Australians at War Film Archive

Eric Silbert (Rick) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:31 **Okay if you could tell me a little bit about what you remember about growing up in Fremantle?**

That's easy. I was born in a very fine home in Ellen Street, which overlooked the Fremantle Park, which in those days was probably the biggest park in the metropolitan area. So it was terrific, it was a bit

01:00 like living next to a lake or a river or something because every time I put my head out of the door there was a big grassy spot out the front. And it was an interesting street to grow up in because those were the days when draught horses pulled all of the traffic around the Fremantle wharf and then they came up the hill to be put away for the night, so draught horses went by at night time and deliveries were done by horse and cart outside the front so it was

01:30 fond memories of that sort of thing. In the distance was the Bushell's Tea warehouse which was four storeys high. Not there now, it was the only tall building in Fremantle and we could see the tops of the ships in the distance from the wharf, so and in the far distance was the old women's home, now the art museum. Tragically, if we stood on our veranda we could see all of the old ladies walking about. They were probably all of

02:00 about sixty now I come to think of it, old ladies. But it was an absolute penitentiary, terrible. It was a fine home, it was on a block and a half, my father was a very colourful personality, kidded the council into giving him the extra width, so it was a fine big home with a hundred rose trees in it, so it was a wonderful place to grow up.

Can you tell me a little bit about what your parents were doing during this time?

02:30 Well, where they came from? My parents' families both came out to Western Australia in 1880, although Mum wasn't born here, she was here before she was one, went to Girton College and then went to the convent in Perth, was a great violinist, became the First Violinist in what's now called WASO [Western Australia Symphony Orchestra], the symphony orchestra in Perth, and also the Fremantle Symphony Orchestra.

03:00 Dad was just a funny colourful guy and worked for his uncle who had Silbert and Sharp stores throughout the goldfields in the gold rush and then of course when the gold rush finished he came down to Perth, met my mother, it was something of an arranged marriage and they started a fancy goods store in High Street in Fremantle.

Can you tell me a little bit about what is actually in a fancy goods store?

03:30 Before the days of Woolworth and Coles, a fancy goods store sold all of the knick-knacks: cups and saucers, papers and toys, hardware, a bit of everything. Of course later, then Woolworths and Coles came in with chain stores of everything. This was before that era we are talking about, they were married in 1913, so that store was open in Fremantle in High Street. And Dad had

04:00 eye trouble so he wasn't a soldier but he had a vehicle so he drove it as an ambulance during the war. But they had that store and then the eldest sister died and they took over that shop on the corner of High and Market Street, which became Barney Silberts, and today if you go down to the cappuccino strip, you'll see on the corner up the top, Barney Silberts, which

04:30 I am still proud about because it is the family's name. And my brother and I when we both left school we went and worked for our parents.

Did you have any little jobs like when you were a kid in the store?

Oh yes. I handled the cash register for sixpence I think it was on Saturday mornings. In those days you made or broke, and it was a retail store of mainly footwear but also clothing. And I used to be the cashier on Saturday morning, which was a big deal.

A very responsible job.

05:00 It was too it was great.

I am just thinking whether so much support from your family and maybe working for them, the depression didn't hit you very hard?

In a way. Bear in mind the depression was really 30 – 32, I was born in 22, so I can still remember men knocking on your door asking for a meal. I can still remember the fact that after the

05:30 depression there was still not too much money until a few years after. And I went to South Terrace originally as a primary in Bubs and First Standard and kids didn't have lunch or if they had a few sandwiches, it was wrapped in newspaper. I still remember that because my sandwiches were wrapped in a brown paper bag and that was really conspicuous by most of the kids.

Conspicuous in what way?

Well, they had either nothing or their sandwiches in just a bit of paper.

06:00 So yeah I remember that. But we were lucky because they had a retail store and for three years it lost money and through sheer determination they kept the door open so we were more than lucky. We survived the depression. Oh, my Mum worked right from day one, as a bride she worked in the fancy goods store and then she worked with Dad in the

06:30 Barney Silberts store. Very few wives worked in those days.

Yeah I suppose it would be quite rare?

Yeah, wives never really worked until wartime, which was 39-45.

Can you tell me a little bit about the Jewish community that you were aware of at the time?

We had our own ghetto in Fremantle. We had the Taits next door and the Robbins around the corner, two up.

07:00 So there were the three families all living within fifty yards of one another. The original Jewish community fizzled out in the gold rush, see Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie were bigger than Perth and when they closed down the people, Jewish people, came back to Perth to the metropolitan area and sixty families, and they started what became the Perth Hebrew Congregation. But my family stayed on in Fremantle, loved Fremantle, although all of our rellies [relations] were up in Perth. And so in a way the community never really got going in Fremantle.

07:30 Although there is a synagogue there to this day, it never really functioned, never had a minister, because the people started the Perth Hebrew Congregation. So we used to go for Sunday school up to Perth once a week, didn't like it, but that was life.

What didn't you like about it?

I found it boring.

08:00 But then I went on to be the lay leader of the Jewish community and took on an active part in the formation of Temple David. So as a kid, although I didn't have great interest, I always happily identified as being Jewish. As far as I was concerned, I was as Jewish as my brown eyes and I still am. But as for the learning bit and what have you, I never went for that much. I have taken an active

08:30 role all of my life but as a kid, no. And lets face it, we were a minority in Fremantle anyway and we were a minority in Western Australia, so we were a minority in a minority. So I was always an extrovert though, it never bothered me actually.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

One wonderful brother five years older, who was the star in my sky and still is,

09:00 great guy in every way. Should have never went into the shop, should have become a lawyer or a judge, he is that sort of guy. But no, he did the right thing by the family, and in those days it was a job. If your Dad had a shop, it was an assured job to go to. And bear in mind he was born in 1917 so he went to work in the middle of the depression, so he had a job to do helping his Mum and Dad. But on reflection it would have been wonderful

09:30 if he could have gone on to be a lawyer, he would have been a very good one. See, we are going to talk about the war in a moment, but in 1939 there was less that seven per cent of Australians did the equivalent of their TEE [Tertiary Education Entry], so what was that in 1932? It was probably five per cent if that. So he went to [Perth] Modern School, which was a big deal, only two boys went up in the train to Modern School, one was a

10:00 man by the name of Kim Beasley, that's the father of the current Kim Beasley who is still alive, and my brother Keith and he was a top student, top athlete and all the rest of it. So he was always very much the star in my sky.

Can you tell me a little bit about your schooling, where did you go to school?

I started off in the bubs [first year at school] in South Terrace that I mentioned about those sandwiches. Then moved to Fremantle Christian Brothers, which was one door away, so when first bell rang I could go to school and still

10:30 be on time. Played in the park that I talked about across the road because that was the playground for Fremantle Christian Brothers. Other than one year I liked it, never very good at school, very good in the playground, could kick a football better than most, but in the classroom no, not good.

Well what sporting facilities were around in those days?

Well, one of the sad things is that, I can only speak for Fremantle Christian Brothers but I think it went for the other schools too,

11:00 at the start of the year you had a choice of winter sports, cricket, swimming and tennis, and I always put cricket last. And in my latter years as an adult, I love the cricket and belong to the WACA [Western Australian Cricket Association] and go along, and my wife is a great sports addict. And we went to the WACA and got our seats and all the rest, but if you didn't play it, you never understood the finer points of cricket; until this day I don't because I didn't . I was always better at winter sports. I am a robust guy as you can see,

11:30 could kick a football and knock a few blokes over and did just that. Was in the team, under fifteen and under sixteen for Fremantle Christian Brothers, it was never beaten, it had such legends as Bernie Naylor who became the greatest goal scorer for South Fremantle ever. And Jimmy Madison and others. I went on to play Rugby Union when I left school because my brother had. So I am enjoying the World Cup at the moment.

12:00 It's a great game. So Keith played Rugby Union, so I did as well. In those days, the Christian Brothers Schools only had brothers as teachers and they wore their long cassocks. And they were live-in at the school there, no such thing as a lay teacher; now of course, there is no such thing as a brother, other than a headmaster. And they were strict,

12:30 all carried a strap with them in their pocket. And everyone from the dux of the class to the bottom of the class got plenty of cuts as we called it. I got thirteen at one French exercise, the acute should have been grave, plural should have been single, grave should have been acute. Whack, whack. Never killed anyone. And although, because we were all treated the same, and it was sissy to cry, so you would stand there with your hand out and get belted by the strap.

13:00 And but all in all I liked the camaraderie of school, which was the same when I went into the air force. I like the camaraderie of the fellows and being one of the guys. And then my parents decided, I was the opposite of my brother, when he was the dux of the class and what have you, I was a good athlete but nothing good at school. And so they thought to rub the rough patches off this boy; I was not a naughty boy, just an extrovert, still am.

13:30 They decided that I better go to Aquinas. So my last years were as a boarder at Aquinas, which in those days was out in the bush. You went off Telling Bridge, it was all bush to Aquinas, now its all suburbia. Loved boarding, loved all that went with boarding school. Again, as with the air force, the camaraderie of school. Do you want an incident of Aquinas?

Yeah I would love it.

I always think its great. As a boarder, smoking was the crime,

14:00 murder and rape were all right but smoking, that wasn't on. It was a three-storey building and one night, I remember his name I haven't seen him since, Con Townsend was smoking on the third floor. And one of the brothers known as 'Bex' [reference to headache powder], because it's pitch black particularly out in the bush there, he could see the glow of the cigarette. So he raced up the three levels, the brother in charge, as Con raced into the dormitory, his bed was right on the far side of the dormitory, landed alongside

14:30 his bed with his hands for prayers and the brother threw the lights of the whole dormitory going, "What are you doing, Townsend?" "Still saying my prayers, sir." Well, he didn't get away with it but I thought he was the smartest thinking schoolboy that I had ever come across. But again that was strict but it was delightful. It was the smallest of what was then the four public schools. I played football but I didn't get my colours, a guy named

15:00 Prenderville took my place .And his uncle was the Archbishop and I often wonder whether he kicked a football better than me or his father was archbishop might have helped him in .But I did get in the first eighteen but I didn't get my colours and that was a disappointment. Sixty, seventy years after, it wasn't really that bad but at the time it was a big deal.

Crushing.

I then went on and left just before doing my leaving and went on a YAL trip, up

15:30 to Singapore, which was a big deal. The YAL, Young Australians League, was decades ahead of its time.

Used to take boys on trips to Melbourne and Sydney. My brother went to all of the eastern states when he left school and I went to Singapore in a state ship and we had a great time.

And how old were you there?

Seventeen. Just before I turned seventeen.

That must have been pretty amazing?

16:00 It was amazing. Who travelled in those days? But the YAL organised it and my parents weren't rich people, in fact none of the kids were rich kids. No, that's not fair, they were all middle-class kids and their parents all saw fit to give their kids an opportunity to see another part of the world. Are you interviewing Stan Watt? He was a fighter pilot so you could well be, he was one of the YAL kids that's still about the place and Norm Merchant down the road.

16:30 **What were your impressions of Singapore at such a young age?**

Oh marvellous. Of course, it stunk to high heaven, open drains. But also there was a certain opulence. We went to Johore and were entertained by the Sultan of Johore at the time, we wore pith helmets, and purple and yellow crest, khaki shorts and shirt, and long socks. So we were all geared out looking like Australian kids. Wonderful journey.

17:00 We were on one of the state ships in the steerage class and we were all a little group down in the back of the ship but it was still a wonderful experience.

I have never heard of anybody going on a trip like that before, it must have been very rare?

Oh it was. But the YAL did just that. And Araluen was started by the YAL and that was their camp.

17:30 Started by a guy called Boss Simons who was the boss of the Sunday Times.

Right, that's interesting, so how did you feel about going and working in your parents' shop after you finished school?

I knew no different; my brother had gone in and I knew I was going in .And I don't know, and it might be an excuse, it might be one of the reasons why I never did very well at school. But I knew I was going to work for Mum and Dad and I knew the job was waiting for me. I disliked, and still do, footwear,

18:00 fortunately my brother being the elder went into the footwear side of the shop and we had a men's clothing section, which during the depression the neighbour went bust, so my parents took it over and joined it to ours. So I took over men's clothing and really enjoyed, so I was in charge of the men's clothing section, particularly after the war. But I went into that and that I thoroughly enjoyed. Am thrilled to this day that I never got into men's footwear.

18:30 **You don't like footwear at all?**

No, there is an end to the story, which will come up later because it is a post-war story.

We will ask you about that. So what sort of things did you do as part of your duties in the store?

Do you want a joke?

Sure.

Well I did talks called 'You too should write a book' and I always ask people now what would a guy like me, I have just left school, I have gone into a clothing store, day one, what was the job that I had to do? And everyone says, "Sweep the floor, clean the

19:00 windows, put the rubbish out." And I say, "No, no, no" before they all answer, "Learn to snap string. How could you make a sale if you didn't know how to snap string?" Because you wrapped parcels up with brown paper, no such thing as plastic bags. So you made a sale of a tie, or a shirt or a pair of shoes, you took the brown paper off, wrapped the shoes or shirt up in it, got the string and tied it up. Now, it's no use

19:30 tying it up if the string is still attached to the roller, so you had to learn to snap string. So day one you learned to snap string. If you didn't' do it well, you would cut your finger off because you would wrap the string around your finger and then snap it against the strain. So learn to snap string was the first job you do when you become a retailer. I did all of the usual things, later on was a buyer and controller and what have you, and the store did grow.

20:00 Same as any other kid working in a shop.

And how old were you by this time?

Straight after the YAL, I went in and worked for my Mum and Dad and worked in the store, seventeen.

So it was around this time then, can you remember anything about the political situation in Europe?

Oh yes, even before that we were very conscious of the Hitler regime and the problems Jewish people were having. And there were a dribble of people coming out from

20:30 Austria in particular to Perth and we got to know them and knew that people were being whipped off to concentration camp. Not sure that we knew the name ‘concentration camp’ at the time but we knew that they were going off to their death. Yeah, very conscious of it, in fact I have got a cutting in a scrapbook, which I don’t remember how I got it, it is 1933 and its about the challenges in Europe.

21:00 We were very conscious of it and our peer group, parents and uncles and what have you, talked about it. So yeah, it was very much on the mind of Jewish people because they really didn’t know where they were going, we hadn’t heard the names Auschwitz and Belsen and what have you in those days. But we knew they were going somewhere and not going to come back.

Were people really concerned about where they were going?

Oh yes.

I just have this vision of a whole

21:30 **lot of people sitting around from Jewish communities going, “Well, what's going on?”**

Yeah, we had meetings and we went all the way from Fremantle up to Perth for various meetings. And interesting one was in 19, the Rabbi in charge ,there was only one community, Rabbi Friedman who went on to be, well, was the chaplain in the First World War, called all of the young men together aged eighteen to thirty, to a meeting, saying, “It looks as though war is going to break out.” This is 1938.

22:00 “We think the Jewish boys should join the various CMF [Citizens’ Military Force], engineers, artillery what have you,” and a high percentage of them did. Probably ninety per cent of those aged eighteen to thirty joined all the various Citizen Military Forces. So when my war broke out, like my brother, I will tell you a story about me when war broke out because that’s what we’re here for.

22:30 But he was in the army, war broke out on September the 3rd, which was a Sunday, he was in the army at eight o’clock on September the 4th, because he had a telegram or a phone call that night, because he had already been in the CMF as well as all of these other young people I am talking about. And they went on, the Perth guys, to produce some great soldiers amongst that group, the Jewish group. Phil Masel went on to become a brigadier, Joe Masel became Red Robbie’s adjutant and what have you.

23:00 A few of them became top line navy men and here we are. Hedley Freeman Mentioned in Despatches [MID], Leon Tait a DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross], so that little group were above the numbers, that little Jewish group that joined up from Perth.

Did your parents support yourself and your brother joining the forces?

Interesting question. I look back now having been a father, well, we will just jump a step, well, not jump but continue on.

23:30 Having came back from YAL, worked in the shop give or take a year, war broke out. And then in that first year all the people we are talking about, yeah, anything from eighteen to twenty, it wasn’t a matter of if you were going to join up, it was a matter of what you were going to join. I used to come home and say, “Kevin’s joined the air force. Peter’s joined the air force,”

24:00 which was not a very subtle way of saying that I want to join the air force. The heroes of the day were Cobber Kane and Paddy Finnicane, they were the fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain, and we were getting news about them and that was really exciting stuff. And guys like me all wanted to be Cobber Kanes or Paddy Finnicanes, or Bluey Truscott. He was the famous Australian. So I can just picture now when I was a father of an eighteen year old son, how I would have reacted

24:30 to my son wanting to go away to war and not knowing how he would fare, would he make it or not? So I take my hat off to the parents of the day and to my parents in particular, because they had to sign on the dotted line before you were twenty-one to go into the air force, and I did just that. But it was a matter of what you went into, not if you joined up.

Did you discuss your decisions at all with your brother?

25:00 Oh no, he was already away. He went away on September 4th and I didn’t see him again for four years, other than once or twice on leave.

Gosh, four years is a long time, isn’t it?

Yeah.

Why did you want to join the air force?

Well like I said, the glamour of these guys. Fighter pilots shooting down the Messerschmitts it was exciting. Of course by the time I got there, Fighter Command…

25:30 Even though you see films and hear about the Battle of Britain, it really was a phenomenal exercise. The famous few really were the famous few who saved the world as we know it, I can’t think of the right

word to use. Because there was only handful of them, they had the whole might of the German air force and army to beat and they did. This few people, eighteen to twenty-four year olds. And they just kept blocking them and Germany never made it to

26:00 settle in Europe. So there was an element of great stuff in that .Well, by the time I had joined up, their excitement, they had won their bit, they were still fighter pilots, but Bomber Command was something that had been started and it sounded very interesting. I am not digressing but I think this is worth being recorded.

26:30 Those that joined aircrew in the main from Australia went into Bomber Command and went to Europe; a lesser group went to the Japanese war. So it is not surprising to hear of people like me, “Oh, you went to Europe, you were in Bomber Command, you flew Lancasters?” Well, the majority of the group did just that and I was in that majority, and that was great stuff.

27:00 **So what happened after you had your parents, signed by your parents? How did you go to training?**

You waited for about six months and wore a little badge like a Rotary badge with an eagle’s wing on it. And my number was 666, I used to buy Lotto tickets, didn’t do me any good but the badge did. Then I waited for call up and went into Clontarf, which was initial training school, up until then it had been Pearce aerodrome so I was in the first course that went into, I was on 27 course, that went into Clontarf

27:30 and you had to pass every subject to go onto the next level.

What sort of subjects were they teaching?

Air engines, air frames, physics, maths, sound, running out of puff can’t remember. And of course, drill and all of those military things.

It sounds very heavy from the study perspective?

It was and as I get back to the thing that I said before, to get into aircrew was the most difficult of all of the services.

28:00 I have no criticism of army, navy, air force, but aircrew was the toughest by far. When I went in, fourteen guys stood up when we walked in the door, what was A.N. Hay House in St Georges Terrace, don’t know if it still exists, and we went through all of the various things. Physical, medical, educational,

28:30 and three of us came out at the other end. Most guys that didn’t make it went onto ground staff or the navy, army, what have you. I am diverted, what was the question that you asked me?

It must have been quite intense?

When we went in. Yeah, I said something before about how only seven per cent of Australians did their TEE, so that seven per cent was standing for aircrew.

29:00 How many of those had their TEE? Probably some of them and they went onto be aircrew. In other words, we didn’t have a whole lot of university graduates to go and do things like be in aircrew, we were pretty ordinary Australians. And quite a percentage of them didn’t have a car licence when they got their wings to fly a two-engined aeroplane. And who were they? They came from conservative homes, probably didn’t swear, probably

29:30 didn’t drink, no, that’s an exaggeration, didn’t drink much, became good drinkers later. But were from conservative homes who went to church on Sunday who got in their best gear, who did what their parents told them. It was a very conservative era, particularly following the depression – bear in mind the depression was not that much earlier – and these were the guys going into the various services.

30:00 Particularly so in aircrew because that was a little bit different to the others.

How keen were you to be a pilot?

Mad keen; that was the only thing, there was nothing else. But I got scrubbed, very cruel word scrubbed.

Well, tell me about how this horrible event happened to you?

Well, I did quite well at Initial Training School. Chummed up with four guys and we were marvellous friends, then sadly they divided us in half to go up to

30:30 Cunderdin to Elementary Flying School. So I was in the second half, had to kill a month but that didn’t matter. But I went off to Elementary Flying School and I was selected by the chief instructor to be his pilot, be his trainee. There is no way that a chief flying instructor would not have a say at the end, because it would have been a reflection on him. So I was thrilled I had Bill Bolton, chief flying instructor, squadron leader,

31:00 and I am his trainee. He did the dirty on me, he got appendicitis and was taken to hospital. And I was left out on a limb and didn’t have an instructor and finished up over two months and between eight and twelve instructors with no way you were going to get through in those conditions. So I was scrubbed,

sent back to Initial Training School. The end of the world had come and I said to my parents, “I am going to New Zealand and starting again to be a pilot.” They agreed.

31:30 Because they were not fools of parents, there was no way you would get to New Zealand in those days anyway. So I never got to New Zealand. I chummed up with two wonderful fellows, Flip Burrows and Bung Barrett-Leonard, and they were going on to be wireless operators, so I joined them. At that stage, to be an air gunner, a straight air gunner, you had to do a wireless course and fail. So I joined my two mates, went off to wireless school in Ballarat,

32:00 killed the time there, enjoyed the fun and didn’t do the right thing, and of course failed, which meant that you could then go down to gunnery school, which was the object of the exercise. But my mates as well as the two I mentioned, said, “Come on, Rick, stay with us, lets all go together.” So I did a supplementary exam and passed it, and from then on I topped the wireless school and was the first to be commissioned and a whole range of things. Just landed on my feet and really enjoyed what I was doing by default.

So If I can just rewind you a little bit. You were actually

32:30 **doing pilot training ,were you flying Tiger Moths?**

Yes. Wonderful things.

Tell me a little bit about that training?

Well, the problem was landing them as a trainee. I didn’t have any trouble landing, I had trouble turning and I would sort of skid out of the turn, but had I had the one instructor who could have corrected my fault, I think I would have survived. Interestingly enough, I am claustrophobic

33:00 and have vertigo and was sick in every aircraft I flew in for the first time, but never sick again. I have asked a lot of people, “I wonder why that was?” The smell probably. I don’t know what it was, however I was scrubbed from the Tiger Moth, in which I was sick once I think, but then of course the turning problem. But they were marvellous little aeroplanes.

33:30 Of course, you were sitting out there in the open with the instructor. I have forgotten if he was sitting in the front or the back. You’re there with your joystick and what have you, it was real exciting stuff, out in the open with the breeze blowing in your face.

And what were the conditions like when you were doing that training?

Hopeless. Hopeless in that Cunderdin was not a reasonable training establishment. As an example, for a misdemeanour, which were pretty minimal, you were sent to the guard gate to report to the sergeant in charge and you had to change your clothing

34:00 every time you were there. So you went down in khakis once, overalls the next time, shorts the next time, you know, in other words you had to keep walking back to your billet and back again, so it killed the next umpteen hours. That was the discipline, madness when you think about it. But other than that the food was beyond description, we lived on Peters ice creams and Hoadley’s Violet Crumble bars. I think they were Hoadley’s.

34:30 And that was that, I went before the CO [Commanding Officer] when I was scrubbed; it was Norman Brearley. There were two famous Brearley brothers, both were wing commanders, one was in charge of Cunderdin and the other in charge of Geraldton. Stan was the nice guy, Norman in charge of Cunderdin was not the nice guy. Went before him and he informed me that, “The war was not going to stop for one person like you.” And it wasn’t either.

35:00 “You know, because you got scrubbed, well, that’s unfortunate for you.” But he didn’t say ‘mate’ either. So that was the end of my career there and it picked up afterwards and I never looked back. And I must add that had I become a pilot, the chances of me sitting here would be one in a hundred.

Its interesting how fate makes us take little turns.

It certainly did. And met up with some wonderful guys, I probably would have anyway as a pilot, and then of course the wonderful were all killed.

35:30 Flip and Bung both went to Bomber Command and both didn’t make it.

Well, the statistics for Bomber Command are just?

A smidgeon under fifty per cent didn’t make it.

It’s just appalling. Anyway stepping backwards, so what happens after you leave Cunderdin, where are you shipped to?

Ballarat. Marvellous place. Very cold, very

36:00 tough station, disciplined very strongly, big population, and we flew Wackett aircraft; we didn’t fly them, we were taken in Wackett aircraft to do the wireless training. Had to learn to do twenty-two words per minute in Morse code. Of course, Morse code was the dominant communication in those days and I

enjoyed that and from being a failure I went on to do good things.

How did you actually get to Ballarat, was it by train?

Cattle truck in a train.

36:30 Always chose a cattle truck, why a cattle truck because if you were sitting up in a train and there was six or eight of you crammed like sardines. But in a cattle truck with palliasses, you threw them in the corner and then when you wanted to bring them out, sit on them, play cards, the train would stop every three hours for ablutions anyway. But the cattle truck was the way and of course it was air conditioned,

37:00 because there was slats and the breeze would come through. Trains weren't air conditioned in those days, so if you were in a conventional carriage like sardines, not a comfortable trip. Some people learnt the interesting way, I went across twice, first time and the second time and always chose cattle truck.

So you said that you quite liked Ballarat, what was…?

Oh Ballarat is a beautiful city and I made a lot of good mates and I finished up enjoying my course.

37:30 Oh, one thing worthy of putting down for posterity, as we have already indicated, I am Jewish. Well, church parade on Sunday Ballarat was no different to anywhere else and it was a big population, the whole of the station from the cook up to the commanding officer would all line up in their best gear, file out and the disciplinary warrant officer would go, "Parade, attention! Catholics to the right, Anglican to the left and disbelievers down the back."

38:00 And so the disbelievers, there were six of us who all trotted down through a thousand guys down to the back. I remember that clearly, that was always a little bit of an aside there, I thought it was fun.

Did you get any time off and to meet any of the locals in Ballarat?

Oh yes, Ballarat was a great place, we were honorary members of the Ballarat Club and went there for a good feed. And it was a typical stuffy club like the Wells Club and what have you,

38:30 but we were honorary members. Of course, the big deal in that era was the ballroom dancing. Wonderful, wonderful thing, terrible day the day ballroom dancing started. And when I left school, I went to Mrs Johnson's Dancing Class and I was good enough to be a teacher so that I went on to dances right through the war years, ballroom dancing was the thing. And ballroom dancing was a wonderful thing, not only for the music and so on, but it was a very civilised affair.

39:00 Even the biggest hooligan, yobbo, what's the word they use? Hoons. Even the biggest hoon in those days still had to walk up and ask the girl to dance, still had to take her arm and got out in the middle of the floor and dance, then take her back to her seat. Now all of that courtesy and wonderful way of life died with ballroom dancing. As well as the music and what have you, the courtesy and the way of life

39:30 died with it. And so the war years, ballroom dancing was great. Didn't know what to do? There was always dance in town somewhere, so Ballarat we used to go to the ACF dance, I think it was called, Australian Comforts Fund Dance, and pretty girls and were happy to dance with airmen; it was great.

Well how popular were the airmen in comparison with the other services?

Well, there was an air force station there. I can't give you a comparison, I don't know. That's where we went,

40:00 we were welcomed there and enjoyed it. We were also billeted on leave there, if we had weekend leave we could get a billet and stay in the town with Mrs Johnson, which we did, or whoever, but still go to the dance on Saturday night.

Did you make any friends at this time in Ballarat?

Sort of acquaintances rather than friends.

What were the sleeping conditions like?

In the camp?

Yeah, just roughly.

Same as everywhere, you know, palliasses and bed,

40:30 miles better than the army of course, they were out really having problems. No, they were quite okay. You got used to it. I have one thing I would like to add. My father was a very colourful character and he saw an ad [advertisement] in National Geographic must have been about 1936, so he sent for it. And it was, I can't think how it worked but a model came out where you could hand

41:00 drive it, where you pressed the hand like that and it worked the gears and the head then went. So all of my war years, I never shaved with a brush and soap like ninety-nine per cent of the other guys. They would all get out of bed and queue for the basin, I would sit in bed and shave and what have you, and I was rubbished for the whole of my air force career for my little razor. It sadly broke after the war.

That's very funny, if we could just hold it there, we do need to change a tape so, that's very funny.

Tape 2

00:33 **Can you explain some of the things that you were being taught when you were at Ballarat?**

The dominant of course was Morse code, which you were sitting at a desk, but you also flew and were called off base and you learnt to use the radio equipment. Aircraft recognition was another important thing, and general flying conditions.

Can you explain how you learnt about aircraft recognition?

01:00 By photos, I was good at that, that was one of my best subjects I might add, I don't know why. Before the war, I went to Fremantle Technical School, and learnt Morse code and also aircraft recognition with a well known local personality who has since died, Ross Hutchison, who became a famous footballer and politician and what have you ,and Hutchy and I used to go down there, so I knew a bit about it and so I was good at that. All of my mates used to cheat off me.

01:30 Well it was fairly easy, you know, you were in the dark there, and they flash a Messerschmitt 109 up and you write it down and pass it to the bloke who passed it to the next bloke ,so we all did well at that actually. So from there, of course, from wireless school you went down to gunnery school.

Did you find Morse code actually difficult to learn?

To start off, very difficult but then to get your speed up was hard, and you had to get up to, I have forgotten what the

02:00 minimum was, but I got up to twenty-two words per minute, which was considered pretty good. There were people who got up to thirty but they were telegraphists and what have you. But that was considered pretty good and I was happy with that. And when we used to go on leave and we would see the billboards, Bushell's Tea, and it was all 'da, dit, dit, da', you know, you had sort of trained as you saw the signboards

02:30 and what have you, and it was good. And of course, you had to learn to send as well.

Well can you explain the difference to me?

Well, you had a key and the key did 'dot dash', so 'dot dash', and the receiving came into your ear, the same thing coming back. That's how you communicated in those days world-wide.

Did it actually happen simultaneously, were you hearing while

03:00 **you were actually sending?**

No, separate, you would send a message and then get it back and vice versa.

How important was the Morse code training?

Oh well, it was the main element and it was the main element of communication at that time, whether it be war or peace. Shipping liners used Morse code, everything Morse code was communications.

Did you learn any other form of signalling?

Not anything of great consequence. There was semaphore where you used

03:30 flags and other things, but they were insignificant.

When you're talking about aeroplanes, is that what you mean?

Well, not only aeroplanes but ships as well. Morse code was the dominant communication. And then from Ballarat, we then went on to gunnery school.

Because you were pretty keen to go to gunnery school, why is that?

Yes, oh only because I wasn't a pilot, that was a way to get to the war, I wasn't going to be a wireless operator or a navigator or anything like that.

04:00 The quickest way to get to the front line was as a gunner. But I got into the wireless bit and there you were. I might add that I was the chairman of the passing-out parade at Ballarat, which I was very proud of because you were selected by your peers.

What was the selection process?

Oh I don't remember now, that's about seventy years ago.

I just thought maybe it was something special that you were good at.

Just popularity, that might be egotistical but that's really what it was.

Well I can see that you would be a popular guy.

Thank you.

04:30 But that was a big deal to be chairman of the passing-out parade.

What happens at a passing-out parade?

Well, it is honouring the people that got through, and my mate Bertie England, who is a doctor down at Rockingham, I realised that we didn't have anyone to thank the entertainers. And the entertainers were fellow airmen from the station who entertained us for the night, whatever, I have forgotten what it was, so I sent a verbal message down to

05:00 Bert to propose a toast to thank the entertainers. But by the time it got down to him, it was the caterers, so Bert got up and gave a toast to the caterers. So that was a little aside that went on at our passing-out parade.

That's very funny, Chinese whispers [demonstration that messages change unintentionally as they pass from person to person].

Anyway I would like to talk about gunnery school because that's where I went next.

Yeah sure.

05:30 We went to Sale down the bottom of Victoria. There was East Sale, oh and I might add there was a famous movie on, Gone with the Wind and while we had a day off or half a day off in the city of Melbourne, my mates Flip and Bung and Steve and what have you, "We'll go to see Gone With the Wind." Well, it was right up east of Melbourne and we were going up Spencer Street Station, I think it was, when we looked at our clock when the movie had come out, we had about five minutes

06:00 for the train to go and of course we had kit bags. So we had to run from one end of Melbourne City to the other to get on the train, bearing in mind that had we missed the train we would have been AWL [Absent Without Leave] and we would have been in pretty big trouble, particularly going from the wireless school to the gunnery school and we all didn't turn up .Anyway, we made it and we all just got there huffing and puffing and threw our kit bags in the guard's van and jumped in, much to the cat-calls of all the other guys on the train. But we did

06:30 made it and there we are. And I might add the term AWL, conservative old so and so's like me get upset with Americanisms and one of the Americanisms that really gets up my nose is AWOL [AWL]; now how you get AWOL out of AWL I have never worked out. And that's a new expression and the Australian Army uses it and that make me very cross, it was always AWL in our time. So there you are, that's what happens when you get older.

07:00 **I reckon it's MASH [American television series about a field hospital in the Korean War] that did it, because it's such a popular show and they are all AWOL.**

Probably yeah. Now, we went to gunnery school ,there was East Sale and West Sale. West Sale was a gunnery school and East Sale was a Beaufort conversion school, teaching pilots to fly Beaufort aircraft ,and that tragically had I think the highest loss of training aircraft in Australia.

07:30 They really had big troubles flying those Beaufort aircraft.

I have heard a bit about the Beauforts, can you tell me what was wrong with them?

Well I have no idea but whatever, I am not sure if it was a man-made error or a deficiency in the aircraft or a combination of the two, but we were very conscious that Beauforts were crashing regularly; regularly meaning once a week or once a fortnight or whatever. But nine times out of ten, it killed the whole crew. It was peacetime, not peacetime but this was down at a place called Sale

08:00 at the bottom of Australia. But we were down there flying Fairey Battles, they were discard aircraft from the Battle of Britain, they didn't work at all. They were an extended Spitfire with a gun at the back, so they were used all around the British world as training aircraft. We did our final gunnery school flying the aircraft and to do your air-to-air firing against the drogue, you know what a drogue is?

08:30 A big parachute thing being pulled by another aircraft and you would fire at the parachute thing. And some bullets were tipped with red and some with blue. So my bullets were tipped with red and yours with blue. And so they could then mark how many hits you got with the reds and blues. Everything was done in alphabetical order in those days, and number. I don't remember who I was with but I remember he was to fire first and I was to fire second.

09:00 I don't remember what his colours were but anyway the final results came out and he was in the top ten of the course and I was in the bottom ten, and of course he hadn't fired a bullet. He was as sick as a dog and said, "Please fire for me; all I want to do is die." So he laid down on the bottom and I fired away and I fired for me and you can be unlucky but there we were.

That's very unlucky.

It didn't matter a damn but I was always amused and

09:30 he proudly got amongst the top gunners and I got amongst the bottom. And of course there from Sale we had embarkation leave.

Can I just find out a bit about the conditions at Sale, what were the facilities like there?

Funnily enough I barely remember Sale. I remember the gunnery bit, flying wit the red and blue tip bullets.

How long were you there?

About two months.

So I am thinking they would have put you through a bit of marching and so forth?

10:00 You always had a bit of marching and square bashing. I might add when we left Ballarat, we qualified as leading aircraftsmen, wore a little propeller, which was our first promotion from an AC2 [Aircraftsman level 2], which was the bottom of the ladder, and then when we passed out from Sale, ninety per cent of us became sergeants and ten per cent of us got a commission.

10:30 Of the ten per cent, they could choose to become a pilot if they wanted to. I don't remember whether many did or didn't. But we then came home for embarkation leave and my memory of coming home was at Guildford there used to be a bell that rang for the train as it went through to alert motorists to stop, as well as the lights. And my memory of coming home for embarkation was always the Guildford bell. And for years afterwards, if we drove up

11:00 to Guildford, I would hear the bell and, "Oh, embarkation leave." Then we were home for a few weeks then headed off back to Melbourne to be posted to wherever. As I said, ninety-nine per cent of us wanted to go to Europe and most of us did.

Had the war in the…?

By now, it is now 1941, 42. Oh, I might add that while we were at Clontarf, which was initial training school, one day there was an

11:30 air raid alert and we all ran for the slit trenches across the way and the air raid alert was because a Japanese submarine had sunk the USS Langley just off Fremantle. Now, the USS Langley was an aircraft tender, I don't know what the difference is between a carrier and a tender, but anyway it was a tender,

12:00 and they had closed the road between Maylands and Fremantle to move the aircraft down onto the tender, I think they were Kittycats [Kitty Hawks], I have forgotten what anyhow, I have forgotten what fighter they were. But most of us remembered and everyone all just towing the aircraft down what was then Perth-Fremantle Road, what after became the Stirling Highway. And then of course a day out to sea it was sunk, all lives lost. So

12:30 that wasn't published but we soon got to know about it, 'soon' meaning a year or two later. So anyway we were then posted, and posted to Europe and I have got a photograph of leaving Melbourne on a very wet cold day. A gang of us standing on the back of the boat had a photo taken and I am the only one to come back out of that photo. We went to America, I was then made the flight sergeant in charge of the group to go over to America,

13:00 which was great fun, being in charge of your mates for allocation of duties and what have you. And then we got to America and went by train across to Camp Miles Standish.

Can I ask you what did you think about the Japanese entering the war?

Oh, they'd be a pushover in five minutes because they couldn't see, they had eye trouble.

13:30 They couldn't fly aircraft and be fighter pilots even a bloke, Air Marshal Brooke-Popham made a statement from Singapore that they will be a pushover, they can't see to fly decent aircraft. It was an absolute myth, of course, weren't they ever.

That's an interesting piece of strong propaganda?

Oh, was it ever. And the other piece of course was who would have thought of riding pushbikes down Malaya to attack Singapore. They got on their bikes and rode down the eastern side and attacked Singapore on the eastern side and took it.

14:00 On a pushbike. So all of the myths about Japs were like. The hilarious part, when we were at Initial Training School we had to do an eye test, a very strict eye test and they were Japanese eye tests, which was rather funny. You probably know them, you can see the number, there is a whole lot of colours and dots and you can pick out a seven or pick out a nine. Well, they were a Japanese invention, so there we were.

Somebody should have woken up?

Oh yes.

But still you

14:30 **wanted to go into the European front?**

Yep. And then we got to Europe.

Well before we get to Europe, can you tell me how you got there. Was it Aquitania?

We went across on a nice little ship packed with American wounded going back .A high percentage of the wounded had venereal disease, they didn't have bullets in their rears, but the Australians were a small group of guys going to Europe. And as I say, I was the sergeant in charge of a group of sergeants and that was great.

15:00 **Well how did you get selected?**

Again popular, whatever, because it wasn't promotion, although I was officially told that I would be made flight sergeant, which never happened. I became a flight sergeant later but not because I was in charge of the guys going to America. We got to America and there was a scarlet fever epidemic so we couldn't move on.

15:30 In Boston, I think. So we were held at Camp Miles Standish and to thank the camp management people looking after us. And we went on leave to places like Taunton, it was in Rhode Island, to Taunton and Brockton and what have you, so to thank them we presented them with an Australian flag. We marched down to the headquarters and present them with the flag. That's all very good, but the Americans march to a different step

16:00 to the British, what's his name the man that writes the American military music, popular composer? Writes all of the American music.

Nobody has asked me that question yet, you have got me.

You would know it if I said it. Anyway they make little steps, they march to six steps, have you ever seen the Americans march on television? They all march tiny little steps, of course the British is left, right, left right. So we march to a different

16:30 American band, it was pathetic as you can imagine. We were used to using a reasonable stride instead of the beat of an American, you would know the name if I could think of it. Then of course we went over into New York to catch the Aquitania.

Well you must have been pretty impressed by taking a look at New York?

Well we were eighteen year old kids, marvellous.

17:00 And we were by then had air gunner's wings. So the Americans would say, "What that?" "Against the Germans." "What's your name?" "Sydney Harbour," you know and that's all the rubbish that Australians go on, and we were part of it and enjoyed it. But they were very hospitable in those days. As time went on, I got very tired of Americans but for military reasons not social reasons, but they were very hospitable. And we got on the Aquitania, which was an absolute rust bucket

17:30 **Well what were the conditions like on the Aquitania?**

Oh pathetic. We were in three bunks, three high, sardines from top. Of course, hundreds if not thousands of American servicemen going to the European war and our small group of Australians. And of course, the waters were still submarine-infested and what have you, so it was a fairly hairy-scary trip across the Atlantic.

18:00 We had to provide the lookout, because we were airmen, for enemy aircraft. And I remember a bloke called Alec Ainslie, I allocated him to go up and do his turn up top and he spotted a Condor, which was an American four-engined aircraft, and the alert went and they fired at it and it went away. Now the interesting thing about that, the Germans only had one four-engine aircraft, the Condor, all the Allies had Fortresses and Liberators and

18:30 Lancasters and whatever. And they only had this one, and Alec Ainslie picked the Condor, and they fired at it and choofed it off, so we were very proud of ourselves ,we Australians provided the appropriate alert. And then we got to England in Greenock.

What sort of things were you doing to really pass your time when you were on the ship?

Utter boredom, oh you could barely move, you know, so we were pleased to get there, the lovely green fields of England and Scotland.

19:00 There was this stuff called…

How long did it take?

bully beef. Because we got American food that we never liked, very sweet and lots of condiments, and not a lot of roast beef that we were used to, you know, Australian beef and lamb and what have you, the

Yanks had a very different diet. And they had these dishes with round things and we didn't think much of their food, however we survived. Went by train down to Brighton,

19:30 which was embarkations and disembarkation. The Metropol and the Grand were the two hotels on the beach of Brighton, both multi-storey beautiful hotels, but of course they were stripped because of wartime. They had palliasses in the rooms, no lifts, so if you were on the 6th floor you walked up the flight and bunked down on the palliasses and then came back. And then we waited and waited for our posting. But we enjoyed it because again we

20:00 went dancing, lots of dances in Brighton.

I was going to say bit of ballroom dancing going on in Brighton.

I finished up with a number on my back in a competition, you know ten picked out, dancing with a WREN [Women's Royal Naval Service], who I had never saw before or after. We were in the last ten to be there, and of course we were really highly barracked by all of the Australians in the crowd. I don't remember what dance it was, but that was the sort of fun we had.

20:30 Also, Sunday night the French-Canadians used to play ice hockey, which we had never seen before, which we thought was marvellous. Great game, great way to die. [(UNCLEAR)].

[(UNCLEAR)] suggesting that it is a bit rough?

Oh, a bit rough? And then of course we could get leave up to London, and Brighton is sixty miles from London and in the height of the war, with no coal, England in its worst condition, you could set your clock, sixty minutes Brighton to London

21:00 right to the minute during the war. It's like Northam to Perth, absolutely brilliant. So we went up to London.

Well that must have been impressive as well?

More than impressive because we then went to the Boomerang Club, a very important piece of Australian history, particularly the barman, to my knowledge no one has written a book about.

I have never heard of the Boomerang Club?

The Boomerang Club was in the basement of Australia House. Have you ever been to London?

Yes.

Where the Strand meets Fleet Street. Australia House is in the big building,

21:30 down below, as you went down the stairs, the Boomerang Club provided meals and facilities for Australians, of course ninety-nine per cent of them were airmen, like sergeants, all headed off to the war. But then it went right through the war. But the thing was, as you went down the stairs, there was a little room on your left, and there were books to write your name in.

22:00 And you would put Eric Silbert, Fremantle, 6th of June 1922, and of course that was sent to the West Australian and was put in the West Australian and your folks would know you were alive and well, because once a month or once a week or whatever it was, "Those seen in the Boomerang Club were: Corporal Smith, Sergeant Jones and what have you." But the more important thing for us, apart from our folks who knew we were alive and well,

22:30 "Ah, from Perth, what is your name? We're having a beer at the so and so, meet you there." So West Australian always invited one another to things, no other states did that, but we parochial West Australians did. So if you ask a West Australian that went to England, "Did you know Bill Smith?" "Oh, I met him at the Boomerang Club." And that was part of our way of life and that was a wonderful establishment. And also going on leave, the Ryder-Cheshire scheme was in

23:00 operation and they would arrange billets for you to go to Wales or Scotland or something and stay with a family for your week's leave. That was also done out of Boomerang Club. We had a meal there, met our mates, wonderful place. One day we went down for a meal in Fleet Street, went down with the gang, and beautiful steak. Wartime England, steak? They didn't even know how to spell it let alone have it on the menu.

23:30 So we sat down there, enjoyed the steak and went a second time because it was so good. And one bloke said, "You know, it is pretty good for horse." My mouth opened and didn't take another bite, it was horse. Europeans ate horse anyway, but I never had another bite. From there, I was posted to my first wireless school up in Dumfries, Scotland, where we flew Ansons across the Irish Sea

24:00 getting acclimatised to the English conditions, the cold and the freezing.

Because it has got to be very different from training you had previously had?

And we're still moving as a group of wireless operators. So we get there and an Anson has got low wings and you have got to go like that to the wing, the two trainees going up in the aircraft would

waggle the wings if the pilot was going to go in a pothole so he would know to steer around it because it was a rough old aerodrome. And we were dressed for the conditions,

24:30 we had thick woolly underwear and undersuit and oversuit, gloves, you know, the whole bit. Thick gear because we were going into freezing conditions. Well ,walking around the perimeter in all of this gear, you got up sweat and got enough for a sauna bath. So we were the first Australians there and we said, “This ain’t on” and you don’t tell the bosses that “This ain’t on” so we had a sleep-in strike. And you have only got one guess who was nominated to be the spokesman to the

25:00 officer as to why we were sleeping in and not going in the aeroplanes. We won the day and from then on never had to do it, but when I look back and think how absolutely bloody mad can you be? (A) going on strike during wartime and (B) confronting the powers that be and (C) being the idiot to be the spokesman. But Dumfries was a great place, Scotland at its best. From there, we went down to

25:30 an operational training unit and then the war really started in a really good way, in that from that time we were now to move as a crew. Up until that point, we had been moved as pilots, wireless operators, navigators, what have you. Now, we were going to be a crew and fly in Wellington aircraft, beautiful aircraft of geodetic construction. We got there and the pilots arrived at the same time as the navigators

26:00 and the wireless operators. And a big Queenslander stood up while we were having an evening meal and said in his good ocker accent, “Is there a married navigator here?” and a guy Reg Perry put up his hand and said, “ I am married.” And he said, “You’ll do me, you’ll want to come home to Mum.” So that was how he selected his navigator, but that was just a joke. We were all sent off to the pub, we weren’t sent off to the mess because there were sergeants and pilot officers,

26:30 and that would have meant a division. The Brits [British] were very good at psychology. We were sent down to the village pubs, where we all stood up at the bar and drank more than we should and talked more than we should, but it was a wonderful way to get to know someone with a common thread because after ten days you then had a crew up, and you were playing with your life. From then on,

27:00 you were then a crew and you were going to die or not die, and the camaraderie and efficiency of the crew kept you alive. People died unfortunately because they were inefficient, unlucky. But if you were efficient, you might overcome the luck and if you were a top crew, you then had a good chance of surviving the war. So this crewing up period was arguably the most important week of your life. We crewed up and I crewed up with the

27:30 big guy who wanted a navigator who wanted to get home to Mum and who was English of course. And our rear gunner was a Melbourne guy who I loved dearly. The crew were closer than brothers ,we had three RAF [Royal Air Force] and four Australians as it transpired. Did our operational training there and gelled as a group of people closer than friends.

What stood out for you

28:00 **about these people that you crewed up with?**

Couldn’t answer that, not the faintest idea. But they were just these wonderful human beings that became closer to me than my brother and away we went. We did our first operation in a Wellington.

What do you think of the Wellingtons?

Wonderful aeroplane. Well, of course, they were superseded by Lancasters and Halifaxes, by engines that flew faster and higher.

28:30 So they had to take over Bomber Command and we then went from Wellingtons to Lancasters and from Lancaster training school, we went over to 62 Squadron in Mildenhall. Now, Mildenhall had a bit of sentimental interest for guys of my age because that’s where the Empire Air Race started. Does that mean anything? The MacRobertson-Miller Air Race 1938, London to Melbourne for the centenary of Melbourne, won by Scott and Black, and a guy by the name of

29:00 Don Bennett was the navigator with Jimmy Woods. Do you know Jimmy Woods? He used to fly the Anson over to Rottnest, the shortest air route in the world, Maylands to Rottnest. Well, that was Jimmy Woods. Anyhow, they got to Syria and crashed, and it becomes part of the story because his navigator was Don Bennett. Anyhow, so Mildenhall meant something to us because that’s where the Empire Air Race started and there was an Australiana about going to Mildenhall.

29:30 62 Squadron was good, it was an old RAF aerodrome and the married quarters were given over to crews. So the crews lived in a little two-storey block, it was great, and we got parcels from home, had Toaroa Soup from the New Zealanders, fruit cake from the Australians added to the food, which was always questionable of course during the war. It was great.

30:00 We stayed there for I think two months, and we had been the top crew out of OUT, Operation Training Unit.

How do you become the top crew?

Your markings like the school exam, your marking for bombing and air gunnery and all of the marks that you had. Didn’t know that we were the top crew ,weren’t interested, all we wanted to do was learn

to fly as a team together and enjoy the camaraderie and away we went. Anyway, the skipper Ron Nielsen said, “Well, it is suggested that we got to Pathfinder Force. It is a real honour to be

30:30 asked to go to Pathfinder.” But to hell with the honour, we liked it at Mildenhall. It was great fun, you know, we would go to all of the dances and all of the rest of it. “Why do we want to move from here?” Anyhow Ron said, “It’s really terrific.” So, “Oh well, if Ron says so, we go.” So we went.

And who was Ron?

The skipper, the pilot. A very intelligent man, a

31:00 real ocker, left school at fourteen, worked in a local newspaper shop and then ultimately became a farmer after the war. Had a lot of common sense, no education of any consequence, flew an aircraft magnificently and was a good leader of men. In fact, when you got into the aircraft, you got in in order so that you didn’t crawl all over one another. And he would stand up there and say, “Righto, you lot,

31:30 get on,” you know, in the most ocker accent you could ever imagine. So that was Ron, a wonderful man. Anyway so we went to Pathfinder School and Pathfinder School had every – it was before the days of computers – every possible permutation or combination of how you got shot down. Your age, your country, the height of the aircraft you were flying, what time you took off, you name it. They had all of these graphs so that you could sort them out so you might live.

32:00 They also taught you things like how not to get mixed up between predicted flak and I can’t think of the other name. Anyhow, all of the things that mattered. Bear in mind, we had already done about eight or nine trips so we were battle-hardened by then.

Where did you go for your eight or nine trips?

Well, I have got a list of all of them there and I can give them to you, I don’t remember which were the first ones.

32:30 **Just generally where were you flying to?**

Oh, Germany, flying over Germany. And we ultimately did two tours of operations. You made a gentleman’s agreement with Pathfinder Force that if you joined the force, you would do two tours. One tour was thirty operations; never missions, the Americans did missions, we did operations.

33:00 So you would do thirty for the first tour, twenty for the second. Bear in mind that very few got to fifteen anyway. But it was a verbal agreement when you went over to Pathfinders. We had done some eight, nine, ten, twelve on Bomber Command and then over to Pathfinder Force and we were posted then over to Oakington onto 7 Squadron. And that was terrific, it was just outside Cambridge,

33:30 it was right alongside Girton College, a girls school where all of the pretty little girls seventeen to nineteen and we were all nineteen to twenty-one. What happened? They were all transferred because it was the war years. It was useless being next to a girls school, a girls university. However that was a great place and that was home for another year and that’s where we did our fifty trips.

If I can just wind you back a little bit, can you tell me about the first time that you went into

34:00 **the German territory?**

Petrified. Petrified for the next forty-nine. You know, anyone who tells you they weren’t frightened on operations where people were firing at you and flak was exploding around you and searchlights were on, they’re a moron not to be scared.

What sort of things are you looking out for as you’re going on these missions?

Well, we’ll talk about a mission if you like, an operation.

Sorry, operation.

34:30 First of all, to start the day you would go to prayers; prayers had nothing to do with religion, but it was where you went in the morning where the commanding officer said, “The battle order will be out at twelve o’clock; the following crews will be on.” You’d go and check, you’re on. You’d write letters home and do all of those things. You would then go – everything was Nissen huts, Oakington, I might add was the last aerodrome built for RAF so we had lovely building and we weren’t in Nissen huts, but there were Nissen huts for various reasons.

35:00 And there was a guard outside the door, you went through the first door and then a black curtain and there on the wall like you see in the movies, a map of Europe and red tapes from Britain across to Germany and then a big thingo as to where the target was going to be. Well, that was amongst the hardest things to do, because you didn’t want to be scared, you didn’t want to appear scared. And you would walk in the door and the

35:30 pilots and the navigators all went in first to get their maps and charts all organised, and you sat in tables for crews, so you had to walk through the back door and then through the tables and staring at you was this big map with all of these red lines that finished up Essen. “For Gods sake, they shoot them

down like flies in Essen and that's where we're going tonight." So you had to have a stiff upper lip and walk through and sit at your table and say something childish

36:00 to the crew like, "It'll be good for the log book" or something equally as childish, and that would relieve the tension. And then you would be briefed. From briefing, you would then go and have an operational meal. An operational meal always had one wonderful thing with the meal, it had a thing called an egg, you always had an egg with the operational meal, and when you got home, if you lived for it, you always got an egg too. So you had Spam [processed spiced ham] or whatever, but with the egg. You would then be taken up,

36:30 you walked up to Operational Flight where you picked up your parachute and then go in the various trucks out to your aircraft. I had a girlfriend at Oakington and she was a corporal driver. So quite often I would, with the crew, get in her truck and go out to the aircraft. You would get out to the aircraft and you would then have to wait. By then, you have been briefed and by now you had to kill about an hour

37:00 or half an hour. You would go up and get all of your gear ready. I might add that during the day each person would check their particular point on the aircraft. Now in my case, I would check on the wireless gear, the air-conditioning, everything that came under the umbrella of the wireless operator. And also took with me a contraceptive for each member of the various crew. And you're giving me a funny look, but

37:30 it had nothing to do with sex. You had a contraceptive because you all had oxygen masks and microphones that went over your face. So it wouldn't freeze up, you would put the contraceptive over the microphone because the latex would then stop the thing from icing up. So I was the bloke in charge of the contraceptives and put them over the microphone on every trip, and there we are. So we went out to the aircraft, got out to the aircraft. I might add

38:00 got out there and after a while it was getting close to time to go and then we all went and relieved ourselves on the tail wheel. Now that was a part of the lucky charm, to relieve yourself on the tail wheel you had to do because we were all superstition. And if you hadn't peed on the tail wheel, there was no chance you were going to get back, so we all queued up and peed on the tail wheel. Bear in mind we were all in heavy firing gear, particularly the gunners who

38:30 had two or three suits on and electrical suits. But it still didn't matter, that was an exercise you had to do.

Where does that idea come from?

No idea. Probably someone did it and they came back so, "They came back and they peed on the tail wheel!" All these things are maybe childish but they get enormous proportions, like the yellow scarf. Superstition was a big thing. If you're playing with your life, I imagine racing car drivers have their funny little things, you know, but when you are

39:00 playing with your life time after time and you forget the superstitious thing, you start wondering and you can go a bit berserk, you know.

Well, I even read somewhere that at some point the eggs weren't served and there was Shepherd's Pie and there was almost a riot?

Well, there would have been, yeah. No eggy, can't fly without an eggy. Anyhow, we then got in the aircraft, oh, and just before we would go, the commanding officer and two or three top brass would come around to wish you well and give

39:30 you last minute instructions. And squadrons are already in A Flight and B Flight, so you knew how to be regimented, and they were always referred to as C Flight, "See you go and see you come back again." Then you would take off in line, which was really quite a big deal because a big four-engine aircraft in the wet climate of England, you wouldn't get off the track because you were bogged, and if you were

40:00 bogged, you were sent to disciplinary school for two weeks and everybody in the crew. My mate Max Bourne who I nearly flew with, he got bogged, did a disciplinary school for two weeks.

What happens to you in disciplinary school?

Have you seen the movies where you climb up big things, terrible things, it is like gaol. It is gaol. So you get very careful and then you lined up to take off, you then fly around and get over the intersection of

40:30 the strips so that you knew precisely where you were and the pilot would say, "Crossing over the intersection now." And the navigator knew to the second what time he was. And always the squadron that I was involved in, which was in the south of the United Kingdom, we always flew to Reading first, turned at Reading and headed east to Europe. We had one

41:00 very interesting time. We turned at Reading and the navigator who calls the directions to the skipper, "Turn starboard" and he meant port, I don't know why he did that, and in that split second as he turned the aircraft, Reg looked down, Reg the navigator, and saw the church that he went to as a kid, he meant starboard and he corrected his mistake. And from then

41:30 on he nearly died, it was the only human mistake we ever made on the whole time we flew together. But

he said starboard instead of port, whatever it was. But a church hall of a sudden appeared before him and he thought, “Whoa, that’s going to be the next stop.” So we went on our way.

Tape 3

00:30 **All right.**

Before we get to that, seeing we were probably going to fly over Germany and I have commented that I was Jewish and very conscious of the Hitler regime, I had my identity card, which you flew with all of the time, from Jewish to Anglican C of E [Church of England] and my dog tags [identification disks] the same.

01:00 But equal to that my second name was Abraham and that wasn’t a very good name to have if you were shot down, so I changed that to Adrian, so I was Eric Adrian all through the war years. Changed it back to Abraham when I got back after the war. The other thing I talked about, I don’t remember the numbers on the aircraft at 62 Squadron but 7’s numbers were MG and we often flew

01:30 in aircraft number M and always requested to fly in aircraft number M, which we often did, so that had that delightful film connotation of MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Hollywood film studio], which was of course a big deal.

That would have boosted morale would it?

Oh, it was something to boast about, “We’re flying for MGM.”

So you would fly in different aircraft for each operation?

Not necessarily, in the main you had your own aircraft and you had your own ground crew. And in many ways the ground crew

02:00 liked the aircraft more than you the crew, because they serviced it and looked after it and you young blokes then took it and got holes shot in it.

What kind of condition would you often bring your aircraft back in?

Well, we did fifty trips and fourteen of them we got shot up by anti-aircraft fire. One of them we had so many holes we lost count, lots of them we had eight or ten holes.

02:30 And the interesting thing when you are hit was the smell of cordite, bear in mind I said we were in, not like modern day aircraft, with an oxygen mask and a speaker on you and you would hear the ‘whomp’. You could hear the dull thud where your aircraft was hit, now within seconds you would smell the smell of cordite. Now

03:00 the big thing was that we learned, well anywhere but particularly at Pathfinders School, to be able to tell the difference between predicted flak and barrage flak. Predicted flak was that that was fired directly at your particular aircraft, barrage flak was where they were just throwing it up and you were flying into it because there was just so much of it. So you had to learn to get out of the way of predicted and to fly around barrage. There is only one way to learn that and that is by experience. The other thing is tracer bullets were used.

03:30 And tracer bullets, unlike what you see in the movies, although you see it today on TV, don’t go in a straight line but go in the shape of a whip so you have got the vision of a whip coming at you rather that straight at you like that. But tragically, we flew ninety-nine per cent of the time at night. The Americans flew during the day and we flew at night. We dropped flares, that’s what Pathfinders is all about,

04:00 like sky rockets, and target indicators, we dropped them on the target, and main force came in and dropped the bombs on those flares. We had to be within fifteen minutes and, by the old-fashioned measurements, within four hundred yards of the target. If we were not that twice, we were up before the commanding officer. We took a photo of the target. Bear in mind colour movies had barely come into the world then. We

04:30 carried a colour movie and the bomb aimer would take a colour movie. The real scary part of the trip was, you’re coming up to the target and the bomb aimer would take over for the last minute or so and he would say to the skipper, “Left, left, steady. Easy. Left, left, steady. Bomb doors open. Bombs gone.” Now bomb doors open was very scary for the stupidest reason. Here you had your bombs exposed

05:00 to the ground. What the hell did that matter? Flak would go through that like tissue paper but you always thought, “Bomb doors open, all those bombs are facing mother earth.” Pathfinders I might add always carried a four thousand bomb known as a cookie and their flares, target indicators. And they were either red or green and the Germans never managed to copy them. The

05:30 war went on for all those years and the Germans were good scientist but they were never able to copy the intensity of the red or the green. And so you would drop your flares for the night and there was a master bomber and they were the real top guys, flew Mosquitos mainly. Famous Guy Gibson of the

Moehne Dam raid. Some Lancasters but a lot of master bombers were the masters. And they would control the raid and they would say,

06:00 “Bomb to the port of the reds” or ”Overrun the reds” whatever it was to correct the target, and they would be the ones speaking to the crowd. You had this fifteen minutes, the raid, and in that fifteen minutes you would have anything from two hundred to seven hundred aircraft bombing. Now bear in mind you are all aiming for the same thing down there and you have got two to seven hundred aircraft all going over there, how many aircraft ran into one another I don’t know.

06:30 But there must have been a percentage. Or drop bombs to the guy just below you. So they were all a hazard just as the Germans firing at you. The Germans had fourteen thousand anti-aircraft stations in German and France during the war so you couldn’t get far without people firing at you wherever you were, so it was a bit hairy.

What was your greatest fear, Eric?

Everything. You know

07:00 I am not trying to suggest that I was shaking in my boots, but I am suggesting to you that it gets dark and you’re looking and after a while you are flown over the coast, and it is getting dark after you get over Germany and you can see the other aircraft all lining up. Oh, I had better to get back to the timing, Pathfinders flew just before the raid started, so you put your target indicators down and so for the fifteen minutes of the

07:30 raid, every minute a Pathfinder dropped his flares, the flares lasted two minutes so they stoked the flares up for the fifteen minutes so that there was always a red sitting on the target and main force were coming in bombing the reds. Now it started to get a bit personal when it started getting dark and you would see other Lancasters to your right and left. Sometimes you could recognise another squadron’s letter like the MG in 7 Squadron, and say, “Oh, that’s the crowd from 105, you know.” And next thing ‘woof’ the thing would be hit and blow up.

08:00 Then you’d really think this is very dicey because it was the half-light, when you got into the dark you could see the aircraft blow up but then when you got to the target it became exciting beyond description because, scary and exciting, hundreds of aeroplanes bombing targets, blowing up, colourful target indicators, red or green, searchlights everywhere.

08:30 The description is like the beginning of an extravagant American, you know, how they have all of these lights and all of that down there, but you’re in it and they’re firing at you. Now, the clever crews weaved, and my skipper was a clever skipper. And he weaved, he didn’t fly straight and level because the Germans knew that, but if you weave you had the opportunity to see and stop the fighters getting at you a bit, and also that way.

09:00 But the scary part was, having dropped the target indicator you then had to fly straight and level for a minute because of that movie that you took, the picture you took. The Germans knew that better than we did. They knew that Pathfinders we flew at sixteen thousand feet, main force at twenty thousand feet. So the Jerries [Germans] knew that those aircraft flying lower were the ones to get, which were the Pathfinders, and

09:30 they’re going to fly straight and level for whatever it was, so that became pretty intense. As a wireless operator, I stood up for most of the time.

Can I just ask you how would you sit out that anxious moment when you were flying level and straight?

Oh, you were just part of the crew and just doing the job. And my memory of fear was your heart beating louder than the engines. You know, it was going ‘Whong, Whong’, and the engines brrr around it, so you were very conscious of the intensity of it all

10:00 by your heart pounding, probably no different to any other human situation. But you’re really scared when you’re over in that last minute and you’re straight and level and everything is flying around you.

It must seem like an eternity that minute?

It was an eternity. And after it was over, the bomb aimer would say whatever he would say to the skipper and the skipper would turn and what have you. And the real scary part was the Germans had marker beacon searchlights that had a slight blue

10:30 tint in them and there was four and they would be synchronised, and if they caught an aeroplane in the four beams, the guns would be synchronised to fire into that. If you got into that, the chances of getting out were very, very small. Well, we got into it one night over Stettin, and the skipper just pushed the stick down and turned, and so he dived for the ground with the aircraft going like that and then and we got out

11:00 of it and why I don’t know, because anyone could have done that, but I think the element of surprise and he did it in rather a strange way and that fooled them. Of course, when we pulled out from about sixteen thousand feet to about three thousand feet all the skin on your face and all of the skin on your arms all went down with the force of gravity and we didn’t have these things that modern fighter pilots

wear to pull your skin in. And your face all was down at your throat, just pulled down

11:30 from the force of gravity. And then of course all of the nuts and bolts of the aeroplane popped, not all of them, but a lot of them popped out of the aircraft under the strain.

Would you describe that as one of your most frightening experiences on an operation?

That and then another time we were flying home over, and it was H Hour [start time], was the time of the operation and you were

12:00 H+12 or 15 [minutes], so we were amongst the tail-enders putting our flares down, which meant that we were at the back with the lame ducks, aircraft that had engines…

Can you explain that for me?

Well, the raid took fifteen minutes, so as a Pathfinder you were on H Hour, which was that first minute, H+1 the second minute, H+2, and the aircraft would come in and drop the flares. Now, the main

12:30 force were coming in and bombing all of the time, they weren't interested in how you got those flares down, they just bombed the flares. We had to stoke the flares up so they didn't go out. So every minute we would have to put a flare on top of a flare on top of a flare, get the idea? So we had to stoke them up so that there was always red. So if we were on a H+14, various aircraft that had been on, also

13:00 the master bombers went before and they had a couple of practice runs to start off with to get the whole show running. And you were talking about scary times, well, we were one of the last aircraft back, and there was always safety in numbers, so it was good to be in with the crowd. You couldn't see them clearly but you could see them against the sky, and another thing, you would hit their air stream and bump along and that was always comforting, knowing that you were somewhere along the line, an

13:30 aircraft in front of you. And this particular night looking, I said earlier I always stood up. The wireless operator's position was underneath the astrodome. You had your wireless gear and a seat and when you stood up you put your head in the astrodome, and the more eyes you had out looking for fighters the better. So other than sitting down to send a message or take a message, I stood the whole time over the raids, well, into them and

14:00 over Germany. So this night standing up and the gunners would report to the skipper, "Aircraft shot down over the stern. Aircraft shot down at the stern." And one after the other they were gradually going down as the fighters at the back were picking off the lame ducks, the lame ducks meaning the ones that shot an engine or two and couldn't keep the pace up. Anyway it gradually come along and that nice rear gunner in our aircraft shot the fighter down, so we didn't have to worry about him any more.

14:30 But that was scary because we looked like being next cab off the rank, and then you knew. We did have two fighter attacks and they're interesting because a Lancaster is a slow aircraft compared to the fighter and what you would do, the gunners controlled the whole show once you had a fighter attack, and the gunner would say, "Fighter aircraft at the stern about four miles.

15:00 "Gradually coming in, getting closer. Gradually coming in, about two miles." and then when it got into a certain, I have forgotten the distance, the skipper would take evasive action and do a corkscrew. A corkscrew was turn the aircraft to the port and go down, turn the aircraft to the starboard and come up. And just like what a corkscrew is so the fighter then had to

15:30 follow him through that particular pattern, and that's how you try to evade the aircraft . Well, we had two and they missed fortunately and so we escaped. But about that, if you believe in UFOs [Unidentified Flying Objects], no bomber crew would ever believe in UFOs because we all went through the same thing. Bomber crew meaning British. We all flew at night time, and the rear gunner would say, "Fighter a bit

16:00 on the port, yeah, he is about ten miles out. Yeah, he is getting closer, eight miles out, getting about six miles out. Bugger it! It's a star." See when you're out there and you have no dimension up, down, left or right, light is confusing and you see a star and it is following you. And that's what people think about UFOs, you go out there, and particularly,

16:30 people who see UFOs are nearly always out in the bush miles from nowhere, just like bomber aircraft were in the night .And all of a sudden this blessed aircraft is starting to catch you up until the gunner said, "It is a star!" and you're away.

High alert.

I know lots of bomber aircraft who had this.

So you were only under air attack possibly two times during these operations?

Fighter attack twice, every time under ack-ack anti-aircraft. Of

17:00 course, anti-aircraft were pretty accurate and as I said there was fourteen thousand anti-aircraft sites over Europe, particularly over the Ruhr, and we all did many trips over the Ruhr.

What was the significance of the Ruhr as a target?

Oh that was the, what were their names? The big munitions, the German company. Krupps. Krupps were in Essen on the Ruhr and they had all of their munitions factories

17:30 and various other factories, the Ruhr was the hub of industry for Germany and so that was a prime target. I might go back and say that the start of the war in Europe, the first two years, Bomber Command were pretty inaccurate, at best ten per cent, and finally this bloke Bennett came forward and created the Pathfinders and

18:00 created the Lancaster and – well, he didn't, 'Bomber' Harris created the Lancaster and the Halifax instead of the twin-engine aircraft. Once you got to the four-engine aircraft you could fly higher and faster. And also you had a better chance of hitting the target. The twin engines were being shot out of the sky pretty fast, you're still fairly fast in four but you had more accuracy, and by well into the war they were getting about ninety-per cent accuracy with this Pathfinder bit that I was telling you. But at the start of the

18:30 war ten per cent would have been as much as they could do.

Why were the four-engine planes more accurate?

They could fly higher and get further away from the anti-aircraft, mainly higher.

So that would give you the opportunity to be more accurate?

No, no, get further away from the anti-aircraft guns, they had to shoot further up and so it was harder for them to knock you off.

19:00 **You said before that you would be standing up during these operations, if you went into a corkscrew or that type of manoeuvre, were you harnessed on your feet or…?**

No but you hung onto something, everyone else was sitting down, but there was something. I have forgotten what I was holding onto to be quite honest.

You would be hanging on quite tightly I imagine?

Oh yeah.

So what could you actually see during an operation?

Well, once the raid started, as I said, it was colourful and

19:30 spectacular beyond description, you had the colour of the searchlights and the colours of the hundreds of explosions going off, you know we are talking about anything from two to seven hundred aircraft all bombing the one spot, and all of those explosions going off and all sending up a whopping big gold flame as well as the red TIs [Target Indicators] that were amongst it. It was a very exciting sight. And tragically we thought

20:00 "Oh, marvellous raid, yeah we are killing a lot of people." You know, you think about that sixty years later, at the time you think about success, "Look at it, it is absolutely glowing and we're right on it."

How long was it before you took into consideration the lives that were at stake during those bombings?

Very recently I was pulled up with a halt. The Dambuster fellows were the ultimate Pathfinder fellows. I will digress with

20:30 Pathfinders for a moment. Bennett wanted to form a Pathfinder Squadron of what he called elite crew, that would be highly trained, very competent. He wanted to have elite crews, Bennett wanted crews in squadrons, Bennett won the day, that's why we were in 7th Squadron. Now why did I digress off that?

21:00 **I asked you about the lives, and then you started talking about?**

Well yes. Having got onto Pathfinder force, the crème de la crème were the guys that did the Moehne Dam raid, you know, the Moehne Dam raid where they blew up those dams with absolute pinpoint accuracy with a skipping bomb, and Barnes Wallace invented the skipping bomb, and they not only had to fly at x feet, you name it, they had to do it. Well, they were the kind of

21:30 fellows that became Pathfinders six months later, so we had great kinship with them. We knew some of them, we didn't know them personally, but we knew the guys who knew the guys, drank at the same pubs, and all of that sort of went with it. So the Moehne Dam raid was the crème de la crème, it really was amongst the great raids of the war. Not that long ago, I read a book written in Germany, saw photos and then re looked at

22:00 the film of the Dambusters, have you seen the film The Dambusters? I looked at that and thought war is absolute evil, absolute evil. I have always thought that but it reinforced my thought. What did the Moehne raid do? They blew up the dams, they let millions of gallons of water out, they drowned thousands of women and kids, and within

22:30 less that a year they got all of the production going again in the Moehne Valley. What did it achieve? It

achieved killing women and kids. Well, I have always thought war was evil but that was the bottom of the barrel and that was only recently that I read the book on the raid, and they had lots of good photos and how they did it. As an airman in Pathfinders, I was very interested in the accuracy, but as a human being I thought,

23:00 "For Goodness sake, what did that achieve?" Look at that, if you were the uncle of a woman and child who lived in that valley in Germany, those bloody Brits killed Aunty Suzie and what have you, and I thought, "For what? For absolutely nothing." So that we could say, "We are Pathfinders, we are Dambusters, we are the crème de la crème!" I am not sorry I was in it, I don't know whether

23:30 ashamed was the right word but I really swallowed hard because that was the ultimate, the dambuster raid, you know, we were one of them and we were responsible for hundreds of women and kids losing their lives for nearly nothing. I think that might answer the question.

How aware were you of the targets that you were identifying, were they anything more than co-ordinates on a map?

24:00 No, they were the target for tonight. They were what you were after, and you didn't think of the fact that there would be women and kids in the street and you didn't think of the fact that a bomb won't be accurate and might blow up an orphanage down the road. That never came, if you thought of that, you shouldn't be in Bomber Command, you were there to hit the target and you were there to be accurate and you were there to do your job and be proud of your job.

How accurate do you think you were?

24:30 **[Break]. Rolling.**

No different people have said to me, "Did you realise that you were killing people?" and I have said to them, "That really wasn't part of the job. The job was we had to win the war and if we didn't win it the other side would and we'd all be destroyed and we were trying to stop you being destroyed. We are prepared to put our lives on the line

25:00 to end the war," and that was the, we weren't trying to be bloody little heroes, we were trying to do the job that we were trained for. Enjoyed the job, found it fantastic and it was like winning the grand final every time you went out there. Yes you were scared, but you were very proud of being in Bomber Command and doubly proud of being in Pathfinder Force, and we wore our little Pathfinder eagles with great distinction.

25:30 **How long would an operation, how long would you be in flight for?**

It varied depending on the target. No, I mentioned being caught in the searchlights at Stettin, now Stettin was well inland, well east, so that would be a seven-hour trip over to Stettin and back, over to the Ruhr would be a four-hour trip and back. But once you were over the coast, you were at risk

26:00 and right until the minute you landed you were at risk because the German fighters would fly in low and they would fly under British searchlight level and they would pop you off as you were coming in to land, so you weren't home and hose until you were down on the ground to land. I might add, we were talking about superstition before, on the first trip we did, now the bomb aimer is up the front, and then the pilot and engineer and the navigator. I might add there were two navigators

26:30 in Pathfinders, one a radar operator and we picked up the radar operator later. Reg, the one we have talked about, was the straight navigator, so they faced the sides and then the wireless op [operator] faced the front and then the two gunners in their turrets behind you. So we landed after the first trip and Reg was as close as me to you, he is facing like that and I'm facing like that and I went like that and he went like that. So from then on every trip we did that, then that, then that,

27:00 then we sort of counted the trips, then we got to fifty. That was part of the superstition, we had to do that. And the other one was at the end of the runway when we took off, the skipper would say when he got to just about to take off, just before he revved the engines up, he would start to say, "Best of luck, crew" and one night he moved the aircraft just a fraction to straighten

27:30 up and we thought he forgot to say, "Best of luck, crew." We all nearly died, we thought he forgot to say it, no chance. So they're the superstitions that went on.

While we're talking about superstitions, can you show us your scarf?

Oh yes, well, some of the guys wore girls' panties around their necks and all manners of things, bear in mind we were all nineteen to twenty-four. But being an old square, and wolves were considered a real…

28:00 they were the, I don't know what you call them today, but that was mine and I wore that under my uniform there, and that was very much a part of me, and to me that was a lucky charm, and very proud of my wolf.

So you looked pretty dapper in your scarf and uniform? And what about some of your crew member superstitions apart from the overall one you have mentioned?

28:30 Well they, I also had a photo of a girl that I used to take out and that was in my wallet and I always felt

that it was important to take that. I married another girl by the name of Joan, I didn't marry that girl, she was rather nice, however I have forgotten precisely what all the guys had but they all had a nick-knack but that one was a rather conspicuous one. Just on nick-knacks

29:00 if you call them. You are flying through and flak is coming through, absolutely raining, and it goes up and hits you and goes through, as I said, you could smell the cordite, a piece of flak about as big as that, nearly as big as that there came through the rear turret and it lost its trajectory, it was right at the end and it was now coming down at five Ks [kilometres] an hour instead of a thousand Ks, and it

29:30 hit the rear turret and it went around and around the turret and then landed by David, the rear gunner's side. Now if that had have hit him, it was white hot, (A) it would have killed him or removed a limb or something. He carried that cold bit of steel with him for the rest of his war career, and I think he carried into post-war years. But I will tell you about David, just seeing I mentioned that. All of us, as I said, were closer than brothers, it was an

30:00 experience beyond description, you know, you risked your life together night after night and it was for a year. So you can imagine you had great respect for one another, but David and I had an extra feel in that we sort of got the confidences of one another. He was the youngest guy on the station let alone the squadron, his parents were quite old when he was born, he was a boarder at a school so he barely knew his parents, and there was a time when gunners would be shot out of

30:30 the air in England, so you could do a gunnery course without doing the wireless course, which meant you went into gunnery school and straight over to England, he did that. So he joined at what might have been eighteen and a half at best, I think he put his age up a year anyway. And he went to Geelong College because he was a boarder there all of his career, and we were just great mates. He finished the war; before he turned twenty-one,

31:00 he got a commission, he got a Distinguished Flying Medal. He did two tours of operations. He got engaged and finally married to a WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] on the station and got his discharge and was looking for a job before he was twenty-one, that's not a bad lifetime is it?

Very condensed.

That was David.

You have mentioned how important friendship was and that you were like brothers, can you tell us anything more about each of your other crew members?

31:30 Sure, love to, because they were that important. As I said, the skipper was from Queensland, from Esk, worked in a newspaper and then went on to be a farmer, died, they have all died except for Reg. Johnny Blundell was the bomb aimer, I might add; I will go back a bit. Most of us were sergeants, wireless operators or whatever we were. By the end of the war probably seventy, eighty per cent of us got a commission so we were pilot officers or flying officers. The war

32:00 air force system changed for the better I think, because I got a commission, I was proud of being an officer. So what was I going into? The group. So Johnny Blundell was the only officer in the crew, the rest of us were sergeants, he was a bomb aimer, very musical man, wrote musical songs of the day and words to them. I might add that on Sunday night, we used to go over to the New Inn,

32:30 which was near the station, and we had two funny little cars and two motorbikes amongst the crew. We used to acquire, I think was the word, petrol, by going to the Lancasters and going to the overflow tank, undoing it and letting it come down the funnel, and it was a hundred-odd octane – which you can imagine the little English Morris Minors, it really did great stuff to the old car, and they all went and backfired of course. However,

33:00 we used to go over to the New Inn any Sunday night we were not flying and sing around the piano. Now singing around the piano, like dancing, was very much part of your way of life, we all knew the words of all the songs. Not like modern music today where you enjoy the music and you enjoy the disco or what have you. But we all knew all of the songs, and Johnny could play them, as well, he wrote two or three with his own words and they were fun.

33:30 And the locals in the New Inn would sit around and watch these seven or eight guys singing around the piano with a pot of…I might add the beer got better the further north you went in England. You didn't drink it cold, which fascinated us when we first went there, but our palates got very quick to drinking mild beer in England, and we all drank quite a bit, because if you're going to die, you really need to soften the nerves a little bit. And so singing around the piano was really very important.

34:00 **Do you remember the lyrics of any of those ditties? Maybe, did you have any dirty ditties, you said Johnny had a few lyrics of his own.**

Oh yes, there were dirty ditties but that was sixty years ago. But we also stood around the bar and all had serious talks. The squadrons all had messes, officers mess and sergeants mess, and that's why that crewing was so important in the pub where sergeants and officers can be together. But you'd stand around the bar and have serious talks, and one of the serious conversations,

34:30 you're allowed to smile now, was sex. Bear in mind, we are talking about 39 to 45. Such a thing as the

[contraceptive] pill hadn't been invented, we had all grown up in conservative families and went to church on Sunday. I went on Saturday, I was Jewish. So we were all brought up in this very conservative atmosphere and quite a good percentage of us had never slept with a girl. Of course, a few of the boys brought the averages up

35:00 and sort of were sleeping with girls at a great rate of knots, but quite a good percentage of us were, like me, conservative and had never slept with a girl. And the thing we used to say, "What's it like?" and it was it, it was sex. And so many of us, every second guy is probably going to get killed and you have never found out a very human requirement, which is probably one of the most exciting ones you will ever find out, and

35:30 you're going to miss out, mate. So I found out in the, what's the name, hotel in London, the something Palace, a little WAAF that used to play the piano who was very keen that I didn't die a bull virgin and I agreed with her and I didn't. And that was my sexual background, at least I went to war and found out what it was about. Although we were both laughing, we are all laughing,

36:00 it was a very serious conversation. A bloke of nineteen to twenty year olds with a beer in hand, probably going out on operation tomorrow night where there is above average chance where they wont come back, and I didn't know what it was all about. And then, of course, the world changed and the pill came and all the rest that went on. But that conservative war was still ticking on in those days and that was over the bar with a pint of mild in your hand.

Do you think that the actual war

36:30 **times changed modesty?**

Oh well, you put modesty aside if you reckoned it was worth the risk. But the pill changed modesty, the 50s and the 60s or whatever it was. I don't think things changed in that regard. Australians in the main are larrikins, they are nice larrikins, but Australians in the air force, navy, army, doesn't matter, some of them are larrikins too far. But the average Australian who

37:00 was a larrikin who was a good guy, enjoyed his cricket and footy and standing at the bar and tell a few jokes better than the rest. We didn't swear much, I might add. I grew up in a family that never swore at all, my mother and father I never heard swear, I never ever saw my mother in anything other than a petticoat at best. So our life was in that regard, in a way on the world of sex, was dramatically different, and there were a lot of guys like me,

37:30 who today you would say are conservative old squares. But that was the conservative sort of people that we were and particularly those that joined the air force, and I don't want to be snobby against the navy or the army, but we were a little bit different in a way, a little bit more snobby I suppose. I can see you're smiling, but you're allowed to.

Just with regards to meeting,

38:00 **where would you meet them?**

Oh, dances, where else?

Which was the most popular dance?

The most popular dance, oh, we did them all the foxtrot, the lolita, the modern waltz; we were skilled at all of them. And if you had two left legs you were in trouble; dancing was an enormous social asset and in war time dancing was absolutely great. We would all listen to the radio ad nauseum, which people do today,

38:30 and all the obvious songs were going. It was the era of Bing Crosby and Bob Hope and people like that, and the British one of course was Vera Lynn singing the song We'll Meet Again. We all knew We'll Meet Again and it meant a lot to us. Lily Ann Carol was the favourite on 7 Squadron, I can't remember the song she used to sing. But eleven o'clock the radio went on and nearly always Lily Ann Carol would sing, oh, I am spoiling the party by not remembering the song.

39:00 We all knew it, we all waited for Lily Ann Carol, never heard it again I might add.

Was this eleven o'clock in the barracks or?

Eleven o'clock when we went to prayers, when the CO would tell us what the operations were and that you hadn't paid your mess bill and that the air commodore was coming to inspect the troops at five o'clock tomorrow, so all be well dressed and shoes polished and so on. That was called prayers, and also you would listen to the wireless, as it was in those days, no telly of course, on the way up to prayers at the administration block.

39:30 **Could you listen to the wireless on board the plane at all?**

It was my job to listen to the wireless but you didn't listen to the wireless as we know it, you would listen to base and the instructions we were being given.

So you were never tempted to tune in?

No.

What kind of communication would you have over the wireless during the course of an operation?

It was to base alone, you didn't talk to the other aircraft in the raid.

40:00 You were solely concerned with what base wanted to tell you and of course you were listening-in to talk radio to the master bomber who would say, "Bomb left of the red TIs" or "Overrun them" or whatever. I might add another thing which brings to mind, you had to be on time, within the minute. And if you are flying over hundreds of miles, or hundreds of Ks as they are today, to be within the minute, it didn't matter to

40:30 main force because they had fifteen minutes to spare, and if they were a minute or two early or a minute or two late, it didn't matter because the flares would always be there. So they in the main always had fifteen minutes as a minimum and really up to twenty minutes and that's not bad to judge it. But we only had one minute, so if you were ahead of time, you were too early and you were in big trouble. What did you do? You did a dog-leg from there to there.

41:00 A dog-leg meant you would turn there and kill an amount of time there and there to get back. That's a wonderful way to die because you were then a lame duck, you're out there on your own, the German anti-aircraft see this stupid Lanc [Lancaster] out there on his own, "We'll get him." No trouble at all. So if you had to kill time, you were in double-trouble. If you were too early , just as bad, because you had to run the hell out of the engines to catch up and if you ran the hell out of them you have got to worry about getting back, and if you damage

41:30 your engines you are in trouble. Of course, many a time a big percentage of us flew home with two or three engines and a lot of that was from overheating them, trying to catch up running up to the target.

Tape 4

00:30 If you didn't have the will, the courage, the initiative, the drive to be in Bomber Command, I can't speak for other services, they have their intensities and tragedies and so on, I am only talking about air force in Bomber Command. It was not mentioned but it was occasionally mentioned that someone had LMF [Lack of Moral Fibre]

01:00 and he had to drop out. Lack of moral fibre. A terrible thing to say and at the time anyone who had LMF, and there weren't many, I know of two local boys that were and they were sent home. It was the ultimate disgrace and lack of moral fibre, can you think of a worse expression than that? We didn't talk about it often

01:30 but occasionally someone heard of someone or whatever. But the more I thought of it as time went on, people are entitled to be scared, people are entitled to not be geared for the position we were put in and I think LMF was a terrible thing to do to people. And particularly to penalise them and send them as if they were traitors or sick or mental or ill or whatever. And I look back on

02:00 that and I think, "Gee, the services were too tough on that." They might be too tough today, occasionally you hear things that are going on, the helicopter boys and things of today, maybe it is still going on, I don't know. But at the time, it was thought to be a terrible thing and not really understandable because the rest of us,

02:30 which was ninety-nine point nine per cent, were all in there going for our lives . But yes, we heard of it and it was terrible. That brings me to the other thing, counselling. Now today, if there is a fire across the road, Ocean Gardens, they will be in here tomorrow counselling the people who might have got scared near the fire, or if there is an accident near the school down the road, the counselling people will be in to counsel you. We thought

03:00 counselling was something to do with local government. There was no such thing as counselling. You would come back from an operation, engines shot out, maybe one of the guys wounded, maybe someone killed, maybe the crew alongside you didn't come back, and you would go into debriefing, you always had to report to the commanding officer and the heads of various departments to tell them what went on. But there was no person there to hold your hand and say

03:30 this, this and this. And I don't know what counsel people say, by the way, our granddaughter now does work a bit similar to that for people on the drug thing. All of my mates have laughed about the fact that they do counselling, "They do counselling, we didn't do any counselling. I wonder what they do and say?" and what have you. I have had occasion to give speeches at Bomber Command dinners

04:00 and once or twice I have brought up the fact that we didn't have counselling and that got the best laugh of the lot. That got a better laugh than a blue joke because counselling was not even a word in the dictionary in those days.

Did the padre provide some counselling?

We had a padre and they were pretty good blokes, wartime padres, and of course the wonderful people were the Salvos. Salvation Army were there, in the middle of the desert in the Middle East, in the middle of the squadrons, you name it.

04:30 The Salvos were there with a cup of cocoa, wonderful people all admired by military people, and padres were good blokes too, but I couldn't even tell you the religion of the crew members, who as I say, were closer than brothers. I wouldn't know if they were Anglican or Catholic, they weren't Jewish I know that.

So you weren't regular visitors to the padre then?

No and I don't know anyone that was. I say that without knowing, there might have been a lot of guys who went regularly to

05:00 the padre, I just genuinely don't know.

As mates, would you confide in each other?

David in particular, David and I confided in one another and he was my soul mate and I was his. And I was a lot older than him, I was about twenty-two and he was about eighteen, and that was a lot older. But yeah, we confided always in one another.

How open were you about your emotions?

Oh, very open. If you're going to die tomorrow night, you might as well be open.

05:30 But of course, everyone else was going to die, you were never going to die, it was the other bloke that was going to be shot down.

So what would you go to one another and say to each other?

Oh, it would just be out of the situation of the moment. And you also, now my mates were Kevin and Peter, and when I heard, and Bung and Flip, they were my four particular mates, and when I heard that they were shot down and they didn't know if they had come back,

06:00 I was shattered as if I had heard that my mate had been killed in a road accident last night. But the blokes in Bomber Command, "So what? They were out on the field with you, it's like footy. Someone was carried off. Well, we'll get on with the game and win." That was the attitude, but your home mates that was different. I will go back to the start of the war, if I may in a way, on this topic. September the 3rd, war broke out and we were invited,

06:30 I am digressing a bit, to the birthday party of a near neighbour and three of us went, Kevin and Peter, who were my particular mates. And seven o'clock Prime Minister Menzies came on the news that night, and they turned the radio on to listen to the news of the day, and said, "We are at war." And Prime Minister Menzies made his famous speech, "We are now at war." The hostess, the mother of the boy, naturally

07:00 tears rolled down her face and the rest of us sort of looked at one another. Now, those guys all went to Bomber Command and got killed. And so that's how my war started, September the 3rd, but who knew that was going to happen? It's like the night before the grand final, I wonder who is going to win.

How do you commemorate their passing away during the war?

I don't, I think about

07:30 them a lot. And I think about them in my own way, why me? They were terrific people, wonderful people, out of the fifty-two weeks of the year, I have forty of them, we belong to Temple David, which is the reformed Jewish body and we got to the temple, and I would think of them at least,

08:00 you know, when I go to serve regularly; they were great guys.

I have to also ask when you returned from operation and a lot of planes or crews don't come back, how were they commemorated?

Oh, not at all, it was everybody else but you. You were back and you went and had your egg, your operational meal, and had your eggy and then usually, not usually, regularly,

08:30 went into the bar and have a couple of beers. Two or three o'clock in the morning, let steam off a bit and went to bed. And a lot of us didn't sleep well to begin with, we were very, very tired because you know, you were really pent up. One funny incident when we were at the bar after an operation. We went on a raid to Kiel, and in Kiel harbour was the German battleship the Graf Spee and someone dropped

09:00 a four thousand cookie – we all carried a cookie as I said before – and it hit the middle of the Graf Spee and blew it up. Well, we were on that raid and you could have read the newspaper from twenty-thousand feet, the explosion was absolutely beyond description. Enormous. Anyhow we got home and were having our beer or cup of coffee and the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] news came on

and said, “RAF out tonight and sunk the Graf Spee,” you know, hooray, hooray.

09:30 Sunk the Graf Spee, it was at least a mile off the aiming point, what were they doing out there? They weren’t supposed to be out there at all. So we thought it was a great joke because whoever dropped the cookie was a bad shot, because we were aiming at that port of Kiel. It was a little bit like bombing the Swan [River] and the bomb hit Fremantle, the four thousand pounder. So it was great chortles in the mess.

10:00 “Oh, it wasn’t a Pathfinder that would have done that.”

So you wouldn’t dwell too much on the negatives?

No, you couldn’t survive you would just.

How would you block that?

Well, it didn’t come into block; you were more concerned about if you had someone to take to the dance on Friday night because the squadron always had a dance on Friday night, that was much more important because that was Friday night; Thursday night was an operation, you know.

So what was your day-to-day life like in the squadron?

10:30 Oh, of course, you did an enormous amount of training. You trained every second or third day, training meaning exercises, dropping practice bombs. And several times we won it for the most accurate crew, which was rather delightful, you know Johnny Blundell the bomb aimer dropped accurately and the skipper flew accurately. So you would do your training flight regularly. And you would do fight

11:00 affiliation with a Spitfire usually flown by a mad Pole; some of the Poles after they came off operation went on the Spitfires doing what they would call fighter affiliation. They would attack you in the air; of course, not with bullets. But they’d come in and you had to get into this corkscrew that I told you about, you would do a corkscrew with the Spitfire chasing you, as I say, flown by a mad Pole and that sort of thing. And of course, you had leave, a days leave every six days.

11:30 We’d go into Cambridge, we would always have a meal at a place I can’t remember its name, but eating was a bit precarious because you could only get limited food, but we went to this place and there was a photo on the wall of the Memphis Belle, the America Flying Fortress that they made a film about. And we finished up with a photo of the Nielsen crew sitting alongside the Memphis Belle. So I don’t know if it is still there sixty years later, the restaurant mightn’t even be there.

12:00 But that brings me to the America bit. We as RAF were not fond of Americans. They were just as heroic, just as courageous and lost as many as we did and made an enormous contribution. But the Americans were over the top on everything. They were bigger, brighter, faster and they were all John Wayne [American ‘tough guy’ actor]. Every one of them was a John Wayne, he was going to win the war and get the girl the next day.

12:30 And that’s a gross exaggeration, but a lot of them were. But we were in an RAF group that tended to be the opposite. We tended to be very conservative and very British and what have you. And they flew in daytime and they had the misfortune of flying in formation and they were really shot up terribly, a lot of their guys were shot out of the air, an absolute tragedy.

13:00 But the lead aircraft had the lead navigator who was the real ‘top gun’ man. Now, the Germans knew that, so their fighters changed their tactics fairly early in the war and instead of coming from the back and the side they would come head-on, knocking out the front aircraft, which they did quite regularly and quite often. Having knocked out the front aircraft, then the formation only had second navigators to take

13:30 them to the target and they missed a lot of targets. More than we in Pathfinders who were within the minute and within four hundred yards. So we were very critical, childishly when I look back, about that. They once bombed a place called Chemnitz instead of Dessau or the opposite, I can’t remember. But they not only missed the town, they missed the country. You know it was in the wrong country. All right, it was

14:00 probably a genuine error but at the time, as brash young men as we were, we were very critical of what they were doing or not doing. And the Brits had a system of marking how many fighters you got down, the Americans had a different system. So if you followed the American system, they would have shot all of the German fighters out of the air by the first twelve months and they were the sorts of things that used to get up our nose. The other thing was, the American newspapers used to write,

14:30 “Allied aircraft out over Bremen tonight.” Well, that was before the United States Air Force came into the war. So you would read the article that a clever journo [journalist] wrote and you would instantly think it was the American Bomber Command who were out over Bremen tonight. It wasn’t, it was the RAF. They were the things that got up our nose.

How was that rivalry expressed?

15:00 I don’t really know because we lived as a crew and went on leave as a crew, other than going to the dances we didn’t really rub shoulders with anyone.

So you didn't see Americans at dances?

Oh yeah, regularly, they covered the country, the girls liked them too.

And would you give them a hard time?

No, on the contrary, we got on with the job and they got on with their job. We just quietly thought…

You thought it to yourself?

We thought they were over the top.

15:30 I was only at the edge of a pub brawl once and that was at Mildenhall, and an American top sergeant, and that's pretty high, you have to be pretty bright to be a top sergeant, one level below a commission. An American top sergeant and a RAF guy, I don't remember what he was, having an argument that finally got to fisticuffs, and the argument was that the Queen Mary was an American ship. And he said, "Well look,

16:00 it's the biggest in the world, it's got the blue around it, it's the fastest, it is an American ship." And the British guy said, "It's Cunard Line, it was launched in the Clyde, it is a British ship." Anyhow they finally got to blows and a few of us also helped them. At my height I didn't help, I barracked from a distance. That was an example, might be a silly example I concede, but that was the sort of thing that tended to go on.

Did you see that sort of tension go on often?

16:30 Oh no, fights no, comments yes. In fact I even remember being in one conversation where one guy said, "Do you know, it would be much more fun fighting the Americans than the Germans." So you know, and of course that's childish but it happened.

Given that you are operating with the same objective, why did you operate so differently?

Oh, that was a matter of policy higher up in the early parts of the war and the powers that be decided that for

17:00 mass bombing raids, the Americans would be better off flying in daytime in formation and the RAF would be better off flying at night singularly. Now, I am not critical of that at all, that was a policy decision made the top flying brains of the Allied world.

Fortunately it wasn't the other way around, I suspect.

I don't know. Well, they took a terrible time and also they had the misfortune of being able to see a fighter coming along in broad daylight and blowing the aircraft alongside you. At least we were in the night and you

17:30 can see but how much can you see? I might add in that regard, to have a light on in England during the war, and in Australia too, was a criminal offence. You know, all shops and houses were blacked out and so were aircraft, so we took off and landed in the dark, and we flew at night. No lights on the ground, no light on the aircraft, so you were accustomed to flying in the dark all of the time.

18:00 **Just for your own nerves, do you think you were better off flying in the dark?**

Oh yeah. For sure, what you can't see, you don't know much about. Well, we had one interesting thing, you asked about incidents, when we were still on main squadron on 62 Squadron. We had a full bomb-load and a full petrol load and that was sixteen thousand pounds of bombs in the old measurement

18:30 and twenty-one fifty four gallons of petrol, and we came to the end of the runway and we didn't have enough flying speed to get off the ground. Now if we would have hit the deck with that much petrol and that many bombs, we would have blown up like you wouldn't believe. So the skipper put the wheels down and sunk the aircraft at about ten feet high, just got enough speed to get up but I think that was as much by the grace of God as by the skipper, just

19:00 lowering that, you can just imagine an aircraft flying through there, that was the level. Another thing I wanted to mention, we did have an experience, night flying again of St Elmo's Fire. Do you know what St Elmo's Fire is?

Would you like to describe it?

Sure, it was a name that grew in the days of sailing ships and the lightning would hit the mast of the sailing ship and it would go from one mast to the

19:30 other, and that's where it got the name from St Elmo's Fire. It could happen in a four-engine aeroplane and did. And that sort of we were flying and we were in an electrical storm and the lightning hit one of the engines and went across to the other and went back and forward between the two engines. Now that's a bit hairy because we were flying with a hundred and ten octane petrol and there is always a seepage of petrol out of the engines even in the best sealed aircraft.

20:00 Sorry, it didn't go from one engine to the other, ridiculous, it went around the propellers so you're

looking at lightning going around the propellers, which is fairly exciting.

Amazing.

But we're here to tell you.

Do you think your young age was an advantage when it came to fear?

We were all the same age, you couldn't join up until you were eighteen and at thirty you were a dodderer. Anybody who was thirty was ready for a wheelchair.

20:30 So give or take, well, you had commanding officer of twenty-four or twenty-six, so we were all in that age group.

Had you been older, do you think you might of…?

No I think the age we were at was probably the best age for such a condition.

Youthful naiveté?

You have to have youthful naiveté. Of course, we didn't think we were naïve at all.

21:00 **How often, I am wondering what you do during the course of the flight, you said sometimes it would be four hours and you would have intense action when you get there?**

You had plenty to do. I missed a major point. I made the point unless you were an efficient crew you had less chance of getting through operations.

21:30 You know, there was no margin of error, none. So I can only talk in the crew that I was in, never ever did you have a conversation in the air. It would be " Skipper to navigator, hows our time going?" "Skipper to rear gunner, anything following us?" "Skipper to wireless operator, what is the news coming through?" or it might be "Mid-upper gunner to the navigator, I think we have just flown over such and such."

22:00 Never ever did you say, "Are you going to the dance on Friday night?" Your mind was completely absorbed by what you were doing, the conversation solely to do with the job in hand and crews that were a bit slack in the main didn't make it. You didn't have time for diversions. People were shooting at you.

22:30 **Well, you mentioned there were competitions at the base between crews, what was the rivalry like between crews?**

Oh no, squadrons were very much like football teams, you were very much part of a team and in the main very proud to say that I am on 7 Squadron. And to this day if you bump into someone, you immediately say, "What squadron were you on?' "Oh yes, I remember 515, Bill Smith was on that squadron" So it was very much like that.

23:00 **So there wasn't actually rivalry between crews ?**

No, there wasn't rivalry between squadrons. It was just proud to be a part of…I am only talking about Bomber Command, I couldn't say the same for Coastal Command or Transport Command or whatever. All of the things that I have said are purely from my observations in Bomber Command.

Well, we haven't really explored your daily life on the ground, you have gone over generally?

23:30 Well, I said I did quite a bit of training. We had six days leave every six weeks, went down to London, went down to the Boomerang Club that I mentioned. I had distant family who lived down at Nottingham and I went and stayed with them and went on leave over to Wales and things like that. We just knocked about together.

What was the daily routine?

Oh, the daily routine, you sleep in if you were flying the night before whether it was operations or training.

24:00 And go up to the, what did we call it, can't think of the name of the room that had maps all around of Europe and where the raids were and what have you, and you would have, that's right, a continental breakfast – a continental breakfast was a bun and a cup of tea or coffee – and then you would wander around the room with that. And from there, you would go to what I called prayers. From there,

24:30 you went to your aircraft and checked it out if you were flying tonight. You might do a training flight in the afternoon, and there you go, that was the day.

What kind of route would you take for a training flight?

They would set your routes similar to Europe but of course you were in England. So you would fly up to Edinburgh or something like that, down to Brighton, across the Irish Sea and then

25:00 you would come back and check you used. So you would say, "Well, what are you on today?' " Oh, we've got eight bombs, Babraham at ten o'clock." So away you would go and the armourers would put eight

practice bombs in your aircraft and away you go and you would get over Babraham and drop your bombs.

25:30 **What was the difference between the practice bombs and the real ones?**

There was virtually no explosion, they were just shells and they would hit the range and there we were.

And you would treat those training operations as though they were a legitimate operation?

Oh yes, very seriously, because although no one is going to shoot at you, that was training for the real thing. And again I can only speak of Bomber Command, I don't know what Coastal Command or Fighter Command did.

We might get the opportunity to speak to someone who flew

26:00 **one of those. Was there any sporting competitions or anything like that?**

Oh yes. Glad you asked, although I am a good West Australian, born in Fremantle, I played Rugby Union for Fremantle and as, in England, of course, Rugby Union is the big game in England, and soccer of course. And England will win the World Cup next Saturday if you want to know. So I had two seasons in football,

26:30 one when I was in Dumfries, in Scotland that was, and one when I was in Oakington, played for RAF sides. And I had a funny experience when we were at Dumfries, we went down across the border, across Gretna Green to Carlisle, an industrial town. Of course, during the war you played games when you could play them, in other words, it wasn't a Saturday afternoon at two o'clock situation. You organised that such and such a factory knocked off their thing at three

27:00 o'clock, so you'd start the game at three or in the morning or whatever. The other thing was jerseys, they called them strips in England, "Righto, we'll wear a blue strip, you wear a green strip." So they'd throw you a strip and the strip fitted everyone and away you'd go and you'd play rugby. Well, we got down to Carlisle and the ground was locked up, somebody had made a boo-boo somewhere along the line. So we did the obvious, what young men do, we went to the pub. We fronted up to the pub and we had been there suitably grogging on for an hour

27:30 and a bloke with a fairly strong Carlisle accent came in and said, "Are they the players from Dumfries? You're supposed to be on." "We're the players." "You're supposed to be on." "We went, it was locked." "The caretaker hadn't arrived, they're there waiting for you." So we went on all full of grog, full as ticks [drunk] and we didn't do very well, but we had fun.

How long did you wait for the caretaker before you decided to go to the pub?

This was sixty years ago, mate, I don't know.

Five minutes?

But I remember we had been drinking away

28:00 and he finally found us and there we were. And I had the privilege of my greatest sporting moment playing rugby in England. My being in Cambridge with 7 Squadron, we played a lot of the university colleges, Christ's and Trinity and all of the big Cambridge colleges and they all had rugby union teams, and on one particular game, we were level at the end of the game.

28:30 I always did the kicking for the side, I was better than average at that, so they threw me the ball to kick, and I did and it was a long way out and I converted it, and so we won the game on the kick at the end and they blew the whistle and the game was over. And I was king for thirty seconds and it was a great moment in my sporting life. And then I came home and continued playing rugby.

How did you celebrate that victory?

Drinking beer. Gunners and Ushers.

29:00 **Good drop?**

Yep. The further north you went, the better the beer was.

Were you corresponding much with family at this time?

Yes, I wrote regularly to my family and I wrote regularly to and from Coralie Condon. Does that name ring any bells? She was the first female director of Channel Seven, opened Dirty Dicks [restaurant], a very colourful television personality when it first started here.

29:30 Well Jimmy and I, her brother, were mates and she corresponded with me right through the war and vice versa. When I got home, my Mum was thrilled that I had kept the correspondence up once a week or fortnight or whatever it was. But she said, "I didn't understand the language you used half of the time" because we used a sort of a jargon. It was English but we described things in this air force style. And the letters were all in aerograms where

30:00 you wrote the letter, got an aerogram, and they photographed it and they sent all of these aerograms back to Australia in minuscule, and I have got a copy of the book and I have still got copies of them. So I wrote to Coralie and I wrote to Mum and Dad, but Mum and Dad thought it was difficult to understand what I was saying from time to time.

Was this a slang that you developed in the air force?

30:30 Yeah, you would use slang all of the time.

Do you recall that slang how you used to speak?

I only remember one of prominence, everything was 'you were forced to': you were forced to go to lunch, you were forced to go to the pictures. Everything was 'forced to', I don't know why it was 'forced to', but that was one example. I remember I had written home and said, "I was forced to go to the movies." I wasn't forced to go at all it was just an expression.

31:00 But I don't remember the others, but I do remember Mum saying it was great to get your letters but…

Wish we weren't forced to read them.

Yeah. And fortunately I still have a copy of all of the ones that I wrote to Coralie Condon on this aerogram.

Was she a romantic acquaintance?

No, Jimmy Condon was my life-long friend. If you listen to the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], he was on the ABC for many years, James Condon.

31:30 She lived five doors up from us; in wartime you looked after everybody and everybody looked after you. As a neighbour and sister of my best mate, she just wrote and kept writing. This is a little bit to do with it, worthy of saying since it is being recorded, the thing you can't get today is a thing called a telegram. And of course, a telegram during the war years had

32:00 enormous connotations, if the telegram boy was walking up your street and you watched which house he went into because there was an above average chance that the telegram would say, "Missing in Action "or "Killed in Action." So people really watched, because there was a happy side too, for twenty-firsts and weddings. But during the war, a telegram was something to worry about if a telegram was going up your street, you would watch, "Which house was he going into?"

32:30 because virtually all of us had gone off to the war anyway. Of course, the other side of it was sent to parents to say, "Your son has been decorated and congratulations." The bad side was, "Where is that telegram going to?"

Yeah, I imagine he could strike fear into you. What did you miss about home while you were away?

Very little. I enjoyed service life. I liked the camaraderie of my mates.

33:00 I have good parents, they were not that affectionate, they were nice good decent people, my brother had been and gone, he was in the army, as I said, the day after, and my closest associates and friends were those that I was with. What more could you ask?

Mum's cooking?

Yeah, I suppose that was right but I don't know that I thought about that.

33:30 Oh, a very interesting raid we did which had nothing to do with bombs, I don't know what year it was, it could have been '42 or '43, it doesn't matter. But the Dutch were absolutely starving, they had got down to the stage where they were boiling tulip bulbs to survive. They were really

34:00 at the bottom of the barrel. So there was an arrangement where the war stopped over Rotterdam for twelve hours or whatever it was, on such and such a date, and the RAF took food to the Dutch and in taking food they ran it the same way as they ran a bombing raid. Instead of carrying bombs, we carried sacks, not parachutes, but Hessian sacks of food to take to the Dutch, and it was carried out exactly the same

34:30 as a bombing raid with two exceptions; one it was low level, and two it was in daylight. And we were the Pathfinders that were to go to Rotterdam on this particular day, we were to drop our markers in either the race course or the soccer ground, I have forgotten which. It doesn't matter, it was in the middle of Rotterdam. And away we went, now we thought, "We have got to give a message to the Dutch, how can we do it?" Well, Lancasters were black,

35:00 and so we wrote on the bottom of it, it was a big aircraft, almost as wide as this room, Guten Morgen, which meant 'Good Morning'. We didn't know what luck was, but we reckoned German for good morning was as good as we could get, so Guten Morgen in letters as big as we are. Anyway as Pathfinders we were first ones in and dropped our flares and dropped our sacks of food and away we went. It was very exciting because we were at tree-top level, we could see the people in the street. We could see SS [Schutzstaffel] people

35:30 in their black uniforms looked as horrible as they were. We could see the Dutch people and the school kids and all that was left of everyday life. At low level, tree-top level, wonderful stuff especially when you're used to flying at sixteen to twenty thousand feet in the dark. So that was that and we were very pleased to have done that.

What was the name of that operation?

Manna Raid it was called. As in 'manna' as in biblical terms, you know, Moses

36:00 got the manna from the bushes. Oh, they had wonderful names for various things. Well, time ticked by and I went onto Perth City Council like twenty years ago and the Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce were coming to visit the Lord Mayor, and they had a Lord Mayor's visit, that's different from a reception, a Lord Mayor's visit where you just go in and have a cup of tea with the

36:30 Lord Mayor, three, four, five of you or one. So I said to the Lord Mayor of the day, "I would like to come into this; it is the Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce." He was quite pleased, instead of going in on his own, he had another citizen with him. So in I went and I talked to these guys and he was about six foot four and the obvious came up, he said, "Have you ever been to Rotterdam?" I said, "No, I have never been there on the ground, but I had an interesting experience." And in as quick a way

37:00 as I could, I told him the story of the Manna Raid. With that, this guy just bawled into tears. Tears rolled down his eyes. He said, "Why have you come here?" I said, "Well, I have come here to say that I am Jewish and Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce that have allowed Israelis to get oil five years ago or whatever it was." And Israel was getting oil from tankers out of Rotterdam, nowhere else.

37:30 The world had embargoed oil, I just wanted to say Jews might be scattered around the world but even people like me knew about that, and I just grabbed the opportunity to say, "Thankyou for what you guys did." And he said, "Well, I was a boy in the streets in Rotterdam when Guten Morgen flew over." And that's why the tears rolled down his face. He said, "You have come to say thankyou to me, I have come to say thankyou to you."

38:00 So I think that is quite a story isn't it?

You must have been teary-eyed yourself?

I was. I was quite touched actually, it was a one in a hundred million stories, but I made an effort to go and see the Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce guys because of that oil Israel connection.

It is a beautiful connection to have all of these years later. What kind of food parcels were you dropping?

Not the faintest idea, they were all wrapped up in Hessian bags like I said, not parachutes, and we just dropped them down like a sack of food.

38:30 **You said you could see the people on the ground in their daily lives, how were they reacting to you?**

Oh, just walking through the street as if you were walking through the street in Perth.

No excitement on the ground?

Oh, it was impossible to tell in a noisy aeroplane five hundred feet up.

You wouldn't have been there to see them run to greet the parcel I suppose?

No. There was no way you got a reaction like that.

Looking around for something?

The glass of water.

Well we are very close to the end of the tape if you would like to.

I will keep going, just a husky voice.

39:00 I had another very interesting trip that had nothing to do with dropping bombs. At the end of the war, our crew had finished our fifty-odd operations so we were just hanging around seeing where we were going to be posted to. The Japanese war was still going, so there was an above average chance that the Australians would be sent home and we would certainly be broken up as a crew.

39:30 Where the RAF boys were going I don't know. Anyhow, with the war ending, they then flew Bomber Command over to Europe to pick up all of the POWs [Prisoners of War] from all of the Allied countries and we were sent to Lubeck. It was a very exciting trip in that it was a grass aerodrome, where we were used to landing in bitumen in four-engine aeroplanes. And they landed one a minute for what must have been two hours at least

40:00 and then of course they had to marshal them around the aerodrome wing tip to wing tip. It was really quite a sight to behold and of course the organization of such a thing at very little notice was an amazing thing. So we had an hour or two to kill, so we walked around the Lubeck aerodrome, which of

course had been bombed out, and I picked up a bayonet, which I still have in my wardrobe as a souvenir. Then the POWs

40:30 were all put in rows to come home, to get into the aircraft. I told you they were all marshalled around the aerodrome. And amongst the crowd – I told you we had time to kill – I saw an Australia digger's hat and I walked over to him and said, "Hi, I am Australian too" because I was wearing RAF uniform with the Australia across here and he obviously was. "Where are you from?" "Fremantle." "Where did you work?" "Atkinson Station opposite the Newmarket." So there we were.

41:00 I have never seen him since, so that was great. They put about twenty blokes into each aircraft and then we were told to fly over the white cliffs of Dover to come home and of course that was emotional plus, some of these guys had been in a POW camp for many years and all of a sudden to see the white cliffs of Dover, and skipper flew the best trip he ever did and he landed like silk. So that was a very interesting experience.

What condition did you find the POWs in?

41:30 Pretty emancipated, but they were so thrilled to be going home after all of this time.

So their morale was good?

Their morale was wonderful.

Tape 5

00:30 **Do you want to start with the little thing you had remembered?**

Well, the war had pretty much come to a close, I am not quite sure where I was, whether I was still on the squadron or on leave, but I got a message or at least it was in the newspapers that Prime Minister John Curtin had died and there was to be a memorial service in Westminster Abbey. Now as I said, I was from Fremantle so I had the suitable background

01:00 historically and a bloke by the name of Stan Labner who was also in Pathfinders from Fremantle, and it finished up that both of us were invited to be a part of the escort party, or call it what you will, for John Curtin's memorial service in Westminster Abbey. So we marched through a small section of London into the Abbey, navy, army, air force, and then being commissioned we were…Westminster Abbey is like an egg timer shape and at the front on the egg timer shape

01:30 were all of the admirals and generals and prime ministers and what have you, royalty, and in the back section were the service people and the public. Well, we were in the front row and by chance I probably was a senior air force officer there and I was sitting next to the senior naval officer and we were all given form of service. Anyhow, the memorial service went along and when we had it in our hand, he whispered to me.

02:00 "Do you think we should stand?" "Yeah, I think we should stand." And with that the whole of Westminster Abbey would stand. "Do you think we should sit?" "Yeah, I think we should sit" so we would sit. So it was a great moment of power as the two of us controlled the whole back half of Westminster Abbey for John Curtin's funeral. And it was interesting and a privilege to be there and, as I say, I don't know how. Maybe because of our Fremantle background. Anyhow, we were there and I thought that was a nice bit of

02:30 history and I have got a lovely photograph of the front row sitting at the service looking at our forms of service.

That's a lovely thing to be able to do.

Yeah.

One thing that did occur to me when you were talking to Julian [interviewer] earlier, you know how you were saying all of the skin comes down under the force, what stops you from passing out in those circumstances?

Wouldn't have the faintest idea, no idea.

03:00 Its just gravity on the loose parts of your skin, I don't know.

Because I am thinking with the G [Gravity] forces that it would actually knock you unconscious?

Well, it didn't.

Was there any sort of incidents where people would just black out?

No idea, not real sure on that.

I was just wondering, you know, from what you see in movies and people are passing out. If

you could actually walk me

03:30 **through a Lancaster, you did mention earlier the skipper would be the first on board. Can you describe what the scenery is like in as much detail as you possibly can?**

Well, in the front section, the bomb aimer sat and then laid down and he had his bomb-sights in front of him, of course, to look down, so he was lying on his stomach looking down the bomb-sights. I

04:00 talked before about in the early days there was a very small success of bombing, and then it became more successful with the advent of the Lancaster in particular, Lancaster and Halifax. Part of the success of bombing too was the new bomb-sights for dropping them and guiding them. I don't remember its name but that also came with the advent of the Lancaster, so you had this new lovely big aircraft that flew high and fast but also

04:30 you had a new bomb-sight to be used. So he sat down the front. The pilot and the engineer sat alongside one another facing all of the controls. From memory, the pilot sat slightly on the left and he controlled the four engines with levers that were just above his head and all of the rest were in front of him. Then there was a cupola over the top of the engineer and

05:00 the pilot. Then the two navigators sat facing sideways. Then there was an enormous spar that held the wings on. And when I went and had a look at one ten years ago I thought, "Gee, I don't know if I can even climb over this. But of course, we didn't even know it was there but it was a very big spar that holds the wings on and then you come back into then to the wireless op that had his own little cabin as it were with all of his gear in front of him

05:30 and as I said the astrodome on top. He also had a little window beside him so that he could see out. The navigator would have to move a little curtain to see out. Then you went down the body of the aircraft, the mid-upper was then with a turret on the top of the Lancaster, just before you got to the mid-upper there was a door, the one that we got in and out, and if you're going to be shot down that's where the wireless operator and mid-upper could

06:00 go to and open it and jump out. Then further down of course, you got to the rear gunner who was right down the back sitting in a turret that revolved a hundred and eighty degrees plus around. By the standards of the day, it was a big aeroplane and of course there was a little latrine down the back known as an Elson. So on a long trip if you needed to go to the Elson, as it was said, you'd go down

06:30 but you needed an oxygen bottle to move yourself then going back and forth. Most of us had bladders strong enough not to have to, but Reg didn't, that's the navigator, Reg always had to do one trip down to the Elson and below freezing, it is a fairly precarious exercise up there. And of course, the bomb bays were under all of that bulk, where I talked about going down the back. But it was not an easy aircraft to bail out of.

07:00 There was a lot of criticism about it, but a high percentage of guys were successful in bailing out of it. So you had an escape hatch above the pilot, the astrodome you might be able to get out of, and that door that I said to get out of in an emergency.

Were you ever taken things like emergency procedures, how to get out?

Oh yes, that was part of your training,

07:30 many times you went through the exercise, you also did dinghy training in the event of landing in the water and you had a thing that recorded, "Dinghy, dinghy, prepare for ditching" if you had to get out in the water. But of course the North Sea, chances of surviving was not great because you would freeze to death bobbing up and down in a little safety raft.

08:00 A number of guys did and air-sea rescue went out to pick up these guys that were dropped in and quite a number were saved. What I didn't say when I was talking about going to briefing, the rear gunners used to collect all of the escape kits and they were in a Perspex box that fitting in your tracksuit,

08:30 about an inch thick by about eight inches square. And in it was a fishing line, some sweets, a map, a rice map so you could eat it if necessary; if the enemy caught you with a map you were in fairly big trouble. Barley sugar, I can't thing what else. That sort of fitting into your tracksuit, you flew in tracksuits, and that was that. Now what made me get onto that point? We also were issued with

09:00 a little flag about a foot by a foot and it had a Union Jack on it and in Russian it had (speaks Russian), which means 'I am British.' And I have thought about that since and I thought if you were shot down just about the Russian lines when the Russians were coming, and the Russians weren't that friendly anyway, and I have often thought, when I thought about that afterwards, I thought, "Yeah, I can just imagine you're shot down, your aeroplane was probably on fire, you jumped out in a parachute, you finally landed

09:30 in what would be pretty freezing conditions, and you take out your little flag in case a Russian soldier comes and you wave it at him." I just thought, "I wonder how effectual all of that was." But they did it and they probably reckoned it was a way but whether anybody ever used or was saved by it, I don't know. But I gave my little flag to the Air Force Museum so there is one in there. (speaks Russian) on a

10:00 if you were shot down over Russian lines.

That's quite ludicrous really.

When you look back it is rather ludicrous.

You mentioned that you were in tracksuits, were they an all in one tracksuit or…?

No a top blazer and trousers below.

Because I am thinking that it is pretty cold in these?

No, it is very cold up there. Yeah.

Well, how do you deal with the cold?

Well, the rear gunner was plugged in with electricity. He had an electrical set

10:30 and we had an inner suit and the conventional outer suit; the aircraft was warmed, central heating sort of.

What about weather conditions with ice getting on the wings?

You had the problem of icing up if you were not careful, and I had a very dear friend Jeff Hammond, and then of course it flies like a rock because there are no aerodynamics

11:00 over the front of the aircraft. But once you lose the flow of air, you lose the aerodynamics to fly. You have got to watch against icing up, you don't today because aircraft are all fitted with all sorts of sophisticated gear and that can't happen with aircraft of today. In the aircraft of those days that's possible.

So what do you do if you find ice on your nose?

Well, the aeroplane won't fly any more and that's when you jump out, as I said, it just becomes a rock. It's not an aeroplane once

11:30 it ices up: no air flowing, well, the air flowing over is not doing anything. You have got to watch whether you fly above or below, that's part of the hazard, it doesn't happen very often but yes in those unsophisticated days, yes, it did happen.

What about with parachute training? Did they actually throw you out of a few planes?

No, you trained parachute training in a great big hanger but you never jump out.

12:00 Maybe they reckoned we were a bit expendable to try but, no, we hung in our parachute and we practiced getting in and out of the aircraft with our parachute on. They were very clumsy with a parachute, you could either put it on your chest or sit on it depending on where you were in the aircraft. So, if it was going to be shot down, the pilot in the main sat on his, the mid-upper and rear sat on theirs .The rest of us had hand ones, which you would quickly flick on your chest and bail out and pull the rip cord.

12:30 **Did you ever have to put one on?**

I put one on; I never had to jump. I was always fascinated with the idea of evading the enemy if I jumped out. I did a lot of reading and attended the lectures very keenly as to what would you do and how you would walk back. And a lot of guys did, they bailed to get out and they walked back. And I remember clearly if you were shot down in the south of Europe, you would aim to get to Spain and walk across the Pyrenees. You would hope to bail up with the Maquis,

13:00 the French resistance. A lot of them did. If you bailed out in the north, you would head for the port of Lubeck and hope to stow away on a ship going to Sweden, which was neutral during the war. And if you bailed out further inland getting toward Switzerland, you would aim to get a part of the Swiss-German Schaffhausen Salient because that was a funny shape border,

13:30 shaped like a pear, and there was a narrow part and if you were going to try to get across a border in wartime that was the chance, your chances were better at that little bit to aim for that. So I took a keen interest in evading but I never had to do it. And then about thirty years ago, I went to Europe on a business trip for Perth City Council and we had to do part of the trip in Switzerland, so I took the opportunity to go up to the Schaffhausen Salient

14:00 and had a look at it; it didn't' look like anything different to anything else but at least I remember it on the map.

Were there any other handy helpful things that they were teaching you?

Yes, in part of your battledress – we didn't call them a track suit, they were battledress – one of the buttons was in fact a compass. It was a basic compass with north, south, east and west, but it was easy to come off and you could get your general direction, because once you bailed out and landed you would

have very little opportunity

14:30 to work out what was north, south, east and west. You also had a water purifier in that escape gear. So that was part of your training, how you would walk home if you had the opportunity. A good percentage of guys did.

Were there any cases where you thought that people were lost and they were just taking a long time to walk home?

Oh yes, all of the time. We were given the lecture by guys that had in fact walked home.

15:00 They had some marvellous stories to tell as you can imagine.

What was one of the ones that impressed you?

Oh, not so much the ones walking home, the ones that impressed me were the ones jumping out of an aircraft at about twenty thousand feet. And the guy that jumped out and his parachute didn't open, it just, what do they call it, Roman candled, so it went like that and it didn't open into a balloon and he went down and he went into a pine tree. And of course, all of the silk wrapped around the pine branches and

15:30 I think he sprained his ankles or something like that and no more. But he jumped from twenty thousand feet without a parachute and he lived to tell the story, so that was fairly interesting.

That's extraordinary. He certainly wasn't meant to die.

The other thing of course, once you got down in a parachute, the Germans were very quick to pick you up and whatever, some of the guys even got shot, because they

16:00 were killing them, so, "We will get one of them," they hated the Brits as much as the Brits hated the Germans. And so it was a dicey business, so immediately you got down, you would get your parachute, roll it up, dig a hole and put it in the hole, because a big parachute flowing around the place would soon point out where the people were, or where you were. But that was an interesting education to know

16:30 what to do in the event it ever happened.

How did you at this point feel about the Germans, I mean knowing that they were an incredible threat?

Oh, they were the enemy. They were to me, and to this day I think the Nazis were evil people and they were. And they weren't a hard enemy to dislike and the Japanese weren't a hard enemy to dislike because they even looked evil. And when you look at Japanese people today, they look absolutely nothing like

17:00 the Japanese of the wartime era. The wartime era they were little men with squinty eyes and their funny-looking uniform, now they are sophisticated in their Italian suits and their brief bag as they walk down the street. Of course, one of the problems with the Vietnamese War was, what does the enemy look like? You didn't know the difference between the Viet Cong and the other Vietnamese people. So enemy are a very interesting people.

Just while we're on the subject of Germans, I am jumping forwards a little bit, when you found out about

17:30 **all of the concentration camp things that were going on in places like Dachau and Auschwitz, did that really shock you?**

Didn't shock me because that how we were brought up. As I said earlier in the interview, even as young people in Perth we went to meeting as to what was going on in Germany. We didn't know the gory details of Auschwitz and Belsen but we knew pretty well people were being exterminated because relatives were here.

18:00 **But the scale of it, did that surprise you?**

No, you didn't know the scale of it. And many times since it has been talked about, well, why didn't Britain and America bomb the concentration camps around there? And I think the theory was good but I often think it was pretty impractical, you know, it was precision bombing but what do you do? Do you bomb the town around it? One of the few really

18:30 great escapes was when they with twin-engine aircraft they bombed the gates to a prison in France and all of the prisoners, most of the airmen, shot through when they bombed the gates and the walls and strafed them, but as for bombing and getting rid of the concentration camps, I am not expert but that always struck me as

19:00 pretty impractical.

Well yeah, you're killing the people you want to save.

You would do yeah.

Because I don't really get the understanding behind that. Is it that you just kill the people because it is better to kill the people than to…?

I don't think they wanted to do that, I think they wanted to bomb the gates so they could all run out, although they were practically starving anyway. And the precision to do that was very doubtful. Changing the topic but thinking about that area,

19:30 Peenemunde was a town right up at the Baltic Coast and that's where Von Braun and his boys were all making rockets and we were briefed for a raid to go to Peenemunde and it was bad weather and it was scrapped, and they went the next night but the next night we went on leave so we never actually went to Peenemunde. It was just further northeast of Stettin, which we did go to.

20:00 But that was the sort of thing we were talking about, but that was bombing rocket establishments, bombing scientific gear to try and stop the V1s and V2s, which finally did come. I looked at a book years later, like twenty years ago, and there was a photo of a famous castle up near there up beyond Hamburg and what have you.

20:30 And the submariners of the German submarines were recalled because they were going to put in some new equipment, so there was a big reunion of the submariners in '43 and '44 or whatever it was, and the Brits heard about it and they thought, "Oh, great, we'll knock this off," and they did. And they bombed this particular castle where this big reunion was, dozens and dozens of bright young men

21:00 who were submariners, while their submarines were all being fitted with extra radar or whatever, but a very successful raid and a lot of guys were killed. Years later, I saw a photo of these top-line German submariners and I didn't know what they were, but I looked at the photo and most of the guys were blonde and most of them were really handsome young men that really looked the part in their naval gear, then I read on into the

21:30 caption and I realised that they were the sorts of guys, if not the guys, that were in that raid and I thought, "Good grief, they looked like the sorts of guys you would like to know." Very nice-looking clean-cut young guys. I thought again how evil war is when years later you look at a photo and you think what a great bunch of guys they look. And they were a great bunch of guys, who we were going to blow up and we did.

You were just talking about the rockets and some of the ammunition that the Germans

22:00 **had, did you ever hear anything, I think it was called 'scarecrow flares'?**

Oh yeah, lots about scarecrows.

Could you tell us about it?

Yeah well, one, the scarecrows were, there was two things, target indicators the reds and the greens put out in fields away from the city so the crews were not very skilled would bomb the wrong target because they had marked the target

22:30 out there, where it was out on a forest say fifty miles south of the town and fifty miles is not far when you're flying in and all of a sudden you see them and an unskilled crew, "There's the red Tis," and that's that. And also there were similar things to make it look like an aircraft being shot down and they were scarecrows, and in reality they weren't aircraft being shot down they were just a great thing shot up

23:00 in the air to give the impression of aircraft being shot down to break your morale, which of course it wouldn't break your morale but it would make it a bit scary. But when someone was being shot over there and over there and another one over there, I am not sure that they were that successful. Because, back to the rockets, as the war went on, there were rocket sites and we had several raids trying to blow them up, and that was pretty hard because how big is a rocket launcher?

23:30 It is about as big as two garages so to hit them was pretty hard. And I was in England at the time of the V1s, which were the buzz bombs and the V2s, which were the rockets. And we used to go down to London on leave and the V1s used to sound like a badly tuned motorbike, 'putter putter' as they went over and then the engine would cut out and then of course, as it cut out, the bomb would then turn down and then go down.

24:00 So you knew when the engine cut out, if you could count to ten you would have enough time to get out of the road of it. So you'd hear these things go over, while the engine was running you were not so much in harm's way, you know, you had a relative safety. Once the engine cut out, trouble, because down the bomb would come. So we bombed their sites.

How do you train for bombing such a small target?

No different from bombing any other targets as far as we were concerned.

24:30 Didn't matter whether it was small or not, you had to be accurate, size didn't matter. On that topic, that brings up an interesting point from my background and that was we in the main did virtually all of our flying in the night time but we were picked for a raid on Christmas Eve – I have forgotten which year, I think it was '43, doesn't matter – to bomb the Cologne Railway Station because allegedly, it might have been '44,

25:00 anyway in the station there were a whole lot of German Panzer tanks from their Panzer Division, the big tanks that they were choofing over to the west coast for D-Day or whatever. And they were virtually being hidden in the railway, not hidden, but overnight they stayed in the Cologne Station to be pushed on and they heard about that. And this was a very

25:30 exciting target to hit them all at once, a lot of tanks. Have you been to Cologne?

No.

Well, Cologne is on the river Rhine and the river winds away and there are a couple of bridges over it and then on the eastern side of the river in Cologne, beautiful city Cologne, is the Cologne Cathedral, it is about the size of two rugby fields put together, several spires and enormous cathedral,

26:00 about the sixth biggest in the world. And it is right alongside the railway station, not across the road but alongside. You have got the point of a square is the railway station. Well, we bombed the target, we were Pathfinders of course, and then circled around to see the damage, repeating the Cologne Cathedral is right alongside the railway station. The end of the raid, there was no more railway station, all of the

26:30 suburbs around it were absolutely flattened, one of the bridges was broken and another was certainly hit, and the cathedral stood in all of its glory, with a few pockmarks on the actual cathedral. There is no building in Perth, oh yes, there would be, it is an enormous building and we flew around and around and had to report on the raid and what had happened, and there the cathedral stood in all of its glory.

27:00 Why was it that a house of worship should stand and the railway station and the bridge should go? And that always got into the back on my mind. I don't have a good answer and my story was completely spoiled when I said that to someone and they said, "Would you have said the same if it was a library?" And I thought, "I am not talking comparisons." The people who go to Cologne still see the odd pockmark in the cathedral

27:30 that is standing in all of its absolute glory. But the station went.

I think I have actually seen photographs of everything being decimated and just the cathedral. And it's held up as an example of faith almost.

We got back and we couldn't get back to our drome, so we landed in what was known as a crash drome, there were three of them in England. They were two runways long by three runways wide. So if you couldn't pull your aircraft up, brake problems, you could just land there and go on forever as it were,

28:00 or belly land. Well, we had to land there and we stayed there overnight, which was Christmas Eve, and we were very upset because there was a squadron dance and there was no way we were going to be at the squadron dance having been stranded at a crash drome. And worse still, no food, no grog, no change of clothes, just in an aircraft that was landed on its belly there. But we were finally sent a truck and brought home.

28:30 So that was Cologne, we went to Cologne twice actually, but that was the most memorable.

Did you manage to meet any of the locals when you landed in some of these areas?

Where we crash landed? Oh, there were no locals, it was just a great big strip to take aircraft and a few Nissen huts with bunks to sleep while you wait to be picked up.

What terrible timing so close to Christmas?

Oh, not good.

29:00 **You mentioned Commander Bennett before, what was he like?**

Don Bennett, he was an Australian, he was not a professional airman, he had written the bible on navigation, he was a world famous navigator and navigators used his training book for navigation. He went on to be a pilot and was shot down in the Baltic and escaped from Norway, he was then a wing commander. He then had this idea of Pathfinder Force

29:30 and he put forward and finally succeeded. He had enormous trouble because the air force, like most other establishments, professional airmen are not very interested in amateurs. They are all jealous of their job, like councillors and politicians and all human beings, and professional airmen certainly didn't want a raw amateur telling them how to run their war. Well, he came up with this Pathfinder idea and got it through and finally commanded Pathfinder Group.

30:00 It was called 8 Group, a number of squadrons were in it, 8 Group, 35 and 62 and a whole range of them and going along nicely. Then the guy that Bomber Harris flew with before the war in the Khyber Pass and what have you – where we have got Afghan problems today, so eighty years after, we have still got the problems but they are not in little planes dropping hand bombs, maybe it would be better if they were. Anyhow,

30:30 Harris' mate was a fellow by the name of Ralph Cochran, and he was The Honourable Ralph Cochran so

I don't know who Dad was, and he and Harris were buddies and he could see no reason why this amateur airman who by then was the highest non-professional airman as an air vice-marshal in the war, and he better sort of dent this bloke's nose, and he started his own little group, 5 Group.

31:00 As I say, Harris and the other bloke were mates, Harris and Cochran were mates, so there was always the professional challenge going on. So they were not in 8 Group but they did Pathfinder work.

Did you manage to interact with Bennett at all?

No, he was God, but all of us went before him to get our commissions. And I went before him when I was recommended for a commission

31:30 and you fill in all the obvious forms, name, rank and number, and language you spoke and all of the rest. And to make my application look a bit better, languages spoken 'French', that looked good. So he said to me, "Where did you learn to speak French, Silbert?" I said, "At Aquinas College in Perth, sir." Okay, strike French out, next question. So my French-speaking abilities were dropped out, which of course were only schoolboy

32:00 skills anyway but it was good to pad it. But I did get the commission and I did get my Pathfinder award. And with the medals that I brought along, which I would like to talk about and show you, they are colourful. But the Pathfinder award to me is the highest by far, and to my colleagues, because it required skill as well as courage. Men of great courage are to be admired but don't necessarily have great skills and vice versa, men of great skill don't necessarily have great courage.

32:30 But the Pathfinder award was given for both and you had to do a minimum of so many successful Pathfinder operations before you got it and you then went again before Bennett and you got a certificate, which I have got in my scrapbook to show you. The award of the Pathfinders.

I also found it unusual that you have got the Polish Military Cross?

Yeah, that's a good story.

How did you manage to get your hands on one of these?

33:00 Well 7 Squadron, because the Pathfinder squadrons did raids around Poland and that part of Germany, and the Polish government of the day, the President whose name is just eluding me, was it Paderewski the same as the pianist? Anyhow, the President of the day was in London and he had an office in London for the various Poles that came over during the war, and they awarded

33:30 a Squadron or two or three, I don't know how many, the Polish Military Cross. Well, time ticked by and the war was over and it was about 1955 and I got a letter in the mail from a man by the name of Allan Vale, who was the chairman of the Australian Pathfinders, to say if you fill in a stat dec [statutory declaration] to say that you were on 7 Squadron, etcetera, you have a Polish Military Cross and it will be sent to you. So I finally did and I finally got it.

34:00 And the thing was that apparently the office of the Polish Government in the war probably had a typist and was on the second floor in a building, can you imagine the Poles in England during the war? There must have only been a handful. But they shifted the office, those that had been awarded the Polish Military Cross for various things like we were, when they shifted the office discovered that the Australians in the Pathfinder Forces, and there weren't that many of us, hadn't received the citation.

34:30 So years later, we had to fill in that we were those guys and we got the Polish Military Cross. But my parents, not parents, great-grandparents would have rolled in their graves because that's where our forbears came from. So to hear their great-grandson gets a Polish Military Cross while they are trying to get out of the place because they were going to get carved up might have had a delightful irony. May I show you the medals?

35:00 They're just behind you, and I can talk about the medals, which I think is interesting.

Okay.

And the camera, well, we will start from the piece de resistance, that is the Pathfinder Eagle and that is worn on top of the…

Can you start again and hold it up just a little bit more, that's it.

Well, the one that really matters to people like me is that, because that's the one I was talking about both skill and courage and going before the big boss

35:30 and you were awarded that. It was recognised through the British Government, a bill put the government so that you could put it on your medals like a Mention in Despatches, so that is that one. That is the king. That one there is the Order of Australia, which I got in later years for work for council and citizens and what have you. That's the Distinguished Flying Cross, that's the Polish Military Cross,

36:00 that's the Polish Military Medal, that's the Bomber Command medal, that's the France and Germany Star, that's why that goes on it, to show where you were, you weren't in Japan or Italy, hence that. And that one, two, three are the medals that you see most ex-servicemen of the Second World War have, they are called the Peace Medal and this medal and that medal for your contribution to the war. The

ones I mentioned are decorations, the others are medals, okay.

36:30 **That's a wonderful explanation. Thankyou. I have now lost my plot here. We were talking about Germans earlier and I wanted to find out what you thought of the Germans as airmen and as pilots?**

They were very good ,the war wouldn't have lasted as long if they weren't. They ran into a problem

37:00 because of their policy, they were flying twin-engine aircraft, Heinkels and what have you, Messerschmitts and 110s and what have you, and that's what bombed Great Britain and for whatever reason Hitler decided not to invade by land with the backing of the air force. Who knows whether he would have been successful or not, but at the peak he didn't do that, the war then changed because of that,

37:30 but they were good. The big thing was that Germany didn't have four-engine aircraft other than the Condor that I mentioned, which only did surveillance for submarines out to sea, never used as a bomber. They used the twin-engined aircraft. The other interesting, this was as a difference, that the captain of the aircraft was the navigator and the pilot was only the bus driver, where of course in the British system the pilot was the skipper.

38:00 So that was a bit different, but they were very skilled fighter pilots and the bombers were as good as the next one.

How close would you actually get to some of these Messerschmitts in the air?

Oh I don't know, hard to tell, and also you are sort of looking after your neck, as the Americans say, your butt as well. So yes, they would come right in close, like fifty yards,

38:30 but you didn't see the brown of their eyes or anything like that. Also again, we're talking about people who flew at night time, vastly different to the Yanks [Americans] who flew at day time; their fighters came in and you could really see them coming in. You have seen the television coverage of both sides, the four-engine and the fighters blow up, so that's getting very close. Just as close at night time but you don't see it in detail like that.

39:00 **You also mentioned before when the lights hit you?**

The master beam.

Can you just step me through what that is actually like, what you see?

You have seen a searchlight? Well, this was four searchlights all aimed to criss-cross on the aircraft they decided to shoot down. You could read the newspaper because you were caught in a very powerful light beam in the cross section of four

39:30 searchlights, the cone of the four, and their anti-aircraft gun was synchronised with that, so you were in a fair amount of trouble when that happened. But yes, and if you saw someone a hundred yards away or a mile away in a master beam, you could see them very clearly, you could even see the number on the aircraft, the MGM bit, because they were lit up that much.

That must be quite alarming to be suddenly hit by this?

40:00 Alarming is a fairly understatement.

You must think you're gone.

Yep.

So how many times did that actually happen to you?

Only once. It was over, a raid on Stettin.

What were you doing there?

Bombing it. Funny question.

Well, obviously you were bombing it.

Well, we hadn't gone to pick up the groceries.

40:30 **What I meant was, what was the plan?**

Well, the policy was rightly or wrongly, you could blow up German cities until the Germans had to give in, call for peace. Now a lot of people say now, that is inhumane, what were the people in the cities, why are you punishing them? But they did the same. Two wrongs don't make a right, but they did the same to

41:00 London and Southampton and Coventry and what have you. It was a fight to the death and if we didn't win, they would keep doing it to us, us being the Brits, and again the Yanks were out of that, they were over in America, and the Brits and France, particularly Britain, were taking aircraft and blowing their

cities to bits. That's where war, I risk using the word, but war is evil. But if you are fighting for survival, the evil bit gets a second-rate mention, you are out there to survive.

41:30 And that gets onto the question I thought you were going to ask, what about the famous Dresden raid? Do you know about the Dresden raid?

I do actually.

Well, I never went on the Dresden raid; we went to a place called Chemnitz, which is the next city just up north, and the rest of the guys went to Dresden and we didn't. But Dresden was just another city. Why was Dresden so precious? Why was it better than Cologne or Hamburg or Coventry or London? It's the

42:00 anti Bomber Harris story, the public were

Tape 6

00:30 **All right, where we left off thanks, Eric.**

Well, we were talking about Dresden and Dresden was a tragedy because it was a beautiful city and a lot of the buildings were wooden, but I keep repeating that a lot of other fine cities in Germany were also flattened. And the reason that it was attacked was (A) the general policy of hitting cities and (B) the Russians were coming in that way and it was a

01:00 combination of assisting the Russians and the general policy of attacking cities. But there was a fellow by the name of Sir Stafford Cripps and he was in the British Cabinet and from the earliest of days he was against Bomber Command. He reckoned, "We'll help the Fighter Command, will protect the country, and so will Coastal Command," what have you, but, "Bomber Command, they can go for naval establishments but no more than that." And from then on, he attacked Bomber Command verbally,

01:30 right through the war years, saying that they were naughty people and Bomber Command in particular who was the commanding officer was a real terrible human being and…

Bomber Harris?

Yes, see Bomber Harris was the commanding officer of Bomber Command. He was Sir Arthur Harris and he was a very efficient man by any standards, and he had a lot of sway with Churchill, and he said, "To win

02:00 this war, we must destroy Germany or they will destroy us." Now, you can be critical of that but at the time, if you're fighting for your life, two and two make four. So Bomber Harris said, "We will pursue this," and a lot of people said, "No, we'll win the war but you mustn't keep bombing cities where there are women and kids." But Harris was a strong man and we were his troops and we kept doing just that. Well now, Dresden was in the same category, Cologne was a beautiful

02:30 city, Coventry was a beautiful city and they got hit by bombs. But this was a way of making Harris the bigger villain, "What did you bomb Dresden for? There was no purpose in bombing Dresden, the war was nearly over," you know, "So why did you do that, you evil man?" When they built a statue for him after the war, there were people in the streets wanting to tear it down and marching and the

03:00 whole bit, but that was Harris and we were his troops, and we did what we were asked to do and agreed with him.

Well, was there a lot of respect for Bomber Harris from the Bomber Command crews?

Oh yes. In a lot of the squadrons, there was a big photo of him with his medals and his hat looking the part as an air force commander and under it had a sign, "If he says you go, you go." And that was Bomber Harris.

Were you ever addressed by him?

Yes, but only in the crowd.

What address

03:30 **was he making that day, do you know?**

Oh, just to do with the war as it was going at the time, why we were doing this and that.

I guess on this topic, since you raised the subject, what do you think would have happened if there wasn't a Bomber Command operating?

I am not sure that Britain or America would have won the war. See, the other thing was that by having the United States Air Force and Bomber Command, there was I said fourteen thousand antiaircraft sites

04:00 firing at those, all of the four-engine aircraft of those two commands. Now, the people that ran those anti-aircraft sections, men and women, they could have been used in other military forces, which would have made the German military regime infinitely stronger. We kept all of those people busy for all of those years of the war with the anti-aircraft firing at Bomber Command and the United States Command.

04:30 I am not sure that they could have won the war without it, I am confident that they couldn't have, and people like Harris were very emphatic that they couldn't have.

As well as wearing down their industrial complex?

Yeah. That was, of course, what they wanted us to do, just hit the ball-bearing factories and the oil refineries, and we did and that was fair enough, but bear in mind in nearly every case they were rehabilitated, give six months, three months.

05:00 I use the example of the Moehne Dam raid, a lot of the places the flooding got into the factories and stuff, they were back going six months later. The war went on for years so I am not that much of a historian but to answer the question, I doubt whether the Allies would have won the war if there was no four-engine aircraft attack.

What were your spirits like approaching your final operation?

05:30 Oh, great, you know, one to go. Looking forward to it, we were looking forward to finishing the two tours, it was an absolute achievement. Bear in mind nearly fifty per cent of Bomber Command were killed and which meant that nearly every second guy in the command was going to be killed, so to achieve two tours, fifty trips, was really like winning Lotto three times,

06:00 it really was. It was a phenomenal achievement; we were proud of it.

I don't know how to put this, but it sounds like there was a lot of luck involved?

Enormous amount of luck, a lot of skill, but you need a lot of luck to go with the skill, a lot of courage to go with the skill. You know, when flak is bursting all around you and the sky is like clouds

06:30 with black flak and a few fighters around the place with bullets going here there and everywhere, you have got to hold your nerve.

You must have been part of a minority to complete that many operations?

Oh yeah. And again the other thing I should mention, and I think I mentioned it before, most of the guys got shot down on their first five or their last

07:00 five trips, because in their first five they were not skilled and in the last five they started to get complacent.

If we could just backtrack a few sentences there, you were saying with the odds varying for your first five and your last five operations?

Yeah. I talked about Pathfinder School and all of the statistics, and that was one of the key statistics that came out.

07:30 What trip were you on? How many Australians? What height were you on? What education did you have? All of the possible combinations and permutations. But the one that shone out was that, on a tour, the first ten and last ten trips, your chance of being shot down was the greatest. And the assumption was you really had to learn the tricks, as I said, knowing the difference between predicted flak

08:00 and barrage flak and all that went with it. And then, "Wow, we have done forty-five trips, we know the tricks now," and that's when you let your guard down.

So I asked you later what your spirits were like when you were approaching the end of your tour or even your last operation. Was your anxiety high?

No, it wasn't anxiety, it was just exciting to have achieved that much.

08:30 Grand final stuff, we made the grand final and there we are.

Like being part of that minority where you successfully completed that many operations, were you often recognised by other crews?

On the squadron?

Yes.

Oh yes, they were tickled pink that you had made it and they hoped to do the same, but they

09:00 didn't keep you on the squadron once you had done your two tours. You were then transferred to a training group or a transport group, or in our case wondering whether we were going to come back to Australia to be involved with the Pacific War.

Were there any interesting incidents at all on your last operation?

Yeah, the last operation we came home on three engines and as we were about to land, the fourth engine on the same side because of overheating caught on

09:30 fire. And so we were just coming in about to land and that engine had gone and that one was on fire and that was a pretty interesting landing for the last trip.

Sounds like a heroic finish.

Oh yeah, it was grandstanding a bit.

And how did you celebrate that evening?

Well, we would have celebrated anyway. Gunners and Ushers Beer.

So what marked the end of your Bomber Command tours?

10:00 Well, the war in Europe was getting close to an end anyway and we were just waiting to get a posting wherever. Nothing in particular, the sadness of it was that we were going to be broken up as a crew and head wherever.

Where did you spend that time waiting?

At Oakington and then down at Brighton. Brighton was the place,

10:30 the Grand and Metropol Hotel, which I mentioned, where we embarked and disembarked, and in Brighton and enjoyed ourselves.

What kind of things could you get up to in Brighton?

Ballroom dancing. Went to a bit of theatre and movies.

Were you still in the UK [United Kingdom] when the war was announced over with Germany?

I was down in Metropol Hotel and we

11:00 had just had lunch and after lunch we went to the lounge room and they used to serve us coffee in those funny little demitasses with your finger up to hold the cup. We're in there having a cup of coffee with the radio on, and I think it must have been two o'clock, it doesn't matter the time, because it wasn't the news. The radio was interrupted to say that Japan had capitulated and the war was over. And in that split second

11:30 a guy said, "We're all out of a job." But I remember that as if it was yesterday, I even remember where I was standing in the lounge there having a cuppa. So we were all out of a job waiting there to come home. But a good question is, having dropped the atomic bomb, what did you think about dropping the atomic bomb? Well, the answer was that, in our ignorance at the time, the atomic bomb was just another bomb. We were used to carry four thousand pounders ,they had

12:00 developed a skip bomb for the Moehne Dam raid, they had developed an eight thousand pounder, they had developed about a ten or twelve thousand pounder armour-piercing, so the size of the bombs were going up and up. And in our ignorance, as far as we were concerned, the atomic bomb was just another bomb bigger than the last one. Improvement on the last range of bombs. So we didn't think about it as the terrible weapon it was,

12:30 we just thought of it as a big bomb.

When did you become more aware of the destructive capabilities of the atomic bomb?

Pretty soon after, because movies were still going and Cinesound and newsreels were on, and so we saw them not that much after.

Were you seeing many newsreels while you were in Oakington?

Oh yeah, the cinema was going alive and well in the UK and we saw a lot of movies. In fact, I think Sunday night

13:00 was nearly always movie night on the various RAF stations, so we saw a lot of movies.

I just want to go back before we continue from this point to your earlier trip across the United States [of America], you travelled from West to East Coast is that right?

We were at San Francisco or Oakland, I have forgotten which, it's the same thing because one is on one side of the harbour from the other, and then we were put on a train across America and that was great fun,

13:30 you know, it was a vacation on a train and reasonable conditions going across America.

How long was that journey?

Oh I don't remember now, some weeks I suppose, I don't remember.

What kind of train were you travelling on?

Very nice train. I remember clearly going into a café, deli [delicatessen], call it what you will and ordering steak and eggs and the girl didn't know what I was talking about. My Australian accent was much too much for her.

14:00 And not only much too much for her, steak and eggs on the one plate? We take it for granted you take a steak and you plomp some eggs on it. At that stage, they would have served you two separate dishes, there are your eggs and there is your steak. So I remember that quite clearly, and was rubbished by the guys about the fact that the girl didn't know what I was talking about because of my Australian accent. Interestingly enough, by the time I had left England, I had a bit of a Pommy [English] accent; I obviously have

14:30 an ear that is attuned to voices and when I came home, different ones said, "Oh yeah, you can tell you've been in England." I have lost it after a while. And with America we were very much Australian-accented people.

So what kinds of thing occurred in your journey across the States?

We were tourists, we enjoyed the…no different from anyone doing a train trip across America today.

So you enjoyed a few stops?

Oh yes.

15:00 Particularly in those days, they stopped for food and this, that and the other. I enjoyed it very much and in my ego, I was the flight sergeant in charge, so that had its pluses being able to do a little bit extra.

Were there any other interesting incidents that you might recall of that time in America?

Only the marching business to present the flag, not really.

And New York, what sort of impression did that have on you?

Oh great, eighteen and nineteen year olds in the big city.

15:30 Looking at the sky-scrapers, that was really something, and the Americans were…

After coming from Fremantle.

particularly generous, the man in the street was, lots of the guys got invited to homes and nightclubs by the man in the street, and society was much kinder in those days than it is now. Today, you might be invited by a hood, in those days you were invited by some sincere person who wanted

16:00 to do the right thing.

Any particular invitations that you might recall?

Nothing particular. No.

Ddi you go to some great dances while you were in New York?

Oh yeah, that was great, but more in London than any. Used to go to a place, I can't remember where it was, but they had an all-girls orchestra, which was a bit of a rarity in those days, a swing jazz orchestra.

Sounds like a bit of a drawcard?

Oh, it was a drawcard, it was great. And of course, people like Glenn Miller were the popular dance-band

16:30 leaders of the day, and he got shot down tragically.

Really?

Yeah, he was going over to France or somewhere just after the Allies had landed in France, and he went over in front of the guys or behind the guys in a separate aircraft and the aircraft got shot down.

You mentioned the Memphis Belle earlier, were any of the planes in Bomber Command named after ladies?

The Brits didn't do it as much as the Americans. The Americans

17:00 were great ones for putting nude girls on the aeroplanes, Memphis Belle or Suzie Q or what have you. The Brits did to a small degree but were more apt to put on some flag motif or what have you, because as I said earlier in the piece, we were fairly conservative people really.

Did you have an affectionate name for your plane?

No, just that it was MGM and that was good.

17:30 Referred to as ‘the kite’, a lot of guys refer to aircraft as kites.

You must have formed a pretty close bond with your kite while you were flying in those conditions?

Yeah. Like your car, you know, you like it and you like the little niceties about it.

Can you recall particular guys who were members of your ground crew working on your plane?

Denny Denver was the corporal or sergeant in charge of the ground staff.

18:00 And as far as he was concerned, it was his aeroplane and all of the boys in his crew looked after it with great affection and we were just the so and so’s that went and took it away and got holes in it. So yes, there was enormous affection towards the aircraft that they were looking after. On one particular occasion, we were about to go down and get the aircraft, it was being tuned up,

18:30 it had engine trouble. So we were driven to the hanger where the aircraft was there and the blokes were hanging off it with their spanners and screwdrivers and did that and wheeled it out and away we went. Now today, there is no way you would do that with a four-engine aircraft. But we had that much faith in the ground crew, we didn’t have a problem with the fact that they had just finished servicing it. We got in it and took it away.

For what reasons would you change aircraft?

You were told to, you weren’t masters of your own destiny in that regard.

19:00 You did what the commanding officer said. Most of us liked to keep the same, we usually flew in M, occasionally in P.

What would be the reason for the change?

Just servicing aircraft and moving them around, wasn’t anything we got involved in, we just liked to have our own aircraft.

Were there any superstitions regarding the changing of aircraft?

Other than the fact that we didn’t like it, that in itself was a superstition.

So you

19:30 **didn’t have any superstitions to overcome the dislike?**

No, well, you didn’t have any option, “Well hell, they switched us to P tonight.” That was as far as it went, just get on with the job.

When the war was announced over and you were basically out of a job, what were your options then?

Well, I wanted to stay on with the air force, as I said earlier, I liked the camaraderie and all that went with it.

20:00 And I liked the challenge to get further ranks, climb the ladder, looked to a future there, and I thought that would be pretty good. And when I got home, my mother said, “Oh, I am not sure there is a good future. We’re Jewish. To have a Jewish girl wandering around from aerodrome to aerodrome with no communal community

20:30 kinship.” And I said, “Yeah, fair enough.” And I had already worked in the family business, but when I got off the ship I had thought, “Yeah, I will stay on in the air force.”

What ship did you come home on?

The Strathpine.

How did that vary from the trip over there on the Aquitania?

Oh, the Aquitania was only across the Atlantic, little American ship that we went across the Pacific was more

21:00 parallel. But oh no, we were all stacked on like flies on the Strathpine. Two things of interest, one, we all sat on the deck playing cards, shoot pontoon. Do you know pontoon?

No I don’t.

Build up to twenty-one, and with the particular game, if you put on ten cents you do one round and its twenty and twenty’s forty, forty’s eighty, and so you can imagine three rounds you are up to big dough and you fall by the way

21:30 as you go. But if you get the three rounds, you made big dough. I am not a gambler at heart but I played and I also wrote a memoirs while I was on the ship called ‘Shy Talk’, Shy as in Shit, S H Y Talk. And so

that was my book coming home and I did quite a bit of writing and working out, and I still have it of course.

22:00 And I mentioned Coralie Condon and she typed it up for me when I got back.

How was it received?

I never published it, it was just a memento. I have since written that book there. No, but it was good fun, and we had some good mates on board. We enjoyed it, of course, great fun. And we pulled into Gages Roads here and looked out at West Australia in the distance. Well, the first

22:30 thing you see are the pine trees, and that's interesting how important the pine trees are. That's the first thing in the landscape. We turned on and 6BR came on the air and there was a girl announcer as there was in those days. And the first thing was, "Oh, the Australian dames don't talk like that, do they?" because our ear and speech had changed after our years in England and we had all picked up a

23:00 bit of the British twang and what have you. But we were home and happy, and my two little parents were on the wharf with Coralie Condon waving there with their little son back home. My brother was still away, he was in Wewak in New Guinea.

What did you do that evening?

I had the family around to welcome home the little hero. You know, my parents were little people, short people, but they were not shy on welcoming and the Silberts were a very close family I might add.

23:30 So various cousins and uncles were all invited home. [(UNCLEAR)]

Was there a celebratory banquet?

Oh yes. Well, when I say banquet, supper. And my Dad is not much of a drinker, drank more whiskey than he should have that night and he was full as a tit that night. I remember that because it was a rarity. Dad enjoyed a drink but not to that extent.

Did your mother prepare any traditional dishes?

Lamingtons probably. No, I don't know.

Lamingtons and whiskey.

24:00 No memory of it.

How long was it before your brother returned home?

That was November and he came home in January, six or eight weeks, and as soon as he was home, he was married, and as soon as he was home after a week or two's leave, Dad walked into the store and said, "It's all yours, I have had enough. Here are the keys, you're on your own." So we took it over

24:30 within a week or two of both of us being out of the services. My brother finished up a captain and so there we were a couple of raw recruits ready to make a living together.

Quick turnover?

Yep.

So what was it like adjusting to civilian life again?

Quite good, exciting actually. I started taking out a girl who I took out when I was on leave before, who I thought was pretty good. Dancing again.

25:00 There we were, her name was Joan. And then I met this young lady in the bedroom there at a family function to announce the engagement of a distant relative, and I thought she was a bit good. So I invited her to go and see my friend Jim Connelly, who I mentioned, who was in a play at the Repertory called Granite. And so I asked Joan, and Jim

25:30 bumped into the other Joan and said, "Oh, I'll see you tonight. Are you coming to Granite?" And she said, "Oh, I don't know." And he said, "Yeah, Eric is coming." Now Rick wasn't coming with that Joan, he was coming with another Joan, who he married and fifty six years later he is still married to, which was the cleverest thing I did in my life because I married a wonderful human being and that made all things right.

What leave had you met the other Joan on?

26:00 Earlier in the piece. I am not sure if I had joined up or not, but certainly when I was a sprog [young, new] airman at Clontarf, I took her out a couple of times. I think I was taking her out before I joined the air force. She was a bit older than I and she was then back in New South Wales.

Did a romance flourish at all with the WAAF in Oakington?

26:30 I took out a couple of WAAFs but again it was good fun, pleasure, serious, romantic, but I didn't wish to

have a future. I wished to marry a Jewish girl if I found the right one, which luckily enough I did. But I enjoyed girls' company. That was normal fair enough.

I certainly don't discourage girls company.

No, I never did.

How long had you known Joan before you proposed?

27:00 Oh she was a little girl at school. Bear in mind that at seventeen or eighteen, she was five years younger, ten or twelve year old. Her uncle lived next door and she used to with her family visit. And I was a bit of an outgoing lad, the uncle and aunt were never that fond of me, they thought I was a bit wound up, so they didn't think it was that clever that I should get engaged to their niece. But I thought it was clever.

So how

27:30 **old was she when you were engaged?**

Oh, she was nineteen.

So you waited a few years?

No, we met in what was probably the December and got engaged in the June. Went out for about six months and then got engaged and then married on the hottest day of the year, one hundred and four point something. No air conditioning in those days. Grog was rationed.

Where did you have the wedding ceremony?

In the Adelphi.

28:00 Do you remember, it was before the Palmieri?

No, I don't remember it.

Well, the Adelphi Hotel was the hotel there before the Palmieri. And went down to Caves House for our honeymoon, down at Yulungah, like everybody else did; that was practically part of the rules to go to the Caves House for your honeymoon.

It is still a very popular place.

Its still good.

And how long was it before you had your first child?

The right amount of months, my mother-in-law counted on her fingers and assured you that it was

28:30 fourteen months, not eight, so all was well. Did I say grandmother, I meant mother-in-law.

I thought you said mother-in-law. When you first took over the business with your brother, before you were married, where were you living?

I came home from my first leave at Clontarf initial training school and in that time my parents had shifted from the house in Fremantle.

29:00 The Americans took over those houses opposite the park and they put anti-aircraft guns or mock anti-aircraft guns on the park and they vacated a group of homes, of which my parents were one. And they shifted into 26 Archdeacon Street in Midland, having been forcibly removed as it were. I came on my first leave from Clontarf and I not only did not know where Archdeacon Street was and I most certainly did not know where 26 was.

29:30 So I came to 26 Archdeacon Street and from then on when I come home on leave when I went to Ballarat, and that Archdeacon Street was home.

And were you living with your family very long?

We lived with my family until we were married.

And where did you and Joan first live together?

Straight after being married. Of course, you couldn't get houses in those days, so we lived with Joan's parents.

30:00 Housing in those days was nothing short of impossible, you lived on a veranda if you were lucky. So Joan's parents had a spare room in their house just down the road down there and so we lived down there for a year and then gradually rented a place and then ultimately got our own place.

What was the address of your parents' house in Fremantle that they were in?

When we were there, it was 73 Ellen Street. Its one door up from Christian Brothers and it

30:30 is still, that's it up there, my wife gave, that's a cross-stitch. And that's taken of a 1930s photo that she sewed as a fiftieth wedding anniversary present. And it is still there in all its glory with one exception, now there are a lot of shrubs in front. When I grew up there, it was a lovely grassy sward with a hundred roses here, there and everywhere. And I think back now, now meaning the last few years, and I think about the various things that

31:00 were growing there. There was an English lilac, there was a big jasmine over there, there was Black-eyed Susans, and there was a lot of things that you don't see so much now that somehow or other don't fit with my unusual Dad, but he was a keen gardener and he had this beautiful garden there.

It must have saddened them to leave?

Oh yes, it was an enormous uprooting, bear in mind they had the house before I was born

31:30 and that means they were living in it eighteen, nineteen years before they were waved goodbye and had to shift.

And that would have been reimbursed by the government?

No idea. Years later, I don't know what I was doing but I was doing a job to do with council, and the girl behind the counter said, "Oh, your name is Silbert. Did you have a house in Ellen Street in Fremantle?" "Yes."

32:00 She said, "Well, we rented it after the war and it was very sad because all of the lovely things had been left behind." And I said, "Yeah, that's right, my parents vacated it." But interestingly enough, I can't answer, I don't know why they never went back and got a whole lot of nick-knacks and beautiful things that were in the house. But in answer to your question, it was quite an upheaval.

So they left a lot of personal possessions?

Yeah, and this girl who I had never seen before said,

32:30 "We rented the house your parents originally owned."

Did you ever talk to your mother much about your experiences in Bomber Command?

Very little .My parents were good parents, they were decent people, good citizens. And my brother was very close with my mother, got on famously, he got on famously with Mum and Dad. But I was out with the kids, I was in the park, wasn't close to my parents at all.

33:00 Liked them, thought they were good parents to have. Don't remember my mother with her arm around me, don't remember Mum and Dad ever coming to a sports event though I was a good sportsman. So a lot of things we take for granted today, I don't remember my parents had that sort of exposure that now we expect of parents and want parents to have. Again, it was their conservative

33:30 style, you didn't show affection in public. I didn't mind though, I had my mates out there and I was always on the go. So and my brother had the opposite, he was close to Mum and Dad, and he was the brain that helped them and I was the kid that got out of the road and kicked the football. So in answer to your question, because of the way we lived, the answer is no. I liked my parents and thought a lot of them.

34:00 Don't remember sitting down and having a heart to heart talk with Mum or Dad. Had a lot of fun with my Dad because he was a fun guy.

What are these fun characteristics that your dad possessed?

Humour. Hilariously funny man. Always had jokes with commercial travellers and his bowling mates, and they were absolute corny jokes by today's standards, but at the time, we're talking 30s and 40s,

34:30 they were very funny. Everyone loved Barney, Barney was Mr Fremantle, he really was. There weren't many police about and one day we came back from Perth with the car, we used to go and get our goods from the warehouses, pulled up outside the Market Street door there, and policeman came up and was about to give him a ticket and my Dad as quick as flash said, "Who put that no parking sign under my car?" and everyone thought that was tremendously funny, and of course he got away with it.

35:00 And that was the sort of humour he had, not a serious fellow at all. No good as a businessman but fortunately Mum was.

Why do you say that?

Because he wasn't.

What are your criticisms of him as being a poor businessman?

Oh, he was quite a good salesman because he was an extrovert. Not a good organiser as such. Good in the garden, good with the car, good with people, but he was not an administrator or

35:30 organiser. But Mum was and that's all that mattered, because they were partners and from the earliest of days when they first got married, they went into the commercial world together, the retail store, and

that was that.

Sounds like a good marriage.

Yeah it was, I look back now and I think, “My God, Dad must have been hard to live with.” But then I look at Eric and think he must be hard to live with too, doesn’t do the right things around the house like he should.

36:00 **And what kind of a businessman did you make in the post-war world?**

Never a good businessman, I was a good salesman, I liked the clothing side. I could buy clothing for a store pretty well and I was quite happy in organising that. Do you want to carry on with the post-war then?

I was going to ask you then what was your partnership like with your brother?

Wonderful, still is, marvellous. And I say he is my star in the sky. He has all of the brains and organization and if I was getting off the track or didn’t see something, he was

36:30 always very tactful in getting me on the right track.

So you never really had to be much of a businessman?

True, and we worked together well. He was a serious-minded fellow and wanted to do this and I was happy to hang onto his coat tails because he was such a good guy and still is. But then we had a funny arrangement. We had men’s and boys’ clothing and men’s, women’s and children’s shoes. And we were

37:00 gradually expanding, we had about six stores: Applecross, Melville, Cottesloe, Claremont and, of course, Fremantle, Kwinana. And our cousins were the Brecklers, who had Betts and Betts and Cecil Brothers. My mother was the youngest sister in that family and her elder sister started the Cecil Brothers, Betts and Betts organization, and they grew like topsy. And the sons that ran the business always admired my parents as human beings and as our business grew

37:30 they said, “How about we merge?” which meant getting rid of the clothing. So we got rid of the clothing out of the business over about two years. My brother, being a suburban store we were pretty good with kids’ shoes, because suburban stores are strong with children’s shoes whereas central city isn’t necessarily, so he was really looked for to come in and fill that gap.

38:00 So we merged I think in 1962 and I was always a square peg in a round hole. My brother went straight in as a fellow director, terrific, and I was really on the outer, didn’t like it in any way, shape or form.

You never liked footwear.

I never really liked footwear anyway, still don’t. So I decided I would get into parliament and I was an active member of the Liberal Party in those days, not now. It’s the Creighton-Brown Party which

38:30 I don’t like. But in those days, we were eager beavers in Fremantle, we never ever won a seat so we could do what we liked because we never ever had anything to lose. So there were three of us that used to take it in turns of being president, vice-president and junior vice-president of the Fremantle branch. We had a wonderful time, used to call for the Premier to come down and do all sorts of clever things. Anyway, I liked politics so I thought I would try getting into politics, which I could enjoy,

39:00 or get into Perth City Council. Well, Perth City Council came around first. By then I was fairly isolated in the Betts and Betts, Cecil Brothers business. I had been given the job as staff controller and then they divided the company into six and put six controllers in and I was really cold-shouldered. Everyone was quite pleasant to me, but pleasant in a distance. Anyway, I got onto Perth City Council, which surprised everyone

39:30 because I took on a heavyweight, knew nothing about it, but I thought, “Well, I live in that area and I work in that area and that’s the way to go” and we won. And I stayed there for about seventeen years. So you can ask the question, did you have job satisfaction? Had wonderful job satisfaction in Perth City Council, nil in the Betts and Betts organization, great in the Barney Silbert organization.

40:00 And then a seat came up in Subiaco in state parliament. There is a guy called Tommy Dadour and he was a bit of a revolutionary, great in opposition, stirred the pot and what have you, no good when the Brand government came in and they wanted to get rid of Tommy, so they came to me and said, “Would you like to have a go at getting the Subiaco seat?” And I discussed it with Joan, and she said, “Doesn’t sound good to me, sounds fishy. However, have

40:30 a go.” And I had a go and I won the seat. So that was all very good, in those days for Liberal Party selection you had to get ten per cent of the first vote, and Tommy and I both got the ten per cent and the other four fell by the wayside. They called us up and by now it is about midnight and they announced that Tommy had won. “Oh well, fair enough, not bad for a first try.” Anyway in a week or two, I was walking down the Terrace, I had been a councillor for a few years and I might add that I didn’t live in Subiaco

41:00 but I lived on the border. And so I sort of was acceptable in that regard. Walking down the street and going down, [(UNCLEAR)] said, “Oh Rick, sorry about the seat, we didn’t go to court, you know.” And I

said, “What are you talking about?” and he said, “Don’t you know that you won?” and I said, “No.” “Oh yeah, the whole thing was rigged and we decided we wouldn’t go to court because it probably wouldn’t do Tommy Dadour any good,

41:30 wouldn’t do the Liberal Party any good, wouldn’t do the Subiaco Branch any good and wouldn’t do you any good. So we thought, ‘Oh well, put it in the too hard basket’.” Joan was sitting down at the uni pool a few weeks later and a bloke came up to her and said, “Oh, you’re Rick Silbert’s wife, aren’t you?” “Yeah.” “Sorry about that seat. He won it.” So we came from two sides to confirm that I had actually won a seat that I never got on. But then about three or

42:00 six years later a very interesting…

Tape 7

00:30 **You were just talking about some of your highlights in politics. If you can just explain to me that photo that you were talking about on the wall?**

Well, I got into Perth City Council, which was a tough seat to win, but I won it and I was tickled pink about it. My wife was my manager and things went well and I got in there and found it an interesting place to be.

01:00 Arguably in those days was the best capital city in Australia as far as management was concerned. We had twenty-seven councillors, three councillors to each ward and there were nine wards. Committee systems so everything went through town planning, building, finances, general services, then on to full council, where today it is a rag-tag of eight people around the village pub arguing. But then, it was magnificent and it was a great council to be involved in.

01:30 I became the chairman of the health and buildings committee, which is a little thing over there which was given to me by the staff, and I was there for twelve years as the chairman. I stood for Deputy Lord Mayor, made a mistake, I thought I had a chance and in a way I did. But then a very dear friend of mine back to Cunderdin flying days, Fred Chaney, decided to stand and, of course, he was a heavyweight and obviously had to win so was standing against a mate

02:00 and he was much too good for me to beat. I didn’t pull out, I would have been chicken to, so I never became the Lord Mayor, I was Deputy Lord Mayor for a little while but that didn’t make. But it was good, I chaired those committees and enjoyed all of the challenges, and come the time to go to Kagoshima because it was a sister city, Fred Chaney had only just become the Lord Mayor, he said, “Look

02:30 I haven’t been here five minutes, I don’t think I should lead a trip like that. Nominate your own chairman.” So I was nominated and chaired the trip and it was a wonderful experience to go to Japan and have a good time. One of the guys, Neville Munchausen said, “Look, we’re going to be rubbished by going anyway, lets do the right thing and go to America and do a study on how local government works on the West Coast of America.” So we wrote over to Los Angeles, San Francisco,

03:00 Seattle and Vancouver in Canada to have an experience, because it was the time of the oil and gas and so we had similarities between Alaska and the Americans. So they were all tickled pink that we should come to their city to do a survey, so we did and we had a great time in America. We worked hard and had a great time socially. Eight of us took our wives. There were fourteen. We even had a protest on the day we left on the plane,

03:30 we got a headline, a leader and a cartoon about councillors wasting the public money on a gravy train or whatever the word is for that. But we did a good job, had a great time, we learnt a lot from the Americans. Neville was a bright man, he picked those cities for specific reasons, I could be here for a long time and tell you about it but I will only tell you about one incident. The first place we went to was Los Angeles.

04:00 We were told we were going to get a great reception in America, so we went to Los Angeles Council in a limo [limousine], we hadn’t seen a limo then, they hadn’t come to Australia. So we all got into this limo and pulled up to these enormous steps, about thirty of them, going up to the Los Angeles Council. We were met by a very tall Negro guy who opened the door for us and said, “Would you mind going to the far door there, we are waiting for the ambassador of Argentine?”

04:30 So they had the red carpet out for the ambassador, we pulled up thinking the red carpet was for us and it wasn’t, but we had a great time. I was in charge, as I said, so I had to make speeches wherever we went, which was quite a challenge but I enjoyed it. But all of those cities had a reason, and then we went onto Kagoshima purely for sister city relationship.

And how did you find Japan?

05:00 We were hosted like royalty, but I will stop there because that would take up the whole interview.

You can tell us a little bit about what you thought of Japan because it is interesting because

the Japanese were…

Kagoshima in a way and it was made a sister city because it was similar, was the westernmost city and had a lovely big park like Kings Park, and the bay, where we look over the river. And there was a whopping big statue of a general there like we have got, Lord Forrest.

05:30 Funny little similarities. And the big thing was the Chamber of Commerce and the Council were competitors politically, so they both wanted to outdo one another and we were the rather delightful meat in the sandwich, so the two organizations hosted us par excellence and the trip was great.

It is interesting that you went up being a part of that entourage for the sister city when you were technically fighting the Japanese some years ago?

06:00 Oh yes a generation ago. Very interesting.

So did it surprise you, the hospitality of the Japanese?

Not really, times have changed. They started the sister city business all around the world, which now flourishes and it is a great. I am still in Rotary and it is a great organization: Rotary exchange students and all of the other wonderful things that Rotary does. They started exchange because they were absolutely hated at the end of the war. Germany was disliked intensely, but they were hated. And some clever guy in Japan

06:30 said, “The way to overcome this hate is to have sister city relationships” and they got down to it and did it and did it well.

Is it just Japan that has sister cities?

No, not any more, all around the world. America, of course, with Rotary as their focal point and a lot of things, in Rotary were the people who sort of picked it up and ran with it.

That’s interesting, I didn’t know that that was a Japanese invention but then again the Japanese are pretty good at inventing things.

07:00 That’s right.

Just rewinding a bit, these are some questions I thought about while I was behind the camera. Do you think the close relationships that you had with your mates on board actually made you brave?

Without doubt. We were a close team and all leaned on one another and all hung to one another. We were the Nielsen crew and proud of it.

07:30 **Do you think it would have been harder for some of the other crews to be brave if they didn’t get along?**

Yes, we were lucky. A percentage of crews, the wireless operator was just picked up and went to that crew, the navigator was picked up and went to that crew, so he just sort of slotted into the crew. In our case, we joined up at operational training unit, in the pub, and that way of doing it was the way that made us absolutely gelled together to perfection. The Brits

08:00 were very clever at psychology.

Did you ever find any friction with relation to how the Australians were treated by being part of the RAF? Was there any sort of?

No, quite on the contrary, we were, the thing that people have forgotten now we are all for republicanism and what have you and becoming a republic, and it tends to be a bit anti-British as part of that exercise.

08:30 But when we joined aircrew., what did we join? We joined the British Empire Air Scheme, it can’t be more British than that. So we joined a British establishment really; yes, we were RAAF and Canadian air force but it all grew out of the Empire Air Training School affectionately know as EATS. So we were proud Australians but we were comfortably British.

09:00 **So does this make you a monarchist?**

I don’t know whether that makes me a monarchist, but I think my age makes me a monarchist. If it’s not broken, why fix it? Seeing I have a dysfunctional family, I can barely be critical of the Royal family.

No, I think everybody can be critical of the Royal family.

See, that’s life, I don’t know if that makes it, no, I don’t really want to pursue

09:30 that, I am not strong on it. I just think I can understand the views republican people have and it is just that I am happy to live out my time in what was once the British Empire and the British Commonwealth. What was it? The red on the map. Can’t think of the slogan at the moment, and yeah, I was in the Empire Air Training Scheme, so there is an element of that that’s part of my age group. And that’s not the case in the navy or the army but I was in that group.

10:00 **But that's interesting, the army and the navy from what we have found are not as warm-hearted to the anti-republican issue. I wanted to ask you because I know that the Pathfinder Force was used in so many different situations. What do you think are the keys to precision main force bombing? What makes you?**

10:30 Oh, just what we were doing. We had these flares and they didn't have to worry about finding, they had to worry about finding the city they were going to or the factory or whatever, but all they had to do was find the red target indicator, and once they could see that in the distance they could put their noses down and go straight for it, and it was put there by this, I know it sounds very cheeky, but by this elite force

11:00 who were trained for precision with their target indicators.

So do you think it had a lot to do with the training?

Yeah without a doubt; we flew virtually every other day bomb aiming, as I said, with Johnny Blundell. Eight bombs, Babraham, we did that regularly until we got it down to perfection, and so did all of the other Pathfinders.

11:30 **What would be the average time that you were in the air when you were on an operation?**

There is no such thing, because if you bombed the V-bomber rocket launchers, which are on the coast of France, or you bomb Peenemunde, which is near Russia, it was, you know, if you bomb Albany or Rockhampton, that was the differences in time, the distances you were going.

How long could you stay up in the air before you had to refuel?

12:00 Nine or ten hours at the most .The long one was Berlin, I only did one trip to Berlin. Lots of my mates did lots of them because Harris wanted to belt Berlin to show that Goering had made the statement that no Allied aircraft would ever fly over Berlin. So Harris said, "I'll show you" and he kept belting it time and time again. And of course they were very dicey trips and they were a long way.

12:30 And they rounded up a lot of people to keep doing them. Now they were long trips right across to Berlin.

What made them so dicey?

You had to fly right across Germany so there would be plenty of places that they would be shooting at you, and (B) plenty of times for fighter to have a go and (C) Berlin was very well-defended. And so lots of guys did several trips on Berlin and the joke was a loveable bloke named Danny Conway said, "I have been to Berlin more times than I have been to London."

13:00 And that was a proud boast. But we only did one trip.

Was there any particular place that when you realised that you were going on an operation, you went, "Oh no"?

Anywhere in the Ruhr because that was the industrial area and it was just packed with anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. We did a number of trips on the Ruhr and they were all pretty scary.

13:30 **Considering it was such an industrial area, what was the smog like there, was it hard to see?**

Well, smog and cloud and night would all make it hard to see and that why the Pathfinders were so important, because we dropped these very bright target indicators so that you could see. There were two sorts, one that you dropped on the ground and one that you dropped in the air if you couldn't see the ground because of the clouds. But there was always smog and cloud and this and that that made the job harder.

14:00 **Well, how do you see through that smog? Was it just through navigation?**

Oh, you couldn't see through the smog, oh, you had to navigate the way through and of course quite often trips were cancelled because there was too much cloud.

So was the cloud an enemy or a friend?

Both actually. One of the things I like to say is that I wanted to be a flier as a youngster and I also read all of the appropriate books and comics,

14:30 and one of the things I read several times was the, I am going to spoil the story. Not the magic, oh,

You can start again.

No, no. I used the word 'magic' although it wasn't magic, 'the magic of flying'. And when I used to read this and they used to talk about flying these little bi-planes and the 'magic of flying' was marvellous.

15:00 I am killing the story because the word tells it, anyway I got to England and flew a lot, as we have been talking about for hours and the magic of flying was that you flew and you got above the clouds and there was this wonderful thing called the blue sky. So that's what flying was about, it was about getting

above the clouds into the blue sky. It wasn't flying per se, it was getting up there above the clouds.

15:30 So that was the myth in Europe about the, I can't think of the right word, but we'll call it the magic of flying.

It's quite strange really.

Yeah, here, particularly in Perth where we have blue skies all of the time. My Melbourne friends who come over on occasion say, "I love coming to Perth and its blue sky, we don't have that in Melbourne," so England more so.

Mind you, you are not too happy with the blue sky with the forty degree heat two weeks in a row. It's like another blue sky.

I was in hospital with the air conditioning, much better place.

16:00 **Well that's a good reason to be in. Can you describe to me the main difference between being in a Wellington and being in a Lancaster?**

Not a great deal really, other than the Wellington was smaller and it was a twin-engine. The Lancaster was a big aeroplane by standards of those days, and it had four engines and had a lot more sophisticated equipment.

16:30 **Out of all of the aeroplanes that you flew on, which one was your favourite?**

Oh Lancaster, just something special about a Lanc, very proud to have been a part of them.

I knew that that was going to be a silly question. From what I can understand the Pathfinder Force was really assimilated with the battle of the Ruhr and they have this gallantry in relation to the battle of the Ruhr, why do you think that there is that association?

17:00 Oh, just that that was the key thing at the time, that's what you had to do and that was a key component of the day.

When you were up there in really scary operations, what was the thing that you feared the most?

Being wounded I think, rather than being killed. And also, with flak flying around, in particular

17:30 to be hit by flak, which were the steel bits, you didn't want that on your mind.

What were the sort of medical services that were available if you did get injured?

I think they had a little box that had a bandage in it; I don't know that it was any more than that. Virtually none, you were on your own.

That's pretty intense, when you got back to your base, did they have any other specialist medical?

18:00 Oh yes, you were met by doctors and nurses and you were taken by vehicle to be debriefed and always impatiently waited your turn to be debriefed. And you hung around so you could report on what had happened, and in that period there were doctors and nurses and they checked your ears and your eyes and they gave you a, I am not sure if it was a brandy or a rum, I think it might have been a rum. That was for your nerves.

18:30 But other than that was nothing, but on your medical question, there was always doctors and nurses to check you and, of course, those that were wounded were immediately taken into the appropriate medical facility on the station. Big percentage of the station were only Nissen huts, but that was wartime situation, but there was always the hospital and first aid hut and those sorts of...

Sorry what's a Nissen hut?

19:00 Those curved huts sort of half-circle and they were the wartime things that were on all aerodrome and military establishments.

What were some of the more common injuries that Bomber Command would get?

Being hit by the flak in the legs and arms, the thing that always went through my mind, was that here the flak was pelting up at the aeroplane and knocking

19:30 holes in it and there were two tyres on the bottom of the aircraft which had to let down. Now, what would happen if flak hit the tyre and you were landing with a whopping big hole in the tyre and it nosedives into the ground. Now, they were self-sealing tyres with a whopping big piece of steel going through them. To my knowledge I cannot remember anyone that had that problem. Lots of trips but the tyres never got

20:00 knocked out. And even to this day I think back and I think the tail got hit and the middle got hit and the Perspex around there got smashed, why didn't the tyres get knocked about?

That's quite strange really when you think about it.

I have never really asked any of my mates; I have a particular friend who is quite a gallant airman, I must ask him.

20:30 **Would you say with the battle of the Ruhr, was that the worst place to be sent on an operation?**

Oh no, Berlin was the worst because, as I said, it was the longest trip and what have you. But the Ruhr was heavily fortified. But it didn't really matter, if you got a bullet of a cannon through the aircraft, it didn't really matter where it came from.

21:00 **Can you explain the Mosquito squadrons?**

Again, this guy Bennett by good chance happened to be at a meeting when they produced the Mosquito and the various other commands said, "No, not interested in a wooden aeroplane." Bennett said, "Oh, that will suit me, thankyou." Other places did later on. But he took them and he used them for master bombers. The pilot there and the navigator there, they were made of wood and could fly very high and very fast.

21:30 Didn't have much armament on them and carried one bomb or did the photographic and navigation work. And they were great aeroplanes, very fast by those days' standards, but they were wooden aeroplanes. Beautiful.

You'd think that they would get buffeted around in some of the weather?

Well it was compressed, if the right word is ply or bonded, a very good aeroplane.

What were some of the situations

22:00 **to use one of these Mosquito squadrons?**

Well, we always had a Mosquito squadron with a Lancaster squadron, so they could do the master bomber work. They'd go in first and say, put a few flares down, and we would come in later. The famous Guy Gibson I think was killed in a Mosquito doing a master bomber raid.

22:30 **Would it be true that the smaller you are, the less chance you have of being hit?**

Oh, only to a small degree. You know, flak bursts and goes like that anyway. I think the answer is no.

Can you explain there was some sort of a secret weapon, the Oboe? O B O E is that how it is pronounced?

Yes and Pathfinders used it. Its advantage was that it marked where it was, it was

23:00 radar, it was two signals and you finally got them and you gelled them together and that went right over the target, so it went over, you saw the target then and pushed the button and dropped the flare and away you went. Its disadvantage was that it didn't go all the way to Berlin. It covered the Ruhr and it covered the western cities of Europe but didn't cover the eastern cities. And some aircraft were sort of specialists using Oboe,

23:30 some Mosquitos, they could get very high by the standards of the day, use their Oboe, which made a fix over the target and there they were.

How hard is it to judge all of these wind conditions?

Oh, that's part of flying; you don't have an option. That's like sticking to the left of the road, you have got to allow for the wind and whatever direction it is coming from. Aircraft don't fly like that, in fact aircraft fly more

24:00 like that, because the wind is taking them there and there, but that's on all the time. Even your big four-engine aircraft that go over now are moved about by the wind. A thing I want to say for the record is today even a kindergarten kid knows about the fronts, turns on the television and watches the news and the weather tonight, and says, "There is a cold front coming, we'll probably get rain tomorrow." Fronts were only discovered in 1938. Before that,

24:30 everything was barometric pressure. Now, that s interesting, because we lived by fronts. Is a front going to be here or there? So away we went to Germany allowing for what the front was going to do. But in 1938, which was the year before war broke out, they hadn't worked out about fronts, they hadn't joined all of the bits. So I find that interesting, and talk to nine out of ten people and you would assume that fronts were something from way back at biblical times. They were there, of course, it was just how you plotted them in

25:00 to know that the weather was coming in like that.

That's interesting, I didn't know that.

Virtually no one knows that, it is a well-kept secret.

That's terrific, it's a great dinner party conversation. With the weather conditions, I mean, if you are battling the weather this way and you're dropping bombs as well, I mean doesn't the bomb get shuffled around?

It does a bit but not as much as you think because you are dropping them from sixteen, twenty thousand feet

25:30 in the old measurement and they go very fast and they are made of steel, so they don't get buffeted about that much and the bomb aimer would allow a little bit anyway.

What would be the sorts of weather conditions where an operation would be called off?

Oh, the obvious heavy weather, rain, storm, snow, ten-tenths cloud where you can't see the ground.

26:00 **Because that makes it impossible?**

Yeah.

With being in the Pathfinder group in Bomber Command, I mean you decided to transfer at one point literally to the Pathfinders?

Yeah, the skipper decided it was a great honour and thing to be admired, so we went, "All right." So away we went and went to Pathfinder School,

26:30 having been selected.

Sounds like you knew absolutely nothing about it?

Oh yeah, we knew what Pathfinders were about, they were absolutely the top of the pile, we never aspired to that, we were quite happy at Mildenhall doing our thing, but to go onto that was something that wasn't even talked about. Then, when Ron appeared to say, "Well, I have been asked will the crew go over?" all the long faces finally said, "All right." And it turned out to be a wonderful thing.

Do you have any regrets about that move?

27:00 None. Oh no, I don't know what would have happened if we wouldn't have. It was really part of my life, marvellous to be selected, it really was, a great force.

What did you enjoy most about that time?

The camaraderie like all the time. I was with guys who had the same challenges and the same eager beavers [enthusiasts].

27:30 **Just jumping a bit forward, how do you feel about Anzac Day and what does it mean to you?**

Oh, I think Anzac Day is marvellous and I hope it becomes the national commemorative day. Terrific, it is great to have it. Now, of course, this coming Anzac Day I am not too sure what I am going to do, I can think of two blokes that might be there and yet

28:00 we always had lunch together and marched together and the reunion of your friends. I love the dawn service and the Perth Dawn Service is unique anywhere in the world, because you have got the sun coming up over the Darling Range, just a glimmer, and it reflects on the Swan and it reflects on the memorial. And all of a sudden you find yourself standing in a crowd of some hundreds of people and there is the

28:30 memorial in front of you and all people are doing is thinking, whether it be good thoughts or bad thoughts, it doesn't matter. Then they fire the guns and then they play the Last Post, which to this day affects me. I was in hospital on Armistice Day or Remembrance Day, the Hollywood [Hospital], and they had a Remembrance Service and played the Last Post and I welled up even there, you know, this year. And the feeling I have a disappointment of the last governor, who is now the Governor-General,

29:00 because when he came over here and went to his first Anzac Day service and said, "I am going to make a speech." Well, no one could tell the governor what he could or couldn't do, but it was pointed out to him that nobody makes a speech at the Perth Dawn Service. It's a matter of memories with sights and sound and what have you , with laying of wreaths. Nobody says anything and that's why it is such a strong service.

29:30 You are there in the silence, but he said, "No, no, you will listen to me and I will tell you all about it" so he did, and of course they have a speech now every year, which to me took the cream off the cake. And I notice now as the Governor-General, he's having more to say as the Governor-General, the first Governor-General to give a speech to the incoming Cabinet. So a fine man and a great man, but that was a blot to me. You asked about Anzac Day and that to me is a sad part of Anzac Day, that we have lost the silence

30:00 of the dawn service. And it says somewhere on the memorial, something like 'remember in silence' so that's got bent a bit, which is a shame. But to answer your question, I think Anzac Day is great, the crowds are getting bigger, we have now moved on to another generation, which looks back on it in a different way, because it is grandad or great grandad. It isn't Dad who drove me mad or did this or that.

The generation has

30:30 moved on and so the next generation are looking differently and so the crowds in the last ten years are much thicker, the crowds marching are much bigger. And it is getting more significance because the world is getting more crazy so we don't really want to go to a full-time war again, we seem to be in a war all of the time anyway. So yes, I think that Anzac Day is a good thing for human beings

31:00 and for the country.

Do you think it is actually gaining more momentum in recent times then?

Very much so, conspicuously so.

Can you put your finger on why you think that is?

Well, I thought I explained that, in that I think it is because the generations are getting further away from the people who went to the First World or Second World War, now the Second World War, to a lesser degree Vietnam – but Vietnam plays a role in the remembrance too –

31:30 and I just think people say, "Well, these old so and so's tried to do the right thing by the country and here they are. They are a bit old and doddery but gee, it was important wasn't it?" whereas before, "Oh, don't tell me about the war again. Sick and tired of hearing that, thankyou."

I am just wondering if people are more open to talking about experiences that they did have?

32:00 Oh, kids want to talk about it, young people, young [(UNCLEAR)] want to talk about it; fifteen years ago nobody wanted to talk about it, didn't want to know about you anyway.

What's changed though?

We're getting further away from it I think.

That's interesting. In recent times, have you talked more to family members, I am thinking particularly your brother. When you came back from the war, did you actually swap experiences because I know a lot of people just came back and tried to get on?

32:30 [(UNCLEAR)] because he had such a dramatic experience to me. He was an intelligence officer in the artillery. He finished up in Wewak in New Guinea. Now, that couldn't be further away from going on leave in London and flying aeroplanes over Germany. So our war experiences were from the two ends of the spectrum, different.

And what did he tell you about Wewak?

33:00 Not a great deal but he is a quiet man anyway, very private quiet man. We get on famously. Various things but not very pleasant.

I just find it interesting that a lot of people came back from the war and just didn't talk about it?

It was not the done thing, particularly army where they had the terrible times in the jungle or the desert,

33:30 "Don't talk to people about that, thank you." We were a bit different, (A) we were in Europe with people and (B) we were in aeroplanes. But soldiers, the hard times they had in the jungle and desert.

Did you think, did you see any folk that were a part of Bomber Command who just lost it, who under the pressure just cracked?

That's when we got onto

34:00 that LMF earlier in the discussion, very few. You were trained well, you were eager beavers and were very keen to get on with the job, so very few cracked up. Many were killed and some wounded but, no, not that many, because you were fine tuned.

Does having that strength of being able to cope with the stressful situation and having to deal with the fifty per cent chance of

34:30 **living, does that help you back in civilian life?**

Oh, it helps without doubt. And I was pleased to get back, I am a very lucky man with the war, lucky beyond description, and I came back to good parents and a job and soon after a rather lovely lady.

How did you keep in contact with the other people in your crew?

Only by mail a bit.

35:00 David the rear-gunner used to write to us all and then copy the letter and then send it to all of us. So we kept in touch in that way, occasional phone calls, and then about twenty years ago, we had a reunion on Anzac Day in Sydney and were in the march, and we were in the front of the air force part of the march

and that was a great experience, it was really good.

All of you actually made it?

35:30 No, the mid-upper gunner not only didn't make it but didn't want to make it. The mid-upper gunner didn't see any value in the war or the camaraderie or anything. Good man, but he really didn't want to associate himself with anything and he was the only one who didn't come.

Oh that's a bit sad.

He also, even though David had written to all of us and I still hear on the phone from Reg and got the postcard the other day,

36:00 even Reg in the last phone calls was sorry that Noel really drifted away from the folds of the rest of the crew.

How much of a special moment was it for you to be reunited?

Unreal beyond description, because we never thought we would and, yeah, we stayed in David's home in Melbourne and that was an experience to behold.

36:30 **How many of your family members have you talked to about your experiences?**

Talked to my kids a bit as time went on, but not long and laborious, and I can only guess, based on nothing, that they were quite proud of their father's effort, but it wasn't a talking point. One of my daughters went along regularly to the dawn service.

37:00 The others didn't and I am not critical of that, they don't have to. As time went by, it wasn't a talking point. As we said earlier, it wasn't a talking point amongst your peers or the newspapers anyway, so it certainly wasn't amongst your family. Now of course, it is.

I am just wondering how your grandson got involved?

Oh, my grandkids are very proud of grandad, that's a big deal.

So did they just volunteer to be a part of Anzac Day?

Yeah, well they knew

37:30 I couldn't march. I don't know who suggested the idea they might be prepared to push me, and it is quite a marathon too pushing me all the way down the Terrace and then worse still pushing you back up the hill. But Amelia did it first then Nick did it. Again, don't know what's going to happen this time. Oh, in the previous years I had been going in a car because I couldn't walk and there is a very good service and they look after you in that regard, so we might have to go back to that.

38:00 But I would still like to go along. But I am not sure, as I say, five of the close ones have died this year, that's starting to make a bit of a dent.

With some of your extreme experiences that you experienced as part of Bomber Command, do you have any really good thought or philosophies that you would like to pass on to the future, as we know this archive project is going to be around for some time?

I am not a philosophical type bloke but I say the thing I said, war is evil.

38:30 You're not going to achieve something by war; you achieve something by talking, arguing, discussing, whatever you like. What are you going to achieve by shooting at one another? And yet we human beings have been doing that for centuries and look around the world today, look at the African continent, the South American continent, the Asian continent, the number of people who are shooting at one another. I don't think some profound words by some fellow in Perth

39:00 are going to make any difference to anyone around the world tragically. Human beings are selfish and selfish with their national views, and it is getting worse. The current situation now is getting a lot worse than it was.

I was going to say I find it interesting some of the philosophy that we get back from the veterans that we talk to about war, I don't think anybody has actually said that they agree with war,

39:30 **regardless of if they have had a good experience with it or a bad or a dangerous experience. It seems to be quite consistent.**

It would have to be, well, I think it would have to be, anyway.

I just want to thank you for talking to us today for the archive, it has been an absolute pleasure.

It has been a great pleasure for me too.

You looked like you had a good time.

I did; thoroughly enjoyed the day.

And hasn’t the day gone fast?

Yeah, we said we’d finish at half past,

40:00 we’re a quarter of an hour over. You’ll get overtime.

No, we don’t get overtime.

INTERVIEW ENDS