendigo. He was born in Bendigo. He joined the AIF when he was about twenty-four, when the war started. He went down to Melbourne and enlisted, did his Rookies Course and then said, "Righto private you're now batman to captain so and so." He

39:00 said, "Pig's arse." I'm sure that's what he would have said. He said, "I came to fight a war not to be a batman." I had a batman, we all did as officers particularly in the RAF. So he did a bunk. And I've got the copies of the Court of Enquiry from the Archives in Canberra

39:30 where he was dishonourably discharged...classified as a deserter. But he made his way over to West Australia as soon as that happened. How he got there I don't know. But he joined the 28th Battalion which is a West Australian battalion and he took his father's surname...no, his mother's surname which is Gleeson and his father's Christian name which is James. So he was James Gleeson. He picked up a dose as we used to call it.

40:00 He had VD [Venereal Disease] on the ship and he was treated for that. He must have been a wild bloke because he was fined about four times for being absent without leave and I think he would have been chasing the French girls. But he was wounded twice and then back again into action in the trenches and on the big push on the eighth of August...

40:30 there was a very big push, it was the change of the war, he was wounded in the legs and run over by a British tank and killed. I've got the place on the map where they buried him. This is all through the war museum. So I have a lot of respect for him.

**Can you tell us a bit about what you want to do next year?**

Yes next year I've been invited by Doctor John Pierre Benamo who is the Director of the Battle of Normandy Museum to return. He said to me in his letter at Christmas time, he said, "Harry it would be wonderful if you could make the trip again. So many from 1994 are no longer with us. Johnny Johnson for one who was the top British Ace and a few other names." And he said, "God speed if you can come." So I've been invited to go. I didn't reply to it until recently but I am going to do my best to get back there. It was nice to get the Normandy Medal from the mayor and he treated me like a lost son over there.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**