Australians at War Film Archive

Harold Johnson (Reg) - Transcript of interview

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http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/968

Tape 1

Note: Audio interference throughout Tape 01

00:35 **Ok, right, we are recording now, so if you can start off by giving us that summary?**

I was born in Ararat, Victoria. A small country town, in 1921. In January 1921, which makes me 82 today. And of fairly humble parents. My father was a carpenter on the railways. But unfortunately we lost him when I was seven,

01:00 through, partly through injuries he collected during World War I. My mother re-married, and that was very unfortunate, in that we were without any income. Right in the Depression years we lived very happily, but frugally, until, I suppose 1939, when I was fortunate enough to come to Melbourne to a quite a well paid public service

01:30 job in the lands department, as a survey draftsman. Whilst I was working happily there, somebody started a company in the militia for the public service. And I joined that, because it was a way to develop myself and added interest to life, and another extra fortnights holiday a year, and that was quite a good prospect. The company was very small.

02:00 We didn't recruit quite enough, but we went once a week into the Royal Melbourne Regiment, in Victoria Street, Melbourne. And we trained there as well as we could. We had an odd day outdoors, but I didn't come to enjoy the fortnight's camp, because the thing called the 1939 war intervened. I was still in that militia, and the day that war broke out, I was in charge

02:30 of a group, which was guarding the Shell Oil refinery at Spotswood. They thought it was subject to attack. But we could have done little about it, because we were walking up and down the streets, and people were walking up and down the streets going home, doing shopping, or calling on the neighbours, and I considered that we were quite ineffective, even as a deterrent, or a not even detecting any adverse action. And that only went on for three weeks,

03:00 during which time we were billeted at the Williamstown rifle range. A place that was quite familiar to me, because I had been shooting down there with the militia. But the rifle I was allotted, happened to be very accurate, and I enjoyed shooting on the range down there. Except that I didn't drink, and probably everybody else drank. And you couldn't get passed the rifle range hotel at Williamstown on the way home, unless you went home on your own.

03:30 So that

So Reg, if I can just interrupt. This is probably a bit too much detail.

That is?

Yeah, just stick to the points of where you were posted and we'll come back and do that.

Yeah, well I consider that I've got a cross-section of the three of four bits of the service, before I ever got to the air force that made my character, to a certain extent. Anyhow, the militia then, went to

04:00 Mount Martha, where in later years I would have hated what I was doing, because we knocked down acres and acres of tea tree, to form the Mount Martha camp. Then we turned into a training carter and I, as a poor, very inexperienced corporal, was training 21 year olds, who were to say the least, fairly tough, from North Melbourne. And not any of them wanted to go, so that was a very

04:30 trying period, and made me grow old very quickly. When I was recalled to the lands department because they were doing, what was called was emergency mapping. And I did not consider that this was extremely valuable, from what we were mapping in western Victoria. But I couldn't get out of it. I could only get out of it before to join aircrew, or to go to a survey regiment. And I wanted to do something different.

05:00 I was also in a bit of a pickle because of her experience, my mother would not sign me up for any of the services, because of her sad losses during World War I. I had to wait until I was 21, which coincided with Japan's entry into the war, where upon I immediately volunteered for aircrew. But when I was released, somebody said, "Ah, ha, now we can drag him into the survey core",

05:30 And I was diverted into the second artillery survey core, which was an outmoded method of determining where enemy guns were located. Using the sound of the guns, and also trying to spot them on triangulation with theodolites. And that group was disbanded. And a gentlemen came around from the air force, and said,

06:00 "Any of you folk want to join the air force?" I said, "You've got my name down". And two days later I was in at Caulfield racecourse. I got all the papers signed, and changed over. Went into Lane Motors, and I seemed to have all the necessary arms and legs, so they took me into aircrew, with one proviso. My eyes were such, that I could only be a pilot. They didn't want us. They sent us up to Shepparton to do a rookies course.

06:30 And then we were posted to Parafield, in South Australia, where we were what as known as aircrew guards. And we filled in three lovely months of the summer there, guarding the aircraft, guarding the aerodrome, and telling everybody that came home late, when they leave to pass and go up and get through the hole in the fence. Not to come through the guardroom.

07:00 But that was a very lax station. It was lovely weather and gave me a lot of opportunity to a lot of reading of air force material. That was going to be handy to me later on. During the course of my air force career, I may refer to several things which I have called 'lifesaving delays'. Now it's quite obvious that if I'd gone straight in then, I would have got into the activities operations much sooner. But that was three months

07:30 I spent in safety in Parafield, before they called my down to Somers for the initial training, at Somers. That was on the beach, at the right time of year. It was just delightful down there. The challenge, the studies. You were working hard at studies. Exercising hard, to keep you fit. It was very character forming and building up a. I was a very inexperienced, unsophisticated, naïve

08:00 country boy, even at this time. I didn't know that I'd already developed my serious side. But having qualified from Somers, I was then sent to Western Junction in Tasmania, in the most delightful part of the year. And there was no messing about then. Straight into learning to fly Tiger Moths. Where the big experience

08:30 was to go solo, which I achieved in seven and a half hours. But we were frightfully unsafe really. It was just a matter of staggering around to say, "We've done one lap". And when I tried to approach the airfield for my first landing, I was a little bit too high. So I tried to go around again, but I didn't put on enough throttle. And they all watched in fear and trepidation, as I looked like crashing, until I listened

09:00 to what was happening, and I heard I was wrong, and away we went. So my first solo was about three times as long as anybody else's, I just went around. Western Junction. Delightful weather. Up early, sleeping well, because of the beautiful sunny days. At nights, you were tired from classes and from up early. We flew from 6 o'clock till 8 o'clock, early in the morning, when the air was still and beautiful, so we were still

09:30 quite tired by bed time. And immediately across to Point Cook here, in cold Point Cook. The wind blew off the ocean. And that was one of the coldest places I've ever been. Probably because we were in largely summer dress, but the winds were freezing at Point Cook.

Okay Reg. Probably again, this is still too much detail. I will come back. I want to know everything later.

I'm garrulous. You'll

10:00 have trouble training me in. Alright. I really do want to get to England and my experience with the English people. I know. Then Point Cook then, we were with Australians flying Oxfords. Flying at a couple of aerodromes there. The day before we passed out, an instructor and I were doing a low level flight, and we hit a telegraph line, and we weren't there for the celebration dinner. We still got, I still got my wings

10:30 and then I was sent off on 10 days leave, before I went to a place called Mallala, where I was going to fly as a stooge pilot, flying trainees around. So, I went home, told them at home for 10 days. And four days later I got a telegram saying, "Report to the showgrounds". I took a bit of gear with me,

11:00 but I said to the, "Oh right, I'll see you for tea". And eight hours later I was on a train to Bradfield, with injections and new clothes. On a train to Bradfield Park in New South Wales, where we waited three days. We were crammed onto a troop ship, going to America. And I never did get home for tea that day. Across the Pacific. Across the

11:30 state side train. That was another four or five day trip. We were then held up there for a period which delayed me from getting to operations for something like two months, because some member of the American forces, who came on over on the same vessel as us, across the Pacific, had scarlet fever. And some of our people caught it. So we had to stay there until we were quite clear from the scarlet

12:00 fever. We were then put in buses with the windows painted black, rushed into New York harbour, wherever that was. Drew a hole in the side of a great big vessel. When we got inside we found we were in the Queen Mary. For a five-day trip across the Atlantic. And even though it was allegedly a secret departure, there were probably 4,000 people waving us goodbye, when we sailed.

12:30 Five days across to Greenwich, and we were greeted in England. Greenwich, Scotland. We were greeted by Scotch mist and constant rain. And immediately off that boat and onto a train down to Brighton, on the south coast, where it was still raining. And then, of course, we found that the Empire Air Training Scheme was so successful, that they had a preponderance of pilots, and perhaps a shortage of air gunners,

13:00 and navigators, and bomb aimers. And all those people we knew were posted away, and we pilots were left there. This was very good for us because we did a lot of training through the country. Flew Oxfords again, Tiger Moths, to learn flying and seeing what Britain, a blacked out country, looked like at night. A sort of change to us. We did PT [Physical Training] courses, and various recognition courses, and training.

13:30 And that waiting period, even though it kept me five months from operational flying, really taught me all I knew about flying. Then came the day when we were posted to what was called, Operational Training Unit. And this is the beginning of, for me, the separation from the Australian air force. Up to

14:00 this point I had been, obviously, connected with all Australians. We've got Australian habits, and language, and accent, and everything else. When we went to the operational training unit, I found we Australians were in the minority, and there were a few pilots and a few wireless operators there, and the rest were Englishmen. A good looking navigator who had asked a few

14:30 intelligent questions wondering around. So I said to him, "How about it?" He says, "Well yes", "I know this bomb aimer". So that was two Englishmen. And another very bright looking gunner walked up and said, "Have you got gunners skipper?" and I said, "Are there two of you?" meaning that I wanted a team. I wanted a tail gunner and I mid operator upper gunner, and not just one of each, that didn't know each other. He said, "My friends here". So that meant we had our quota, except for a wireless

15:00 operator. And the navigator said, "Well I know that chap over there slightly", so he recruited the other Australian in the crew, which was an Australian from Sydney, called John Northcote. So I had him to remind me of Australia, and these five Englishmen in the crew. And at the end of operational training, we were posted to what was called a

15:30 heavy conversion unit, at Stradishall in Suffolk. We no sooner got there, instead of converting to the huge sterling aircraft; we were on a posting to a special duties unit, in five group of bomber command.

16:00 And my two Englishmen, the navigator and the bomb aimer came up to me and said, "We're not going skipper". I said, "Oh yes, you're going to mutiny". And they said, "No, we've been training in Canada for nine months". "We were promised when we got home we'd get disembarkation leave. We have not had it". So I had to front up to the CO and explain this. And he said, "Oh, that's alright". They got their leave.

16:30 I didn't get any. I stayed there doing odd jobs taxiing aircraft, and doing an odd test flight. And when they came back we started. But I found that I could not land the sterling gently. Because we were so far off the ground, and I usually landing the sterling about ten feet above the ground, and went down with a bump, and they said, "Oh we'll have to scrub you".

17:00 And I said, "You look at my medical records and you'll find that I've got an eye problem". And that's alright. And they sent me to London to air board who had to study me and had to say, "I was not fit to fly". And they decided that "No, I should have my eyes trained". So for six weeks I went to an air ministry eye specialist, who trained me to turn levers, to have both eyes working in unison. They had me

17:30 doing the eye thing, so that I could just focus immediately, and the lazy eye, which had been doing all the work, came back and the two eyes. And I had no trouble. So I went back to where I had lost my crew, to find that they had been posted. This is my lovely, there were now six of us, because we had a flight engineer. Six people that had been posted away. I got a box of dinner

18:00 chocolates from home, and went down to the. Coincidentally, went down to the officers, and I met some WRAF's [Women's Royal Air Force] and passed a chocolate around, and said, "I want a posting to where my crew are". And that took no time. So I shot off to this, I was posted, rather than shooting off, to this holding station in the north of England. Gamston, near Redford, to find my crew had been sent to a

18:30 Lancaster training school. With the one exception. The mid upper gunner had been separated out from them and sent to a crew, which needed a mid-upper gunner. Well when I got to Woolfox Lodge, I found that my crew had been allotted, naturally, to a spare pilot. And the spare pilot had my crew, plus another gunner. Again, I approached the commanding officer and said, "Look, this

19:00 is very good". "At the present moment, you've got my six crew there, they're not happy". "You've got me, I'm not happy". "Wouldn't it be better to have one happy crew, and the other pilot disappointed, and

put us back into the team that we got into". He said, "Yes". So that we trained there on the Lancaster's, which meant that I had progress with them from the

19:30 two-engined Wellingtons at the operational training unit. There were four-engined Sterling's, which gave me trouble. And now we were very delighted to learn our skills on the four-engined Lancaster, which was a beautiful aircraft to fly. Just a delight compared to anything else I'd handled.

Ok, Reg, this is my last go. This is really a lot of detail, and I want to talk about

20:00 **this in detail later.**

Training with Lancaster's, which we did very, very thoroughly, because by this time I had turned into a very responsible person, which I hadn't been earlier. And the crew trained well for me and we were posted from this

20:30 Lanc [Lancaster] finishing school to an operational squadron, which was stationed about 15 kilometres south west of Bury-St-Edmunds, in Suffolk. And we got there in the first of month of 1945, which is the last year of the war. And then

21:00 I did a couple of flights for experience, with somebody else. And we did a few of our own, and then the war came to an end. So I was only on the operational training for a few months, and they had plenty of aircrew. It was hard to get a trip, because everybody wanted to fly. And eventually came the time when VE [Victory in Europe] Day.

21:30 And we did a couple of interesting trips then, after VE Day. And then we were posted into the hands of the Australian air force. And this was obviously May. There was a time when we might have gone further with the Lanc, and flew one out here. But generally speaking we were just told to fill

22:00 in our time and given never-ending leave passes, because they had no vessels to take us home. That was another well spent part, that I travelled around Britain, with leave passes, and rail passes, and saw the country fairly well. And in November, must have been October then, we were

22:30 sent up to Gamston. Kitted up and, so that from May until October, I was just wandering around Britain filling things in. I had a stepsister that I saw a lot of there. That boat, the Sterling Castle, which was practicing to be a post war

23:00 passenger boat, served us very well, because all the stewards and everybody were practicing their skills for paying customers on the next voyage. Landed here two days before the Melbourne Cup, so I remember going to see the Rainbirds at Melbourne Cup. We were still held on force by the air force, for another three months before we were discharged. They

23:30 hoped, and they constantly wanted us to go to the Japanese occupation forces, but I really wanted to go back to the lands department. Then I did. I had the necessary survey draftsman qualifications, which I'd acquired whilst they had called me back in the first place,

24:00 in 1939. And I worked there until there came a time when I married, in 1948. And we came to live in this house, where we've lived ever since. I was quite happy doing, and enjoyed my work in the lands department. Socially I had a busy, busy life out doing things for the community.

24:30 in sport, in the city of Heidelberg then. And I retired very early, because I had acquired the interest in conservation and preservation of wildlife and flowers, and birds in particular. And I would much rather do that for no money, than in the Lands

25:00 Department for a lot of money. So I walked out very early. Subsequently that was recognised by the award of the Australian, Order of the Australian Medal, for my work on, described as environmental education, which I think it was. And then became a time that I realised I was doing

25:30 too much. I learnt to say no, to all the various requests. My life took on a more personal factor then. And then I went around and enjoyed the things I'd been teaching other people to enjoy ever since. So here I am today.

Excellent. That's great.

I'm not nearly as garrulous on appreciation am I?

No, that's good. I've got to rein you in. That's alright. Well look,

26:00 **now we can afford to go into a lot more detail. I want to start of by asking you about your childhood, growing up in Ararat.**

We had, I had one sister, who was four years younger than me. I went to the primary school in Ararat. And I think I was, we were there so long enough for me to

26:30 be able to lead her down to Kindergarten and bring her home again. So that must have been 1920. She must have been five or four when we left there. The loss of my father probably, oh it was a drastic change in our lives, because he was a carpenter. We didn't see him most of the time when I was young,

because he was working on the bridges on the railway, all the week. Came home for the weekends

27:00 to give me the strap if I'd been naughty, or otherwise. And eventually he was given a job in the carpenter's workshops at Ararat. And that was a marvellous place. Where these men took the planes and they took lovely curly strips of wood off. And if he was looking after me. I was sitting in the corner playing with all these beautifully smelling shavings.

27:30 And it may well have been that had he lived, I might have had the same feeling for woodwork that he did. But I never did acquire it without him. And he didn't let me do too much when I was seven. We were somewhat lucky, and we got a pittance from the, what was then called superannuation, I think. Was very little money to keep us.

28:00 My school expenses were paid, which we couldn't have managed without. And my stepfather was a total no hoper, who thought that higher purchase was something where you paid the deposit and never paid anything else. So we owned the things until they were taken back from him. And he never made any money. And without that education allowance from the superannuation

28:30 board, we wouldn't have existed, I don't think. It was our life with him that made me this describe our growing up as living on boiled wheat and rabbits, because we ate wheat in every form. We ground it up into flour, and made patty cakes out of it. We had it boiled for breakfast. We had it boiled for tea. And rabbit was our main meat, because at one time

29:00 he made a bit of a living trapping rabbits for the market. Probably that was when we were well off as anything.

Did you catch rabbits yourself?

Oh yes. I caught them for the table, and we ate those. But we didn't like the cruelty of trapping the rabbits, or the cruelty that my stepfather used, because once they were trapped he kept them in confinement with their broken legs until the man came around to pick them up. Now this meant that I went to

29:30 a one-man school, up in the Mallee, 20 miles west of Mildura. One-man teacher. And we had enough to play cricket if the teacher played. And only had one batsman. We couldn't have two batsmen running, so that means there must have been 11 or 12. 11 children and the teacher in the school. Perhaps 11 and less. He rode up on a motorbike.

30:00 We walked, my sister and I, walked a mile through Mallee scrub to school. The crops failed. When they did get wheat, it cost more to put it in a bag and sell it, than it did to grow it. And the, some of the farmers were paid to walk off the farms. I think that we just fled because the debts he'd acquired were too great for anybody to

30:30 cope with. The operation was called Closer Settlement Farming. It wasn't for returned men, but most of them were. And the rainfall was sufficient to grow beautiful wheat. If it so happen to fall in the right three little times, when we required rain. But it didn't. And that's what's the undoing of the operation. We've been back there several times. There's just open paddocks with grazing going on. You can't

31:00 see the bag and wire shanty we lived in. I can see where it was. We saw the little damn where the water came down the channel once a year. We had, that was the only water we had, that came down the channel into a muddy dam. We were happy there. It was a wonderful place to go to school. Because of the necessity of education, the teacher

31:30 gave to the one year-eight, and the two year-six people he had. And I was in year-six also, but not in the same category as the other one. And he used me to teach, and or supervise, and supervise grade three or four, and to teach grade's one and two, who, in those day's learnt to spell and write A, B, C, D. And as a result of that, I got

32:00 a lot of personal tuition, from this very enthusiastic young man. And he was very disappointed when we had to leave, because he thought I would do well in what was the examination that was coming. We fled to South Australia then, and we wondered around a series of places in Australia, until I passed their qualifying certificate, which was a big date in your education.

32:30 And because of our background, they sent me down to the Port Adelaide Technical School. And the headmaster, after seeing me, said, "You shouldn't be here son". He rang the Woodville High School and they said, "Yes, we can take one". And owing to that wonderful man at Port Adelaide, I was taken out of the technical school and sent up to the high school at Woodville,

33:00 where the different curriculum suited me extremely well. We battled and struggled. It was still depression. The country was depressed. The people there were on rations, and given tickets to acquire groceries, many of which, of course, were changed for alcohol. Not in our house, that wasn't our failing. Alcohol was never his undoing. It was his inability to

33:30 conceive how to manage money. Eventually he and my mother went back to Ararat, and I stayed in South Australia to finish that year's schooling. That must have been in December, 1934, that I went back to Ararat, where they were living in a house owned by my grandmother, and probably

34:00 living on what little board she paid us, because she was supplying a house for us. It was due, I think, to Grandmother we lived at all in Ararat. And I finished my schooling there. I didn't want to go to university, and I had to earn money, because the family just couldn't afford to keep me in clothes. So I did come down and do various. I tried to join the forest commission.

34:30 And they would have had me, only when I wanted to join them, I was a year too young. I was too advanced because we gained a year between South Australia and Victoria. The end result of that was that curriculum in South Australia wasn't as advanced as the Victorian one. And even though I went a year forward, I was struggling the whole time to keep up with the

35:00 standard, the level they had reached in Victoria. I did that only just, but well enough so that the forest commission would have been delighted to have me, but I was still this year younger. They said, "You'll have to come back, you've got to go out, you haven't built up your body, you're not well enough to do all the things want to do". Next year I didn't go back, because it would have been four years with virtually no money. And the family

35:30 couldn't afford to keep me there. So I went over to the lands department where the. A bit of background. In a country town, I had been allotted a person as a legacy father. It happened to be the shire in Genoa. And he took a great interest in my prowess, and what I was doing. And he thought he would have me as a trainee engineer. And he had me training in drafting and

36:00 surveying in a spare room at the back of the shire offices. And low and behold, the shire president's brother's son got the job. Not Reg. It was unknown. So he said, "Oh, we won't have that". So he sent me down to the lands department. And the lands department took me on as a trainee draftsmen. And the salary was such that

36:30 I could pay my board, I could pay my train fare, and there was nothing left over except to buy a pound of apples, with five apples in it, on a Monday morning, and have one apple a day for lunch. Because where I was boarding gave us marvellous breakfasts and great evening meals. So that we didn't need much at lunchtime. I wasn't a burden on home. I had enough, I think

37:00 to buy toothpaste, and I had enough clothes to keep me going. Because once you had done a year in the public service in those days, salary increased enough, not much, but enough to let you look after yourself. So that by the time the war came I was, I'd had two increments and I was on good money, but

37:30 quite happy to go in for militia, and quite happy to leave to go to aircrew now. I want to have a break now, to see where you want to go now. I've got myself in a job.

That's a good spot. I want to ask you a little bit more about your youth, I should say. You were

38:00 **a very, fairly poor family, you didn't have a lot. What sort of things did you do for fun?**

Yes. I think that the Church of England was a great help to me in giving me some direction. I graduated there to be a Sunday school teacher. I was also an altar boy. I used to go

38:30 to early morning communions, and help the clergyman conduct his early morning mass. And with the boys, I was a country boy. We went roaming over the countryside. We, one of us had a greyhound dog,

39:00 and he'd chase rabbits, and sometimes catch them, sometimes drive them into a burrow. We might dig the burrow. We would set out of a morning and we would wander all over the countryside. Just wandering around the district of Ararat, climbing the hills and the mountains. I took part in athletics at school. We had a, I was a member of the Exhibits, and most weekends we went

39:30 to other country, smaller country towns, and played either, whichever season, football or cricket against local teams. Those gentlemen looked after us extremely well, as far as that part of keeping us, extending ourselves went. So that, in essence, if we roamed, and looked at the countryside, and I think that

40:00 this came back to me later on when I realised that I didn't know what I had been roaming around. My grandparents had established a very good sheep farm, from nothing. Great grandfather bought a few blocks and probably sold fruit and vegetables into Ararat. Grandfather continued to

40:30 acquire land, until, when he died, he had a lot of land, but he had 11 children. So not much came to my mother out of even shares. I could spend time out there. One of my aunties had a farm, where I was always welcome to go and stay. And the home farm, well that was open house. With Grandmother and Grandfather, with a house of

41:00 their own. And their son, who was managing the farm on the big house then. And that was, I learnt a lot about the countryside. And later on when I was doing topographical mapping. I think the time I'd spent at wandering around the country, gave me appreciation of what you could learn from a map if you used your skills. Much the same as it did apply to the air force.

41:30 **Could I just pause you there, because we are at the end of the tape, and we'll just change.**

Tape 2

Note: Audio interference throughout Tape 02

00:30 **Now, I wanted to ask you. Did your parents split up at some stage?**

Did they split up? I don't think they split up. I think they may have been split up. There was a mysterious time when my stepfather was absent for eighteen months, during which time I think he was probably incarcerated for the debts he'd acquired up in the Mallee. I

01:00 think that caught him. He must have owed a fortune there, because he bought horses, and cultivators and harvesters on time payment. And car. And I think he did some time. It was never talked about. He just wasn't there, and we lived on our own. I had a cream round. I used to buy cream

01:30 from a dairy in Port Adelaide. Put it into small tins, which I'd purchased. Ride round on my bike on Sunday, and deliver it to people who had pre-ordered it. So it wasn't a gambling on with my money. Because I didn't have any. And most of that went into the household. I forgot now how much

02:00 I had. But it was appreciable in those times. The profit on the cream, buying it wholesale, and retailing it, was quite high. It was well worth doing for a boy of 13, 12 and 13. I then had to sterilise all those things. Each week I'd pick up the money, and the tin from the week before, and I had to sterilise those

02:30 tins, and sterilise the cream drum I took to Port Adelaide, and came back. I think I sold a couple of gallons of cream every Sunday morning. I don't know what else I did on Sundays except sold cream. I did go to the Baptist Sunday School there, because they had the best Sunday school picnic. That was what influenced me to go to the Baptist church.

Were you parent's religious at all?

03:00 No, not that I can think of. Just an odd day at the beach. No.

So for yourself. You kind of swung between the Baptists and the Rechabites?

No, I was Church of England in Ararat. Oh, the Rechabites was nothing to do with religion, although they were all Methodist men that were running it. But it was just a. They said they wouldn't

03:30 let alcohol touch their lips. I didn't read it as a religious think. Again they taught us skills. They taught us things they knew. They took us out to sports. They kept us occupied. Both that and the Baptist church were very good for, I suppose you'd say, drawing me out in other areas, other than the religious side.

04:00 Then you pointed into religion. When I came to Melbourne to work, I boarded in Albert Park. I went twice on Sunday nights to Saint Silas's church, near the railway station. And not a soul spoke to me. The vicar didn't say, "Good evening, how are you?" Nobody welcomed me in that church.

04:30 And I have not been to a church since, except for those ceremonious occasions, when you have to go now. I had been, quite deeply involved in the church, as a young man growing up in Ararat. And believed in what I was doing. But when I saw what it was like in the city, I just gave it away completely, which is one of the parts

05:00 of my character. I came to admire the padres I met in the air force. Possibly not from their religious aspects, but from the things they did for us. I could go on now, but it's quite out of context about the padres?

Yes, let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.

No, but still, that was all part of my religious background.

05:30 **Tell me. During the Depression, what did you notice of the effects on the community as a whole? Did you see people really hard up, and perhaps some of the swagmen [itinerant worker] from the city, or sustenance workers?**

In Ararat, we were on the main road from places west of the city,

06:00 and there was a constant trail of swagmen going through Ararat. My aunty could afford to put them up, and when she did, I'm sure they knew, and they passed the word along. "When you come to Ararat, the house behind the big hedges in the street will give you something to eat, and a little parcel to go on with". And she had a constant stream of swagmen cutting wood, or digging a bit of a garden, and things

06:30 like that. So I was aware of these people that had, I assume, less than we had. We mixed with people that didn't have clothes. They were very peculiar these poor people. I once had the go to put my name down for a free pair of boots. And when I got it, they wouldn't let me keep them. They said, "We're not living on charity Reg, we're looking after

07:00 ourselves". "You'll have to take those boots back". Now, it was a mentality of the day. You were going to fight your way through it.

Did you have boots of your own?

Mainly. Yes, yes. I wasn't barefooted in the Mallee, where it was a delight to run through the sand. Not because I didn't have boots, but most of the children who went to the school up in the Mallee, didn't wear shoes at all.

07:30 I can't remember what it was like on a frosty mornings. There were heavy frosts up there. We didn't have enough water to wash our food. We didn't have enough water to wash properly. I suppose they got clean somehow. Poor people around us. You see people had vegetable gardens, and the people that I knew all knew somebody that had a

08:00 cow. For instance, my Aunty always kept a cow. And I was always traipsing up to her place for a billy. For either skimmed milk, when she didn't have a calf to feed. Or milk, and a little bit of cream occasionally. I don't know whether we paid her for it. I assume we didn't, because she just had it going to waste.

08:30 I don't think that in the country town of Ararat, we crossed paths with anybody that were on the what I'd call the real poverty, starving level. In South Australia there were more. Others that depended on the vouchers for food that they got, as a form of sustenance or dole. And

09:00 unless they went and bought vegetables straight away. Fruit and vegetables and groceries that were wasted on other things. Legacy was a great help to me in Adelaide. I used to go into the Legacy club and met fine gentlemen in there who alternatively took us to the gymnasium one night a month. And the library

09:30 studying another night a month.

When you say 'us', you mean you and your sister?

No. My sister was too young. She had a legacy father later on, in Ararat, but not in Adelaide. They took us to educational jaunts, like factories and things like that. But the legacy club was always a great background in my young life.

10:00 Even in Ararat where the legacy father used to take me and talk to me like a father. It was very good.

How did a legacy fit in with your own parents?

My stepfather had no idea of being a parent.

Your stepfather?

Oh, my mother felt the loss of my father badly. And she thought that my sister and I needed

10:30 a father figure. And somebody to keep us. And she made this most this most unfortunate marriage, which she stuck to till he died. And it was just a burden on us, rather than being a help. And all he knew was work. He'd work, and work and work. But unfortunately he never turned it into the

11:00 area that would have made them money. He usually worked until he needed to buy something on hire purchase, which eventually took all his money. And instead of having money, he was simply paying income on his purchase, or else they took it back. He had no idea of money. We used to grab his money from him, spend it for what we needed.

11:30 But, not grab it. Get it from him as soon as he got any. But he was the most marvellous worker. He used to loaf off Christmas Day. He wouldn't do anything Christmas Day. The rest of the year he would do nothing but work. I can quote an instance in Colac where he was share farming, and he worked and worked, and planted a pea crop. And dug it over. And he

12:00 had 20 acres of peas, which were worth something like 25 to 30,000 pound. And it disappeared overnight in a frost. Now, if he'd worked for somebody else, he'd have had wages over that time galore. But, oh no, he had to work for himself. And it was his inability to manage finance for himself that kept us so poor.

12:30 **Having your father die when you were so young. How did that affect you?**

Sense of loss. It isn't great when you are seven. I don't think, for me, it was any. He just wasn't one

13:00 of us. And I think that was because he hadn't been home. He was very adventurous chap. He bought a Ford car in 19.., A T-model Ford in 1928. He didn't live to enjoy it of course. But they all thought he was mad to spend his money on a T-model car. He was only home at the weekend, and the

13:30 few times he was home, he'd take us out in the country. And his aim was to come home with two rabbits from his shotgun. A little bit of firewood to keep us going, and some gum tips to put in the front room, to decorate the front room. So that, yes, he came home on the Friday night. He was dirty. He spent most of the time having a bath. He didn't drink.

14:00 He'd garden. Kept the house. And made things in his workshop. But really he didn't have time to be a father, so that he suddenly wasn't there, that was all. His income wasn't there. My mother had people

coming into lunch. People who had lived in the country came in to work in the shops and little factories in Ararat. And came to her to have lunch. Mainly relations. And that sort of kept us going.

14:30 Plus a little bit from the superannuation.

So they would give your mother some money for lunch?

Yes. And then she married this gentleman.

What knowledge did you have of your father's involvement in World War I?

Except for when he told me, and he did have a cough. And he'd say, "This was

15:00 caused by gas in the war son". And he'd heave, and you could see his chest working. He was an ANZAC [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps], which he had some wonderful stories to tell. And then he switched to the pioneers, where I think he learned his carpentry, and his woodwork skills. And he was also in France, where he told me he was suffering frostbite. But he didn't talk

15:30 about it very much.

Did you go to Anzac Day marches with him?

In Ararat, I marched on Anzac Day as a child. In Adelaide I marched as a child, wearing his medals. In Melbourne, when I came down to work, I didn't, because in the main

16:00 we had pushbikes which we rode 120 miles from Melbourne to Ararat. So at the weekend, we could live at home, because the place where I boarded wouldn't feed us on Sundays, being the stoutest Methodist you've ever seen. They didn't cook on Saturday. No matter of work was done on a Sunday. On the Sabbath, I'm sorry. I'm talking about the Sabbath. So we had to go home. We had to feed ourselves. We would have had to

16:30 go out and buy whatever we could, on what little we had. So that most holidays we were home. No, I don't think I marched in the Ararat march after I came to work.

When you marched as a boy, was that through the encouragement of Legacy?

Oh, I'm sure it was, yes. Some of the little ceremonies in the Legacy club was such as to

17:00 remind us of the loss of the all men. Because every child there had lost their parent, lost their father. And the going down of the sun ceremony was very moving to some of us sometimes. I think we missed our fathers. My sister and I missed our father when we realised that we didn't have anything like the same person.

17:30 No, I mustn't digress, you'll growl at me. But, he brought out a wife and two daughters before he met my mother. And one daughter died, and the wife took her daughter home to Britain to live with her mother, and left him out here. Now whether he was ever divorced when he married my mother, I don't know. I've never been asked, don't

18:00 know any different, one way or the other.

So, given the ceremonies you mentioned, and I guess the encouragement from Legacy. What sort of things did you hear or were told about World War I? What did you know of what happened there?

From Legacy, not as much as

18:30 I possible heard from my mother, who had extensive scrapbooks she kept of the newspaper cuttings, right through the war. Fascinating that was for a boy to read that. "Who was that Mum?" and she'd say, "That was someone I was very keen on". And this was what influenced her. I'm sure she'd lost a sweetheart there.

19:00 You must remember that she was brought up on a farm, and went to a country school, the same as I did, which was just outside their farm gate. And the people she met with were only these young servicemen of the farming area, all around her. So that all she knew were all these crop of young men that went off to World War I. It was of them that she had

19:30 cuttings of their death, or their happier moments, or their loss, or a list of casualties on which their name appeared. And she'd tell me about these. She didn't know the conditions they suffered. Somewhere I have some letters from my father, who was a man of few words. And he'd talk about frostbite. He'd talked about coming off Gallipoli

20:00 Back to the hospital at Lemnos. He'd talked about, "I haven't seen my brother since I've been over here". But they were really, "I am well, and I hope you are too" letters. They were not the sort of letter I wrote home, which there is a box full of them over there. I wrote to my mother every day, while I was away.

20:30 Which was both good and bad, because she knew that she was getting a letter every two or three days.

But when there was delay, she suffered agonies, wondering what had happened to me. And sometimes there was a fortnight. If an aircraft was lost or something, and a gap in the mail, she imagined all sorts of things from the distance. How did I digress into that?

You were talking about the letters that your

21:00 **mother had. They were different from the ones that you had wrote.**

They were written on tiny little bits of paper, from the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] hut, somewhere in France. "Frostbite's bad, I'm having it treated". "Still in the trenches", "I'm looking after myself". "I don't want Gerry to get me". I wasn't allowed to mention

21:30 what he was actually doing. From having read it up, he was always building duck boards, and trenches, and things for the infantry to use and shelter in, in France. So that I knew things were. A crop of young men that my mother had lost, not the actual conditions over there.

So given

22:00 **this is quite extensive knowledge, compared with a lot of the chaps that I've spoken to, who didn't really know a lot about what happened in the First World War, when they were young. What was your impression of it? Did you think of it as a heroic time, or a miserable time? Grim and terrible?**

I don't have to

22:30 separate it into two place parts. I think all these people had gone. You forget as you get older, that all of my antecedents that I knew, referred to Britain as 'the old country'. Grandfather talked about it as the old country. Grandmother talked about it as the old country. I thought Britain was the old country.

23:00 Uncle Joe and Uncle Ely, who came out on the boat with my Great Grandfather. And I visited them. All talked about the old country. "This is better than the old country, Reg", they'd say. "It's a wonderful place". But the old country's where we come from. They felt they were still part of Hertfordshire, in Britain. I think these people who were brought up, and remind, they

23:30 were all children of these people. The migrant relations were all children of people who had come out with their father, and made a way in life. And I think they owed a debt to Britain. I don't know why, because they had come out as paupers. But I really thought those men were going to the war to fight for their country, and their home country.

24:00 Not quite the same in the Second World War.

Well how did you feel growing up about the idea of Empire? Or did you feel a British subject? Or did you feel like an Australian?

No, I don't think I turned into Australian until probably when the time when I learned the difference, during the war. I don't think I turned into an Australian then, because our step-father was a dyed in the wool [stubborn]

24:30 Pommie [Englishman]. And he thought that Pommie couldn't lose at cricket or football, or the war, or anything. He was one of the Englishman's worth ten of any other race.

And so by and large, that's how you felt also?

Yes, I think so. I don't. I thought the queen was our queen, or the king was our king.

25:00 King George the fifth. I thought he was our king. I can remember going to the races in Newmarket in Britain, and the queen walked past me, just the same as you are talking to me now, from a couple of yards away. And while her entourage was all done up in silk stockings. Oh she was Princess Elizabeth then of course. In silk stockings. She was done up in AWA [RAWA – Royal Auxiliary Women's Army]

25:30 uniform, with coarse grey woollen stockings, that all the AWA's wore. She didn't have one hint about a uniform, except that it fitted her. That made it any different from what any women on the services were wearing. And I thought she was marvellous to appear like that, when all her hangers on where done up like a dogs dinner. I'm a great one for running

26:00 up channels. Go on.

Feel free to digress now. That's okay. We're here to get those stories.

I'll put him to sleep at one stage, because I'm not going up and down when I talk. And I know that I should vary my sounds.

No, you're doing fine. Don't worry. Now I'd just like to

26:30 **get onto your work history. What year did you join the lands and survey?**

On the 5th of May, 1937.

And how did you come to be working at the Lands Survey department? It was a fairly good posting

To join the public service was split into two or three pieces. Professional, clerical and

27:00 I forget what they called the other less qualified section. To get into the administrative area, you had to do a competitive exam in connection with the leaving certificate, which I didn't put in for, because I was working with my Legacy father, the engineer. He was teaching me drafting, and a little bit of trigonometry.

27:30 And took me out occasionally in his truck when he had to look at a culvert in the country. And he said, "Well you've got some skills". And he sent me down to a politician that he knew, who took me over to the lands department and said, "He's a chap that's done some training". Now that would be pretty unique. And they were taking on three people, and I was one of the three that were taken on in May,

28:00 1937. Because I was useful to them straight away, in the most minor jobs. But the lands department at the time, set out to train their junior draftsmen to the highest possible standard as they could. Which meant, of course, that inevitably, they lost half of them to other people, because

28:30 other people would recruit them without having every trained them. Well that was great. And later on, when it became my role, I was told that it was accepted that I had some budget, because I was training draftsmen for the public service, not only for us. So they accepted that as one of our roles. So that I was a bit of a ready-made material for

29:00 them, thanks to the time I'd spent in the backroom of the shire at Ararat. Drafting was so different in those days, where everything was done by hand. Every stroke on a map, or on a plan, was your own writing, at various stages. And the lands department required the finest possible printing you could do. So that probably

29:30 for the first four months, even though I had some background, we did nothing else but practice pot hooks and beautiful printing.

Now, being 1937, what did you know of events in Europe, and the war that was going to come?

It is hard to know. But I know, I felt

30:00 very unhappy when the prime minister, Bob Menzies, came home from Europe and said, "Hitler was one of the greatest men he knew". I knew I disagreed with that vigorously. Now I don't know how I'd acquired the background to feel that way. I know that I hated Bob

30:30 Menzies when he sold our, and rightly so when I think about it. When he sold our scrap metal to Japan, and became known as Pig Iron Bob. I resented that. I thought that was our assets he was selling to them. So that wasn't a political feeling, it was a practical feeling that he was wrong. There was something wrong in the world.

31:00 How I acquired that I don't know, because we were studying surveying two nights a week at the working mans college, which had grown to the be the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology now. Then, you had to be working to go there, like a technical school. I don't know how I knew that there was something wrong in the world that would need correcting.

Did you,

31:30 **were you aware of some of the changes in Germany towards laws regarding the Jews? Or Hitler's move into Czechoslovakia and Austria?**

No, I think I was far more concerned with the Nazi advances into sedate land and Austria. I had read 'Mein Kampf' [Hitler's political manifesto] by that time.

32:00 Now, whether I was old enough to read the sinister aspects of it, I don't know. But that would have been one of the things. His land grabbing really upset me. His lack of acceptance of the borders and rights of the surrounding countries, rather than the anti-Semitic nature of what he was doing. I don't think I knew.

32:30 **What did you think of Mein Kampf?**

I don't think I appreciated it. I don't think I was worldly wise enough to know what was going on.

What did you think of Mein Kampf?

Oh, cut it out. I read it in 1938, or '39, or something, and I don't remember.

Did it have any impression on you?

Oh, it must of done. But I don't remember it. No, I'm sorry.

OK.

33:00 **What did you know of communism at that time? Were you aware of communists in Australia?**

I had this most simplistic knowledge, that they wanted to possess nothing and have everything shared. But really I knew nothing about it,

33:30 any more than the various principles, no.

But did you see any communist activity, marches?

Not in Ararat. When we came home to the city, I suppose yes, we saw them talking, and listened to them talking on Albert Park, in the square, every Friday night. In the orators corner in the parks. We had no money, so we could go there on our weekly ticket, and wander around

34:00 and listen to them. Yes, we went there, and thought they haven't got a very good. We didn't like what they were saying. We didn't think it was sound. Yeah, three of four of us would wander around there Sunday afternoons, and listen to all the people. And I can remember then, saying, "Oh this is way out, this is not for me". Not in detail.

34:30 **Can you remember where you were when war was declared?**

I heard the newspapers boys, walking up Kerferd Road, Albert Park, at about ten o'clock at night, singing out, "War, special, Menzies", or whatever they called, that's what it would have been. And people going out in their pyjamas to by a newspaper.

35:00 So yes, I was in bed at Kerferd Road, Albert Park. And I got up to read the paper.

How did you feel about what had happened?

What does this mean to me? And I said I'd let the militia take it's course. That's what happened. I think we had known about Chamberlain [Prime Minister of England]. I think we thought that was all pretty weak, and not the right

35:30 thing. I'm sure we did. Because my stepfather said, "No, this is not right", "We ought to get in and knock them over". But he would have cleaned them all up in no time. I was sounder than that. But I thought I would just let it take its course. I had no intention of enlisting any further than I had done in the militia. Well I was in it.

At what point, in what year had you joined

36:00 **the militia?**

Would have been 1938. I was in it for about 12 months, before war was declared. We wore putties. That's how historic it was. Around and around the legs. You had to wear these putties. Unless you were meticulous, they fell down around your ankles.

So tell me about the militia? What sort of things were you doing then?

36:30 Well I have touched on guarding the oil companies, which was a knee jerk by the government to use these people. I'm sure it was to get us involved, and to practice in controlling our people. But the major thing that, two things that I did in the first phase of the militia proper, was the establishment of the Mount

37:00 Martha camp, where I learnt that a corporal was a group of seven men who didn't sit on a log and watch them do it. But the corporal worked with them, was part of the team, not the king of the mob, sort of thing. The way to get work done was

37:30 to share it. See what they were doing. Know what they were doing with this tea tree, and how they were cutting it right down, and not leaving dangerous spikes, and things like that. As we were taught as we went along. We had to put up ablutions. I don't. I think I must have been too tired to remember. But I'm sure we must have slept in some form of tent down there, but I don't remember anything until we cleared the tea tree and put up all these tents in

38:00 tent lines. And then we had company lines with tents. Across the road from us was the Scottish Fifth regiment of the militia. I learned to march behind bagpipes there, but they were clearing their campsite. Ad they just took shape to get together, and then more people were recruited to come down and join us in those camps. And there were continuous camps from the foreshore

38:30 right through to Point Nepean Road, which was about 6 miles inland at that time. Baulkham it was known as. It then became known as Baulkham Camp. The inland part. We learned a lot about manoeuvring these, probably unsuitable people, because they

39:00 hadn't joined from any altruistic motive. It was just a good thing to do. We attacked places. We defended places. I learned a lot about moving through country without being seen. I don't know that it did any good, because I never commanded any people. Then the call-up came, and

39:30 we had full companies. We had people everywhere, and the whole battalion was at full strength. I was still fairly naïve and pretty frightened, but the thing was not to show it and try to control your little section. As in later on, be friends with every member of your section. At the same time, having them under your control. I think I learnt that

40:00 down there with the militia, so it did me some good.

When you were still in the militia, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour [United States Naval Base]. Is that right?

Right.

Can you remember exactly where you were when that happened?

Nope.

Can you remember your reaction to it?

Yes, I thought it was

40:30 an act. I can remember reading in the papers about the Japanese ambassadors who were talking to America all the time. In weeks before that trying to come to some arrangement. I didn't quite know what about, but I knew that they were talking. And suddenly whilst they were talking, I knew they had played this low trick of sneaking in behind the

41:00 Ambassadorial approaches, which they shouldn't have done when that was going on. I knew that was a whole horrid thing to do, but I don't remember when it happened, or where I was. I know where I was, I was down in the camp at Mount Martha, but I don't remember what I was doing.

Had it occurred to you that this was going to change things radically, for Australia?

I knew

41:30 that Australia was going to be involved in the war immediately, and that's why I tried to get a clearance. I wasn't at, I was working. I wasn't at the camp. They had called me back to the lands department.

Actually I'll pause there, because we are right at the

Tape 3

Note: Audio interference at start of tape, stops at approx 03:04:43

00:31 **Alright, so where we left off is 1941. You are a 21 year old and I'd like to ask you now; why you decided to enlist for the survey corps?**

Two things. One, had I thought that the

01:00 reserved occupation I was in, justified keeping people out of the war. I felt it was just a waste that I wasn't doing anything for anybody. We were mapping areas in western Victoria, because we had the information. Now we weren't mapping areas in the northern parts of Australia, where there was no good mapping available. Where there

01:30 was the chance that it could have come in useful, and it did of course. But as for doing something down near Portland and Hamilton, I thought was just stupid. So I had had enough of that. I was 21 and I didn't have to ask my mother. I felt that if I had to do something, I wanted to do something different. The call of adventure

02:00 of flying appealed to me. You must remember that I grew up in Ararat, when if an aircraft landed at the racecourse, we took the afternoon off, and all ran down to touch it. It was a phenomenon that you wouldn't dream of. "Air aircraft on the racecourse". And down we'd go. I grew up at the time when Hinkler was making

02:30 records, when people were, Anderson was lost, looking for Smithy. Smithy was every man's hero.

Sorry, can I just pause you for a moment.

I was saying that Smithy was a popular hero. Hinkler was a hero, the men, Melrose were flying around Australia, making records, were heroes. There was something about being in the air that was attractive. And

03:00 also that it was a challenge, and I wanted to do something different. I did not want to apply what I'd learnt in the lands department to the war effort. Now this was just, I felt that it was an opportunity for a young man to do something different, to learn new things, rather than go and do what he was doing every day of the week in the lands department. So that's why

03:30 I applied for release for aircrew. Not being aware that the department would just give me a release, providing it was aircrew or a survey regiment, and then immediately ring the survey regiment and say, "Grab this bloke, he's good quality", which was what happened. And it possibly was, because I was

quite adept at general

04:00 rough sort of surveying. I was quite good at drafting. I could draw a map of where the sounds we were trying to locate was. We used to go around in this artillery survey regiment, letting off lumps of gun cotton, which would go boom. And then we'd have two widely separated sounding things, picking up the sound. And by the differentiation of the

04:30 time of arrival, they would be able to plot on a map, where the enemy guns allegedly were. Not this was Boer War stuff. We were far more enlightened than that, and there was no wonder that they disbanded it. We were located on the edges of the Sandown racecourse. We use to run around the Sandown racecourse for exercise when it wasn't a racecourse. It was an abandoned racecourse at that time. We were at

05:00 Albert Park. The train used to stop. If somebody gave the driver a packet of cigarettes, he'd stop at the Sandown racecourse siding, and let us off on the last train at night. So to save us a long walk across the country. It was nicely situated. Nothing wrong, the officers were all good at their craft, but their craft was not of any use. That was the trouble. One thing they did

05:30 was calibrating artillery, the 25 pounder's. Setting the sights, and adjusting the sights, so that they were accurate. But there was very little work of that nature, so they just withered on the vine, and then, as I say, just disbanded. And few of them went into the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. A few of them were just discharged, back to

06:00 civilian life. And those of us that had shown a preference for the air force were collected up by the officer who came round to see us.

Can I ask you, on a slight tangent, the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. Did you notice any distinction in class, in terms of the RAAF. Do you think it was more

06:30 **upper class chaps, or was it right across the board, allsorts?**

That depends on what time, what part of it are you referring to? Are you referring to recruitment, later on, or Britain?

I guess just generally.

Generally then in Victoria. Lets put it that way.

07:00 Aircrew showed a tendency to want to recruit people from public schools, because a greater majority of them had reached a standard that they wanted for easy assimilation into flying. I

07:30 think that by the time I got into anything more than training, many officers had been promoted because of their abilities, rather than who they were. And the thing, the preponderance of the public school types was decreasing rapidly.

08:00 I think that people such as myself, who had a government school background, became the majority. Would make just as good officers as anybody else. So that in my time I think the scale was tilted slightly from

08:30 the readymade aircrew type, historical aircrew type of Biggles [fictional aviation character in books], and that sort of thing, to the practical ones. And the scales swung in favour of what they could get. Bear in mind that you are asking a question like, such as, when I joined the air force you practically had to

09:00 have had matriculated. You had to have a very good leaving certificate, which may not mean anything to people hearing me, if this is every heard. Or matriculation, which was entry into university. Before they'd even consider you. And by the time I finished, they were taking people by necessity. With far lesser educational qualifications and

09:30 doing what they called the 'twenty lessons', which was a series of things they could do in their local primary school to bring themselves up to the entry standard for aircrew. Because it was testing. I mean, you went in and you had to learn navigation in two months. You had to have some trigonometry. You had to have some mathematics. You had to have the knowledge of geography, to look at the map, and say, "Well, that's a hill, and that's a valley",

10:00 And read contours. It was a crash course, and unless you had the advanced background. It was not snobbery, or anything else, it was just the material you were recruiting. Later on, it is different.

Yeah, tell me, was there a contrast in Britain?

You are now talking to me about things that I found on the squadron as an Australian

10:30 officer, compared to the one side of the English officer system. As an Australian with a crew, and once I had a crew, and as captain of this crew I had to have a commission. And I continued to mix with them, the same as I'd done for

11:00 the previous 12 months in the sergeants mess.

But which way did the scales tip in Britain? Was there still more of an upper class preponderance?

I think there was a preponderance of English officers, on the squadron with me, who never saw their crew, except when they were going flying. And they'd ring their senior

11:30 NCO [Non Commissioned Officer], and say, "I want them down at the crew room at 08:00 hours". Now that would have never had occurred to me to say, "oh goodbye boys, I'll see you next time we're flying", "I'll see you at the next briefing". I would have said, "well I'll see you down at the tavern tonight, and we'll have two beers", no more. And this suited us down to the ground. Or occasionally I'd take my jacket off and go into the sergeants mess with them, which was

12:00 virtually a crime in the eyes of the squadron commander. I think I've taken that far enough. I might just touch on it again later on when we get flying..

I'm wrong to jump us on too far ahead. I just wanted to get some idea about that, because I'm curious. I heard from one chap that when he was applying

12:30 **to the RAAF they didn't, the only questions they asked him were, "What sport to you play?" And he replied, "Rugby and cricket". And he was in. And that strikes me that a lot of the chaps that were in the RAAF, were from public schools, or private schools, I should say.**

The Empire air training scheme committed Australia to showing, to producing, a certain number of people.

13:00 When their schools were smaller, they had the privilege of selecting on background. When the empire air training scheme came to, even my day, where every month there were 90 going into Somers. They didn't have that privilege.

13:30 They had to take anybody they could, that had enough background to observe their training. Later on, when the schools got more and more efficient, and they built more aerodromes. And aerodromes proliferated over southern New South Wales. Training aerodromes. They had to taken them, whatever they could get. Whether they had

14:00 more people scrubbed from training, I don't know. I don't know that figure.

Ok. So you did get into the RAAF, and firstly you went to South Australia, is that correct?

Yes, I went to South Australia as, not as aircrew, as an aircrew guard. That was to keep me occupied and

14:30 use me until I went into the training system.

And then from there you went to Somers. Can you tell me a bit about the training you did at Somers?

Healthy. Was across the creek from the sea. There was swimming on the banks of the creek. There was, what we called, the mad minute. There was an obstacle course which tried everybody

15:00 to their fullest extent. There was plenty of drill, and plenty of marching, so that the toughening up part of it, well the increased physical welfare of us, grew rapidly. We were living outdoors. We were in tents. And no matter what you say about tents. It was healthy

15:30 open air beside the beach. And we were up early, not as early as later on, but pure. We'd have breakfast, and having our first lessons by half past eight. And we'd do all the morning in classroom. And I can remember a couple of gentlemen who came to Somers air force

16:00 from University High School, and I used to drool on them. They were so good. They captured your imagination. One was the navigation teacher of course, and I was expanding all the time on what I already had. But he was brilliant. In interesting his people. He wasn't just a. He was devoted to what he was doing. And the other one also. He must have been teaching some form of mathematics, I don't recall

16:30 now. But then. And then we were learning airmanship, which we hadn't flown. We'd never flown. We were learning some form of airmanship, of safety in the air, and safety rules for when we did start. And then in the afternoons, we were always doing physical. Whether it was marching or square bashing or PT. Blokes running us around. And as I say, we had swims and this obstacle course.

17:00 All in all it really drew us out, and then some of the things we did in the final, closing stages. We'd go for a walk along the beach, and somebody would meet us with a meal, and some tents, and we'd sleep hard out on Point Leo, and things like that. It was really brightening us up no end. It was really good.

What's square bashing?

Drill, on the square.

17:30 Turn left, turn right, turn left, turn, halt. Yes.

How did you adjust to this type of strict discipline, and just the regimentation of it?

But I'd been doing it in the militia. So that it was the opposite end of the stick I was getting there. Instead of doing the drill instructor myself, I was the one receiving it. And of course it annoyed me to have to learn

18:00 how to, all the elementary drills and rifle exercises, which I'd been teaching. It did annoy me slightly, but it was all part of the. I mean, I could dream the happy hours away just doing it without any application of the mind there. Whereas if you got next to somebody who had two left feet, it was most annoying, marching behind them.

18:30 **I sense from you, from what you've said so far, that you were a very keen learner, and you really took to the mathematical side of things? Would I be right?**

I was a sort of a drinker in. Assimilator. I didn't have to study up to a certain stage. Hearing something, or being told something went in. If I wanted to go further I had to work much

19:00 harder to put another step in. But I think because of my mapping background, I was able to go further than the average trainee. Just automatically. But if I wanted to go even further, I had to work hard, just the same as I had in the first place. Learning was no difficulty to me.

Your first practical

19:30 **training on an aeroplanes, was on the Tiger Moths. What were your impressions of the Tiger Moths, when you first encountered them?**

Tiger moths were fun. These are the only aircraft I flew in, where the air was going past your face, and your head was out in the open, and you could feel that you were moving through the air, and you could sit over and watch the ground going slowly past,

20:00 at 70 miles an hour. And I don't know, 80 miles an hour. It was beautiful to know that you could get up a bit higher and do allsorts of aerobatics, and sometimes frighten yourself. It was great. If you weren't a bit frightened, you weren't flying properly. Because you had to be aware that there was a certain amount of danger all the time. You could be coming in and doing too

20:30 sharp a turn and stall it, and just drop it in sideways on a turn. There was the risk always there that a mistake could cause an accident. Not necessarily fatal, because the Tigers [Tiger Moths] were all canvas and struts and wires, and many people walked away from quite seemingly serious accidents in tiger moths.

21:00 It was the only time that it was fun. It was a joy. And I went back when we did some more in Britain. And we did a lot, as I might have mentioned. We did a lot of night flying on the tiger moths in Britain, so that we got used to looking for the type of lighting that led us into the aerodrome, when we were flying harder planes. But, if there were

21:30 enemy aircraft over the area where we were flying. Of course we'd be flying along the country were it's lit up, and suddenly it'll go black. We had no radio. We knew, that for some reason, they'd blacked the country out, and we had spots we'd had to go to at various sites, and circle. But even that was fun, doing a circle around a road intersection at night. It was fun until the lights came on. And then there came a time when they had to get us down.

22:00 And they put the lights on, and we knew we had to scuttle like mad and get down, because they would only be on for a while. Still fun. Flying in Britain with sleet and snow coming into you, in the open cockpit. Wasn't bad. It wasn't bad. You didn't mind, because you knew that we were going home, and there it was. We were encouraged to fly in Britain,

22:30 because the tiger moth aerodromes were run by private companies. And the more we flew, the more money they got, which meant that unless they got it they would have to close down. They wouldn't have been profitable. So they liked us to fly there. Tiger Moths were lovely.

Tiger Moths were something left over from the First World War though. How did you feel

23:00 **in, or what do you think was the intended use of these Tiger Moths?**

None. It was simply to teach us the elementary controls. And even though a Tiger Moth, some that was only pretend, we still had to do cockpit drills as if we were in larger, we would make a pretend of doing something, which

23:30 When you got into the other next twin engines was there. But in the Tiger, it wasn't necessary. The Tiger Moth would nearly fly itself if you didn't interfere with it. The trouble was we tried to make it do what we wanted. They didn't know. It was great. No, it was a development to a very, very safe and suitable for educational aircraft, from ones that

24:00 Gypsy Moths, and the other ones of the earlier years. They would have loved to have had Tiger Moths in the Great War, I'm sure.

After you were trained on the Tiger Moths, you then went to Point Cook, and worked on the Oxford's. Tell us about those?

The Oxford's in Australia

24:30 were a much more touchy aircraft than the ones I flew in Britain. The ones in Britain had a further piece of tail plane put on them, and made them much more stable. Out here they had a very high wing load, and if you did something, you were likely to have to pay with your life. Because they stalled and they didn't feel as at home as the

25:00 Avro Anson, which I never flew, but I flew in, and was allowed to touch the controls, and feel them. But it was very good training, in that you had to fly it properly. There were no mistakes. One of the saddest moments at Point Cook were when two Oxfords, with two trainees in each, ran into each other, and we had to bury them somewhere, and I was one of the pallbearers at the funeral. And

25:30 to carry a coffin amongst mothers and sweethearts, was a very sobering experience. It was a very, very touching. It had to be a touching occasion. Not only were they your mates, but you could see all the mourners around. And that was one of things that brought it home to us, that it wasn't a game anymore, it was serious. Just picking that up

26:00 lightly; losses in training were probably more than in operations throughout the air force. There were more people killed in training, than in the actual war.

Did you think you'd taken the whole business fairly lightly up until then?

Oh yes. It brought home, I mean everybody. We all agreed that burying these four blokes told us that it

26:30 was no longer a game. We were at stake as well. We could make a mistake long before we got to the war proper.

Were you, prior to that point, were you fairly daring pilot?

No. By the time I got to Oxford's,

27:00 I'd reached the stage where somebody had appraise me, and said, "This bloke isn't the daring do type". "He's not suitable for single-engined fighter aircraft." "Somewhere in his make up", which I was not aware, "Was a very responsible, serious, vain". Running somewhere there.

27:30 I don't know where they got it from, but they were probably right. Not often I'd say they were right, but this time they were right.

Were you disappointed not to be taken for fighter pilots?

No, I don't think so. I think some were. A lot of them were, because they were sort of madcap. I think

28:00 that if we got back to some of my background in the Rechabites, and in the churches I did go to then. In all of them, even as a youngster I was carrying some community good. I was teaching, or supervising, or doing something. I think it came, it goes right back to there. I didn't know it.

28:30 **So, I don't quite follow you. What do you mean? How did your disappointment or lack of it, relate to the Rechabites?**

Starting again, and I probably said it badly. Let me say that in the Rechabites I soon became a leader, or a captain of the cricket team, or a captain of the football team.

29:00 They divided them into tents, and I became the representative of the tent. I was carrying some small part of running the Rechabites. At Sunday school, I was soon selected to be a sunday school teacher, even though I talked to the boys about going out and catching rabbits, rather than religion. Because they went to sleep on you if you talked about religion. But I interested them

29:30 and led it all around hurly-burly from Rabbits back to perhaps to religion, but I don't know. It was there that the vicar asked me if I wanted to be an alter boy. And they must have seen some character, and built on it. And this part of the character must have been obvious at Somers, where we were graded

30:00 into light and heavy; or single and twin, or single and multi-engined aircraft. So it must have been obvious. And I think that's where I got the grounding. I don't remember being responsible for anything at schools. I was never a prefect. I was never a captain of any team, or anything. So it must have been in those aspects.

So you felt proud to be recognised as a responsible

30:30 **person, rather than allotted with this little bit crazy fighter pilots?**

No, it wasn't pride. I don't think I knew it. It's only later on. I don't think I knew that I was more sober than others. Sober? Not alcoholically sober. Sober.

I know what you mean, yeah. Alright. How

31:00 **long were you at Point Cook for?**

Four months. Two months when you really learnt to fly the Oxford, and another two months where we did night flying and cross country's, and low level flights, and things like that, drawing us out. We'd go around from one township, say Portland, to

31:30 Hamilton, to Ballarat and home. And things like that on cross-countries. We'd been told we were to take off at Point Cook and we were to try and reach the Hanging Rock racecourse, without being caught by the air observers core. And we would just try and fly as low as we could. And this was all sensible wartime training, for wartime flying.

32:00 So that was Point Cook was divided into two sections. Learning to fly, and learning to use your ability. And when you'd learnt to use your ability, you received your wings. During all that time I had never told my mother that I was flying. We had to wear a white flash on our cap, but I had mine on press-studs, so that when I got 300 yards up the street from home, I'd take it off. Whether she knew or not I don't know.

32:30 But I didn't think I could heap any more worry than necessary, so I didn't tell her. And whether she thought I was doing maps as an extension. I let her think that she did, but I didn't tell her I was flying. It wasn't until I was on, oh she had to know when the wings went up, that's right. When I came home on that leave and I had the wings up. That was the first she knew of it.

What was her reaction?

33:00 Oh, she had a bit of a sob. Her reaction would have been worse had she known the morning I left home I was going off, and she wasn't going to see me for two and a half years. That would have been worse than ever, but she had no idea. It was just, "ta da", like going into town and back.

So you had no warning that you were going to be sent over?

I did not know. I left kit at home. I think they sent a truck out to get some of my gear.

33:30 And that was when they wouldn't have told her. They wouldn't have been allowed to tell her. It was all in a heap there. Otherwise they would have had to issue me with another lot of packs and things, and kitbags. I just took a haversack in there. I thought I was going for the day. I had no idea. I mean, really the first time I woke up and we were trying to sleep on the train, and we get to Albury, and we had to change trains. It was the first time I really knew.

34:00 **So tell us about your trip. You were sent to the US [United States] first off. How did you get there?**

Over night train to Sydney, and then out to an initial training school, called Bradfield Park, which is in one of the northern suburbs. And we were there for,

34:30 I think, four nights. But we didn't worry. And then we went into town, and wondered around. And put ourselves up at some YMCA, or something or other, than go back to camp. And we had to ring up to make sure that they didn't want to talk to us. And one day they said, "Yes, you've come in and see us". And we'd no sooner got there, then four days, they put us back on buses onto a vessel, which had been

35:00 the USS Washington, which was the premier United States liner, on the Pacific run. It was known as the USS Mount Vernon. Mount Vernon. And that was a bit of a culture shock changing to the

35:30 American naval idea of two meals a day. The ship was full of food, which under their regulations they had to throw out when they got back to San Francisco. Because it was no longer healthy. Everything was thrown out. We had stuff, ice cream and everything forced on us, to get rid of it. The meal was served on a tray with

36:00 indented recesses, all three courses. And you couldn't tell which was sweet, which was salad. We knew what was meat. But some of their, what I would call vegetable salad, was nearly fruit salad. Getting used to their diet. We were only five or six days, but getting used to their diet was a little culture shock.

36:30 And another greater one even, that awaited us when we got to, I don't remember any eating on the train across the states. The must have just brought it around and given it to us, but we got straight off that onto a train. So within hours we were off across United States within hours of landing in San Francisco. Probably the first things I can remember there

37:00 were the sizes of the goods trains, that they ran on those American lines. And trying to talk to the negro servants on the train, who were frightened to be seen talking to us. It was ingrained into them, "No sir, I can't do that". "Don't make your own bed sir, it's my job". We Australians, who were in these beds that

37:30 fold up in the roof, and they would not let us touch it. They wouldn't let us eat. They brought the food around. I can see it know. But no, we weren't allowed to help ourselves, or do anything. They were the porters. We were so unused to such inequality. It was hard for us to take. Really difficult. But that was five days, and we finished up at a camp called

38:00 Camp Miles Standish, near a place called Taunton, in Massachusetts. And I say we were quarantined

there. The food was pushed at us, but I couldn't see what, people gave me a pint a milk and a cantaloupe, and a packet of shredded wheat, and a pile of pancakes. The food was so different,

38:30 and better. Better than Australian standards, by far.

Well had you been eating well prior to leaving?

At Point Cook, yes. At Somers, the meat was frequently fly-blown, because of the time of year we were there, and the broken screenings on the windows. The food at Point Cook was

39:00 probably poor standard, even if it wasn't blown. I mean at Somers. The food at Point Cook was quite a good standard, but we were pretty ravenous then, because we were flying early. In the second half we were catching a truck from Point Cook at about five o'clock in the morning having had

39:30 breakfast. And we drove down to satellite aerodromes down at Little River, and Lara. And the meal came down in a dixie [tin cup] for us, at about 11 o'clock. Then we were back for an evening meal, by the same trucks. So we were pretty hungry, having been up early. And when you're hungry, anything tastes nice. But I think the Point Cook food was very good for a big mess. Yes.

40:00 **So did you adjust to the American food?**

Oh yes, I was very adaptable to anything. After all we were there for six weeks. That was a long time, and it was good food. It wasn't adjusting. It was the idea that one couldn't tell what was salad, and what was fruit salad.

Great. Alright, well we might stop there.

Tape 4

00:35 I think I just got to Camp Miles Standish, where it was a delight to have a shampoo, because of course there were steam driven trains and coming over the mountains over in the US. There were two mighty engines on any train to pull it over the big ranges, which the size of the trains were

01:00 unbelievable to us Australians. 150, 120, 130 trucks in a goods train. We couldn't believe it. I don't remember the food on the train at all. I can remember the food at Cape Standish, which was delightful. We got leave, and I remember going into Boston and somebody came up to me and gave me a ticket for the premier restaurant in Boston, to go and have a free feed. And that was so nice that we went and paid

01:30 for the next lot. But that was a few days we stayed with an American family. But really we didn't see much of them. He was working and she was out. And oh, it was really only somewhere to go for a meal at night. We went to see a play called, 'Bringing up Father', at one of the premier Boston

02:00 theatres. And they gave us some special seats. And we didn't know what the word meant. Still don't. But we finished up in a box on the stage. We were virtually in the play. We were so close to the people. At intervals, people would come around the box and would want to talk to us. They didn't know what we were or what we were from or anything. You began to realise that Americans had never

02:30 heard of Australia. And particularly before the Pacific war, they didn't know the different know the difference between Australia and Austria. Those of us that could get scarlet fever, could have got it in a certain time lag from when we took the American soldiers with scarlet fever aboard in Sydney,

03:00 up till a certain time. And some people who were all given a scratch injection, and those that could show signs of it and hadn't, were declared free, and were shipped off to England. Those of us who could get it, who couldn't get it, had to stay on to

03:30 make sure they weren't carriers, and there were none of our contingent getting it. So we had to stay in Camp Miles Standish, out of contact with everybody, for 10-day periods. And when the 10-day period was up and we all hoped that nobody would get Scarlet Fever on the tenth day, because we had to stay another 10 days. Well when we finally got a clearance, we were taken by bus to New York, and onto the

04:00 Queen Mary. The size of the Queen Mary frightened us. It was so much of it. You could walk around and around those corridors for exercise, and you'd never know where you were, except that you had to watch your level. Our conditions were quite good, in that we had small rooms, divided to take four, which in peacetime would have taken two. And I considered that that was quite

04:30 luxurious for us, rather than some of the places where they had open areas with bunks crammed in. The Americans were sleeping in three shifts. And when they kicked somebody out of the cot, another lot got in for eight. They were eating in three shifts. And when one of our shifts started to eat, you would get on this queue. At the end of the queue. And when they started

05:00 to serve, the queue would be jogging to fill the tables, and people just sat down and ate. What came was American soldiers, with great cans of stew and loaves of bread, which were dumped on the table. We

helped ourselves and ate. But we had to get out of that mess place to make room for the other shifts. It was

05:30 healthy, tasty stew, every meal. I can't remember breakfast, what that was. But there was only an evening meal of course. There were two meals. There was a morning meal, so it must have been a cooked breakfast. You also wanted to eat your meal, because unless you got up on deck quickly, there was nowhere to sit. There were 25,000 people on the Queen Mary. We went a long way south,

06:00 to get out of the most dangerous zone. We travelled quickly, without escort. We weaved all the way, changing course, and weaving over the ocean. But I think they did 28. I know they did 28 knots by day, and 30 plus in the cooler area, cooler air at night, when the motors were more efficient. And at times, it rolled

06:30 enormously, because of the speed and going to this zigzagging manoeuvres. We didn't have time to know anything, except that we were subject to some danger from a lurking submarine. The Queen Mary took us on, and on a sodden Scottish day

07:00 not into a wharf, but into the Greenock harbour, where a ferryboat came and took us off. Still in drizzly scotch mist. And put us on a train.

Ok, I'll ask you to pause there. Ok, now, before we get to the Scotch mist area, I'd like to ask you more about

07:30 **America. When you arrived in New York, tell us about your experience? What went through your mind?**

We were in a bus with blacked out windows. And apart from where we scratched the blackout off, we couldn't see anything. We didn't know. Just knew it was New York. We had no idea where we were, up through bits of Connecticut.

08:00 Oh we did know, because we had maps and we could find our way around, but from looking outside we didn't know where we were. We couldn't see out. It was supposed to be an ultra-secret departure. The streets in New York, they couldn't see us or what we were. Only because we scratched little eyeholes could we see out at all. So that really the first

08:30 thing we came to was a hole in the steel wall, which was a hole in the walls of the ship that we entered. It wasn't until we got up on deck on the Mary [Queen Mary], we could look out and see the sky scrapers, and the size of the Queen Mary. Although we didn't see the size of the Queen Mary, because we were in it. But we knew we could walk round and round and round. And the meal queue was three times around, before you got to the dining room. It was so long.

09:00 So, of America, yeah we had wonderful sights on the train. We went up into Canada and past looking out, we could see the mists of the Niagara Falls. And the countryside from the train, but we didn't see America. We only saw an army camp, because we were just, the food was pushed in trucks and we had to go and get our

09:30 own food and serve ourselves, and things like that.

Now, I'm very, very interested in that story you said about when you came across the African American servants, and you said that that was an interesting experience for you, because you weren't accustomed to it. What about it, I suppose, knowing with Aborigines. I'm not sure if you

10:00 **grew up with any Aborigines in Mallee.**

No.

But, what did you find that was different about the Americans, at the time, to Australians?

Yes, well the porter had a little cubby room to himself, which I personally tried to go and sit and talk to him. And he wouldn't let me. He said, "I mustn't be seen sir,

10:30 talking to you". I said, "But we're coming to a town, would you give me some nuts and chocolate?" "Just leave the money there sir". And he did that for us. But he was frightened that someone would see me collecting it. Others got him to get grog for him of course, but that wasn't my predilection in those days.

11:00 I couldn't see how anybody could be frightened to let somebody else help them do something. It was so, it was demeaning to me to go along with him, and yet he didn't want me to go along with him. He was angry if we pulled our own bed down to help me. Pullman coaches there were, where your bed

11:30 folded up into the roof, and then you pulled a curtain and the whole passage through the carriage was a curtain, and you were hiding behind this curtain. And he had to climb up and make the bed for us. Now, I don't think I had ever had, I had had no contact with Aborigines at all, until my later travels, after birds and things.

12:00 So that it was just a straight shock, culture shock, out of nowhere. The other thing, of course, was that

they were very difficult to understand, with a Harlem New York accent, and speaking very quickly. But they could make us know that we weren't welcome talking to them, in case we were caught.

12:30 And he got into trouble. I didn't want him to get into trouble.

Were you curious about African Americans? About these servants? Where you curious to interact with them?

You mean was I furious about the whole thing? Curious?

Curious, yeah.

No, I was disgusted.

13:00 There was no other word for it. I was ashamed and disgusted that it went on. No, I just had this one example. It was not a curiosity. My experiences were restricted to one man on one train, for one week. And I was just ashamed to be part of it.

Did that make you reflect on Australian society in any way?

13:30 No.

Later on?

Later on. Yes. I had, I met many aboriginals in my later bird wanderings, and saw the conditions they lived in, and talked to them. But yes, I think that must have made me feel there is no way, in any way treat anybody like that man was. No way could I make them feel frightened to be themselves.

14:00 **Yes, it's fascinating. I'll probably ask you more questions about that a little bit later on. Now, when you were embarking on the Queen Mary, on your transatlantic voyage. Tell us about the submarine scares, and the threats that you had heard of, or experienced?**

Well, we thought that we would be in a convoy

14:30 And when we didn't have any escort, we had to ask about it. We thought that we would have a cruiser or a battleship in front of us, clearing the way. But they explained to us, and it was manned by American Navy personnel.

The Queen Mary was?

The Queen Mary was.

15:00 And they were quite happy to explain to us. Anybody that asked, what the circumstances were. And I think that we must note that Lord Haw Haw [German radio propagandist] did announce that the Queen Mary, with all those people, was likely to be torpedoed on this trip. Whether he did that every trip of

15:30 the Queen Mary or not, I don't know. But somebody was listening to Lord Haw Haw on their own little wireless. You've reminded me of something I forgotten ever since then. I took on board the Queen Mary quite a large box of Hershey's nut chocolate, and a couple of times I ate that instead of going for the meal,

16:00 because there was a little bit, degrading getting into this great long meal queue, and dashing around for stew. So we just made do with Hershey's chocolate. Oh and Red Cross parcels. We all got a Red Cross parcel with some food, and warm clothing. Things like that when we weren't aboard the Queen Mary. Now,

16:30 they said that, "Unless a submarine was right in front of us, at the speed the Queen Mary went, we were in no danger from submarines". Because it was so fast that if the submarine saw us, a: it couldn't catch us to get us within range. But if it was in front, directly on path, and the odds are very much against that, and it's a big ocean,

17:00 and they thought we were quite safe. It was all over so quickly. I think it was five nights and six days.

That was taking place during the. What year would that have been?

1942, late '42.

Late '42. Okay, so the wolf packs were still around.

It was still a good submarine, but the point is

17:30 that the convoys had to take more direct routes, because of the mixed collection of vessels, so they had to go on, more or less predictable routes, whereas the Mary was free to go as far south. And it did go a long way south, from the heat and the sunshine, and went way down past the canaries somewhere. Way down. Off the normal north Atlantic routes. Yes, yes, great half circle down that way.

18:00 A lot further.

I was curious why that ship was not sunk, because there has been so many other chaps who've

been on ships. There were sister ships like the Queen Mary that travelled up unescorted, because they were so fast, apparently.

That's right. We had no escort across the Pacific, but then at that time, I didn't know that over a hundred ships were torpedoed off the eastern coast of Australia, during

18:30 the whole war. I didn't know that there was such a reasonably high danger off New South Wales.

So there were no submarine scares at all for the Queen Mary on that voyage?

No. They weren't frightened at all.

Tell us about the ocean. What were you thinking about on your way to England?

On the way to England.

There must have been those memorable days where you had your pipe in

19:00 **your mouth and you were watching the waves, and you were wondering, "I wonder what's happening in England now".**

It had a lot of things for me to wonder about, because I really wanted to see the England that my great uncles, great grandfather, my grandfather. They were great uncles I think,

19:30 had all been talking about the home country and what a wonderful place it was. And I wanted to see. And then I had a stepsister there. And what is had in store for me, I don't think we really knew. I think we were just passing the time. We probably played cards, or read a book, or just sat in the sunshine. No, I don't think we sat there in fear and trepidation, or wondering what the world had in store for us

20:00 at all.

What was the weather like during that trip?

Oh wonderful. Yeah, it was warm and sunny, and whether it was huge seas that sent the Mary. Sometimes you felt that you were going to be rolled right out of your bunk on the biggest roles, but I think it was always on the zigs and the zags, rather than the weather that made us do that. Rapid change

20:30 of course, rather than weather. We could see the carvings in the woodwork from when the Mary had brought Italian prisoners of war out to Australia, and taken troops somewhere back.

21:00 We could see all that. A lot of the beautiful woodwork on the Mary had been spoilt. We went up, and I don't know what they had in their shops. It certainly wasn't duty free stuff. But we could see the beauty that had been the Queen Mary.

What was it like when you docked

21:30 **in Scotland?**

Again, we were not there long enough. It was light rain. We only wanted to get on the train. And then it was dark, so that our next impression was detraining in Brighton, in southern England, and walking through the rain to our big hotels. We were boarded. We were

22:00 billeted in the first instance, in the Grand hotel, for about a fortnight. And then we shifted. That was the one that later on, bombed by the IRA [Irish Republican Army]. And then we shifted into the Metropole, where four of us had a, quite a large

22:30 room overlooking the sea. And outside our window was a Beaufighter gun. And the very first night we were in Britain. German aircraft had the habit of sneaking up, rushing up to the coast, dropping a couple of bombs, and rushing out again. They were known as tip and run raiders.

23:00 And when the alarm went, the new contingent all grabbed their gas masks and their helmets and they rushed down to the basement where there were bomb shelters. But later on we came to realise that the damage their bombs were doing were isolated. Bad enough where they hit,

23:30 but if they hit you, they got you. And it didn't matter if you were in a shelter or not. So later on people didn't react to these alerts. The thing we knew most were about it was, that if the Beaufort guns started to fire after it, but I think that also frightened them into letting their bombs go and rushing away

24:00 Again. So our first taste of our first night, other than on a train in Britain, was a tip and run raid, which went on about one night in five, or something. The whole time we were there. I went to visit the same room about six years ago, and they told me it would have cost me 180 pound for the night. Where I had slept for nothing

24:30 all those years before. Here again, we had another eating shock. At four o'clock we were invited down to tea. And tea consisted of a cup of weak tea, and a bit of dry yellow cake, and bread with red or green jam.

25:00 Now, in the homes where I lived, tea was the evening meal, at six o'clock. We had another evening meal there at eight o'clock, which was called supper. We didn't know about this tea business at all. Later on I came to know it as a ceremony.

What were the English people like? How did they treat you

25:30 **all, generally?**

I don't think I ever met an Englishmen that wasn't helpful. Wanted to make me feel very, very welcome in Britain, whether it be. You rightly picked up that in those days I had taken to smoking a pipe. Tobacconists

26:00 would take you to heart, and find you something they had hidden under the counter, which they would sell you, rather than that which they had out on display. That's just one example that comes to mind. I went to stay with my stepsister. And I'm talking about English people now. I used to do some of the shopping for them. And they'd send me shopping.

26:30 And I say to the chap. I had to produce their ration card and perhaps some of mine, "I'd like three bits of bacon please". And he'd say, "Oh", he said, "We wouldn't eat that". "We'd just cut that off and throw it away". "Just a minute, just a minute". And they would produce better pieces for me. Not that much

27:00 better, but at least they had a bit of lean. They weren't all fat or anything. I'd go shopping to other places, where in the grocers shop you had to produce points. And I'd sneak up to him and say, "Look these people are putting me up." "Have you got anything that's not on points?" They'd help me with something. English

27:30 taxi drivers were exceedingly helpful, wherever we went. One of the great things that the English did for us; if we put our name down as wanting somewhere to stay, under a scheme run by Lady McDonald of the Isles. Various people throughout the country would ask us into their homes for a week,

28:00 and just put us up and entertain us. I went to one where the man was really the squire of the district. And it's there where I found out what English Tea meant. It was little sandwiches with a cups of tea. And it was a social occasion. Tea was just one of the highlights of the day. Supper was a very flash meal, but tea was one of the important parts.

28:30 I did this to a place near southern London. A man was a bank manager, and he could afford to entertain. Sometimes he had five Australians in the place. He was a cook, as a hobby, and he loved to go scouring the city and finding things for his guests. We could just ring up and say, later on,

29:00 "We've got a week off, can we come to you". And we could go and stay with these people. They went out of the way to feed us properly, and, oh, they made us honorary members of the local squash club. And we were there one riotous Christmas. It was just unbelievable. And they did something that I've always regretted that I didn't start here. On Boxing Day they put

29:30 over all the left over food and drink in a wheelbarrow, and went wheeling it around the streets. And you'd find wheelbarrows going in all directions, and descending on various houses. So the Christmas celebrations could go on in any house in the district. And all day Boxing Day people with calling in. And it was all unscheduled, and there was no holidays for them. There was nowhere for them to go. So they were home, and it was cold.

30:00 And I think that that was one of the great social mixing things I saw. Social mixing things. Yes, that's what it was. Making people of the district all meet each other on Boxing Day. It was great. It was only last year here that somebody down the street had a little afternoon tea for anybody that wanted to go. And that was reminiscent of that.

30:30 **What about the English women? A very important question there.**

Yes.

How did you and your colleagues socialise with them? What was their disposition towards Australian airmen?

A group of us, who joined up on the same day, here at Russell Street,

31:00 and went around to training schools together. Went over on the same boat together. And we decided that we would form ourselves into a group called 'The Ta Ta Club'. Meaning that sooner or later it was inevitable that we'd get shot down, and we went Ta, Ta's was our expression. We didn't expect to live through the war. We decided that we weren't' going to be

31:30 seriously entangled with anybody, because of our probable short life time, and all the sorrow that it would bring with us. So in the main, apart from at dances, where we danced with them, we had very little to do with women. Very little. Another thing of course, was on the stations, they were as good as men, the things they

32:00 were doing. So that they weren't sex objects. They were co-workers on the stations, as far as I was concerned. None of that group of Ta Ta people ever got entangled with women to any great extent at all,

the whole time we were there. We only lost one of the ten of us, which was incredible really. The most

32:30 closest contact we got, was when we were on these holidays, with these people in their homes. And they would ask people to come around and have tea, or stay for supper, or take us to a cocktail party, or something like that. But in the main we had little time for them, because we thought it was quite a different attitude to some of the

33:00 others, who just treated them like tools. But, no, we had little to do with them at all. So my attitude to them was, the ladies on the air force stations were so invaluable to us, so important to us. We, oh, no, I'm not going to go that far. I've answered your question.

What were you going to say?

33:30 Oh, it will come back if we get back onto the operational parts this afternoon.

If it's relevant to my question on women. We're speaking thematically as well. So it's okay, I'll draw you back to the point of the Ta Ta club later.

Well the most person, the person that I was most

34:00 devoted to, I had to share with my crew. When we were operating in particular, and the crew went to this squadron, as a group of seven, there was an old lady of 28. And we thought she was ancient. Not really. Adopted us for no unknown reason that we were nice to her one time when she was waiting on the

34:30 table for us. And thereinafter she would, any time we went flying, she'd be there to wave us off. She'd be there to greet us when we came back. She'd take us over to the mess, and because we'd been flying we were entitled to a meal of bacon and eggs. She'd personally cook our bacon and eggs, and bring it to us. She'd see if we had any mending or washing or

35:00 anything to do. She was great friends with us. If we were going out to the pub, we'd, she'd knew we'd only be having a couple of drinks, so she'd gladly come with us, knowing that she wouldn't have some stupid roaring Australian drunk to get home afterwards, or anything else. I guess that that was the lady that

35:30 the seven of us knew really well, and doted on. And she doted on us. And I can't remember her name now. Isn't that sad. I just don't remember her name. I can see her. She was a very attractive lady of 28. Old, as I say, because some of the crew were 19, and I was 22.

So, it was basically just a friendship to everyone. Nothing more?

Nothing more. No. Nothing more at all.

36:00 **Now. When you mentioned before about the Ta Ta club, you were saying that you had an understanding that your life expectancy under the circumstances was going to be short. Tell us how you knew that it was going to be short?**

It was a sort of fatalistic sort of thing. Fatalistic, that we really thought that it wasn't going to happen to you

36:30 but, nevertheless you were honest enough to know you were going to an area where one in five, even in my time, where one in five was lost. And I'd try to find the grounds for that belief.

Were you.

I'm trying to justify the fact that

37:00 I thought our lives were short. By the time I went into training, until the war finished, nine Lancaster's were delivered from one factory to the squadron I was on.

37:30 Until the end of war, eight of those nine were lost to enemy action, or failed to return. And the other one was transferred to another squadron. Of another, of the whole 85 that were manufactured in the time when I was in training in Britain, until the war ended.

38:00 Another 47 out of 85 did not get home from operations, while another 7 were delivered. That's realistic. We weren't frightened or anything. We were just accepting the fact, that the odds against us surviving until the end of the war, were pretty great.

Now, you were stationed with bomber command?

38:30 Yes.

And what was your expectation in terms of what you were potentially going to undertake in operations?

Well we have to look at the time I was operating. When I went onto the squadron, and they were doing night flights, which then stopped, because they didn't have to go at night; the losses were still up in the one in

39:00 five category. Your percentage of lasting ten operations, was very much against you. Once you got to ten and became experienced, you usually went on a long, long way. But the losses in those first ten ops, and that's about all I did, were very, extremely high. Except that by the time I got there again, we were concentrating on

39:30 artificial fuel refinery's and that sort of thing. And they were easier targets. So that the odds against being lost when I was operating, was probably about one in 20. Whereas at the time,

40:00 until the end of January 1945, was probably one in five. Just the same as all the war. So, I came in at the rag tail end of it. But I had these delays that stopped me getting into the other part. But only one of us was lost. He was lost on his thirty-ninth operation. He had another one to go.

I thought it was thirty operations?

No, because they were so easy, and in the end they put it up to forty. You see you could go over

40:30 and bomb a V1 [German jet-propelled rocket] site, and back home again, and do three in a day. And not get near anything. But we were along way ahead of where we ought to be in this. The ladies took us there.

That's okay. We'll come back. Ladies took you there. Well we've run out of tape unfortunately so we'll have to pause.

Tape 5

00:32 **Now before we embark on an operational sortie, can I talk about the Boomerang club in London?**

Yes.

Or, can we talk about that club rather?

The Boomerang club was one of the great welcoming establishments run by English ladies, and Australian, under the basement of Australia House which housed

01:00 all the commonwealth bank, and all the Australian offices, in the Strand. Very easy to get to. And the first feature when you walked in, was a huge alphabetically arranged notice board on which we were all, who were interested in other Australians, wanted to leave a message, "I'm in London until the 4th, and you can contact me here". And you tried to take it down when you left, but you had

01:30 to put dates. And this way we were able to keep in contact with a lot of our mates. We were able to hear, sometimes death notices, we saw, or either to find people and to talk to them. We were always able to get a cup of tea, and a very hard rock cake. But then all cakes in London were hard at the time. You could find an odd Australian to talk to, that you knew, which was gathering ground. And all

02:00 It was sort of a, the equivalent of some of the places our comforts funds ran in Swanston Street. Here, I think it was called the Dugout. Boomerang Club was wishful thinking for some of them, but it was a great rallying point if you wanted to find other Australians, or your friends. I called in there every leave and put my address up where I'd be, and for how long. And quite often

02:30 I'd just get down to Orpington, or another suburb and get a phone call. Somebody says, "I'm in town, come in". Which I'd do. And really, you can only acknowledge that it was a wonderful voluntary service provided by ladies; British and Australian. Australian ones being wives of officers of the Australian political functions that went on in the same building.

03:00 **Now you were staying with people in London, weren't you? Relatives?**

Several lots, yes. First of all I had a stepsister there. That was the daughter of my mothers' second husband. And I wrote to her when I got to London, and she

03:30 said, "Yes, come out to this bank, and say hello to me". And when I got to the counter section of the bank. It had a high wall separating the staff from the customers, as banks had in those days. And there was lots of giggling from behind. Endless giggling from behind, female giggling, from behind this high wall. And eventually this English lady came out and spoke to me and said, "I'm Peggy". "I'm your half

04:00 your stepsister". "And come out for a coffee". She did, and subsequently we had a couple of meals in London to see that we were compatible. And then she asked me out to the home, where she was living with her mother-in-law. Her husband was away on army duties, preparing for the invasion.

Sorry, when you say preparing for the invasion, you're speaking of Normandy?

04:30 He was training for the Normandy invasion. And her mother-in-law's son, who was my age, was also

flying aircrew. Operations at that time. And you can imagine the mental state the mother was in, every time she heard an aircraft go out. That was one of the unfortunate things for the mothers of aircrew in Britain. They imagined their

05:00 son was involved every time they saw any aircraft out. Whereas we were involved only once every three or four days, or every week, or less. Often depending on the weather. But it's nevertheless, in their imagination, her son was involved. Now, my sister, after I got to know her for a while I had to ask. There will be a little hiatus while we have anti aircraft attack on a wasp,

05:30 which we just shot down.

06:00 **Now, sorry.**

After a while I plucked up courage to ask my stepsister what all the giggling was. And she said, "Well I sent them all to have a look over the top to see if you were

06:30 black or white, because I thought my father was such a person who would have married an aboriginal. Now, that's a very sexist statement, but that's a fact of what went on. And she said, "I was very relieved, and now will you come and stay with us?" Whilst we are touching on those people who lived in the southern part of England, it's interesting to note that it was more stressful, staying with them, in Orpington, which was right on the path of the V1

07:00 buzz bombs, on their way to London. They were trying to bring them down there, in the outer suburbs, rather than in London. And these people went into horrors of nerves anytime they heard a bus in the street. And consequently, it was much less restful to be back on the station than staying with them, because of their imagination. So that was one lot of the people I stayed with in London. I stayed with them occasionally. Not as often as when I was

07:30 with the crew. More often after the war had finished and I had time to fill in. I was coming back to their place. The point being that I was a bit of a help then because I had ration tickets, whereas when the war was on and I went there and we had a roast meal on Sunday. We'd get this tiny little bit of beef between four of us, and that was their ration for ten days. We'd eat their meat ration in one meal. I used to scrounge a little

08:00 bit of stuff. Occasionally I could scrounge a scrawny old chicken, or some eggs, or something from the farms around, but it was a great help. But their rations were very strict.

What was it like to be under attack from buzz bombs? These were V1 rockets.

Yes. It was just as frightening for me. For instance; you could be riding in a train and you'd hear one going

08:30 "putty, putty" up above you. And you could also see the exhaust. And you knew whilst you could see it, you were quite safe. But the moment the noise stopped and the exhaust stopped, it started a downward path, and where it hit was just luck. And you might have been in its' way, you might not. I was in London the first night they came over, and they didn't know what they were, and they were trying to shoot them down, which

09:00 was a waste, because they were going to come down and explode anyway, so what was the point of shooting them. But they didn't know what they were. Later on, these people saw the faster aircraft. The Tempus chasing them, and trying to divert them, or shoot them down. They had balloons over their head, hanging wires down, hoping to knock them down. Which if they did knock them down they just came down near their house. It was very, very scary. I'm not blaming them for being nervous. I'm just

09:30 saying it was more restful to be on the squadron, not flying, than on a leave with them.

And when they'd attack, the V1 attacks, where they multiple attacks simultaneously? Or was it just an odd stray one here and there, that would take place?

They had a large number of ramps on the French coast. Each one had to be readied and

10:00 aimed, and lined up. And then fired. So they came over at intervals, but quite regular intervals, as you can imagine. As they got one ramp ready and fired, the next ramp was nearly ready, so they were pretty constant. But there was never any mass attack.

What about the actual dogfights

10:30 **above. And you were talking before about planes attacking and so forth. Tell us more about them?**

No. The day of the dogfight as far as Britain was concerned, were really over. On some of our, I've got to jump to a daylight mission, and tell you that we could see the vapour trails of the fighters of both sides. Our protective fighters,

11:00 and the attacking fighters overhead. But our fighters in those days, far outnumbered the German single-engined aircraft, because they didn't have any petrol. And that was why I took part in daylight

operations, where our escort was enough to keep the fighters away. Whereas at night there were fighters were just as accurate. I only did one of

11:30 those.

That's a very, very interesting aspect, which I am going to ask you very soon, about your operations. So I will work up to that. Now, I understand also you'd see the Vaudeville shows in London?

I am going back to your previous question for a moment,

12:00 because I'm out of practice visiting my crew in their homes, and they were always glad to see me. But, and looked after us and gave us all of their food rations, the same as my stepsister did. But the worse part was when you said goodbye, and a mother would, with tears in her eyes, would say to you, "Now, Reg, you'll look after my little boy, won't you?" And I said, "Yes, of course I will

12:30 Mrs Parsons" "I will look after him as if he was my own". Didn't tell her that it was much up to him to keep me on the right track, as he was just an important part of getting back as I was, and that there was little I could do. But yes, the mothers of all of my crew were so welcoming. We could send anything we liked home to be mended or repaired. We got little packets of food to bring back with us. Not that when we were

13:00 sergeants. And they were wonderful. And you asked me about Vaudeville. One of the things in Britain was that the theatre, in general, was still vibrant. Within their need, and their requirement, everybody had to do about half of the year serving on army entertainment units. So you got all the good ones available

13:30 for half the time, and the rest of the time on the theatre was filled up with elderly people who had been called into repeat what they'd done when young, or young people that were training, plus the choice little bit at the centre. So in the Vaudeville, which were often called Empire theatres, there were some wonderful programmes. And we went to places like

14:00 the Wood Green Empire, as often as we could. We went to the Hippodrome, and saw all the famous English people. There were Flanagan and Allen, and I saw Ivan Novello and Noel Coward, all on the stage. And I went to the Windmill, which was a girly show. And to see Phyllis Dixie at the Whitehall, which was even more of a

14:30 girly show. But they were all well run, well entertained. Yet I found that the theatres were a great entertainment. Something, better than our Tivoli. They were, because the Tivoli simply booked the good acts from there, and filled it in just the same, so they were on a par, I suppose. But they kept going. And at one time they had to close because of the buzz bombs, because they didn't want

15:00 to have a theatre full of people. But that was only for a couple of months.

Bit of a strange circumstance to watch a movie isn't it? You've got buzz bombs going over.

I don't think I ever went to movies in Britain. I don't remember going to a movie.

Or for social congregations, like that.

Oh, I was always with people, and talking. And we'd have fun in the Vaudeville. And we had little whistles here attached

15:30 to our battle dress, which we were to blow if we were shot down in the water, for location. And we'd blow these, and the manager would come along and say, "Stop, or I'll throw you out". And we'd stop. We enjoyed the show as much as they did.

Tell us about how you crewed up? What was the process involved in choosing your members?

Well I did cover that. Do it again.

16:00 We were posted to an aerodrome called Wing, which was near Leighton Buzzard, which is in on the main northerly line out of London. And we did a few exercises and classes for three days. And we watched the people and whether they asked questions and how they comported themselves,

16:30 and if they seemed to know what the instructors where talking about. Then we were thrown into a room and told to sort ourselves into crews. And when we looked around I found very few Australians there. That didn't worry me in the least. And I don't know what made me approach the English navigator that I did approach. And he said, "Oh yes, I was looking at you".

17:00 "You'll do me". And that was all you could go on. You couldn't tell what a man's character was really. He knew a bomb aimer, who willingly joined us. I was approached by a fine, upstanding young chap, who said, "I'm a rear gunner", "Would you like to fly with me sir?" And I said, "Have you got a friend, because I wanted the gunners to be a team". And he produced his friend. And

17:30 that made about five of us. And then we decided we had to have a wireless operator, and the wireless

operators were Australians. And my navigator and another Australian pilot said, “We know that chap”. “Have him, he’s quite good”. So then the last of our crew was Johnny Northcote. Later on, when we got to heavy conversion unit, suddenly,

18:00 a flight engineer was attached to us. We had no say in that. He just came to us and said, “I’m your flight engineer skipper”. And we thought we were real good flyers then. And I said, “How much flying have you done?” He said, “Ten hours”. He said, “But I know my engines”. So I said, “Alright Bob, you’re one of us from now on”. So that’s how the seven got together.

Now,

18:30 **I’m interested now to move onto operations. And if you can walk us through the sequence of what took place in your first operation, and what happened, just generally?**

There are two types of operations. There is the first one I did, and the first one I did as a skipper of a crew. Now, we were sent off to fly around the drome and

19:00 familiarise ourselves with the landmarks. Our aerodrome was fairly easy to recognise, because in one corner of it, there was a house surrounded by elm trees. And oddly, the house was called Elm Tree Farm. And it was wonderful to recognise the aerodrome. If you went there now, you wouldn’t find an elm tree, because they were all lost to the elm bug. And Elm Tree

19:30 farm is just as bare as an Australian paddock. So we had to familiarise ourselves with the aerodrome. And yes, they said, “Right, you’re ready for daylight”. “Go off with this man on this operation in the morning”. And I was the duel pilot. I sat alongside him, and I kept very quiet. I was watching and learning and everything. And they all did. And about half way there, one of the

20:00 port, I think, one of the engines failed. And I said, “Ooh, goodness, he’ll turn back”. “I wonder if this will count for me as a second rider”. Anyhow, not this chap. He had a couple to go to finish, and he was going to go on. And long after the main bombing force had been through a place called Gelsenkirchen, where incidentally we were attacking an oil refinery.

20:30 On our own we chuffed across, not as high as we should have been. And I think because the defences had exhausted themselves when the main bomber force went by earlier, we had no real opposition at all. That didn’t stop me from wondering whether he was sane or not, to go on. The idea was for group protection, and to go on, on your own

21:00 seemed to be a funny idea, but here was this man with two operations to go. This was his second last. And he brought it off quite alright. I can’t. After he’d done it I can’t question him, but on my own, and being green, I’d had turned back. I wouldn’t have gone on as a solo effort. Following that I was accredited for daylight. And I was just looking forward to a daylight operation, when they told me I was on the board

21:30 to fly with another, extremely experienced officer, on a daylight mission, to a place called Dessau, which was a large residential city, to which much of the German administration officers had been shifted, because of the bombing of Berlin. And they wanted to catch them there. So a huge force was sent over from bomber command, somewhat on the lines of Dresden, but not so concentrated.

22:00 And that to a first-timer, was a very sobering experience, because whilst the target was alight with searchlights and fires and coloured markers, which our pathfinders had put down, you could still see the anti aircraft exploding. We had to fly through that. At one time he got up a little bit higher because we could see that the bursts

22:30 were lower than we were, and he forced his aircraft up a little bit higher. A great moment of great relief when you drop your bombs and you are a free agent. You’ve got to hold steady for a little while. This was the most nerve-wracking time. You had to hold steady for about 20 seconds, until your flare went off and took a photograph of your bombs hitting the ground. And then you were free to do anything.

23:00 I couldn’t believe that it was so bright. The light was everywhere over the target. We saw explosions on each side of us, which we didn’t know whether they were aircraft or whether they were a thing called scarecrows, which the Germans sent up pyrotechnics to imitate a bursting aircraft, to frighten the crews.

23:30 Our squadron lost one aircraft that night, so it was as others. Losses were quite significant like any other night flight. The experienced gunners crews constantly called for the skipper to zigzag along, because their job was to look for an enemy night fighter getting underneath

24:00 them, and flying up into their, firing up into their unprotected underside. And they couldn’t see down there, so hence they were asking us to, can’t remember the word now. If I called it zigzag for want of a better word. And that was alright. We came back. His crew. He was an officer. His sergeants crew were sharing our sleeping hut, where

24:30 I was still sleeping as a sergeant, and their night sleep was broken with nervous yells and shouts. They were not sleeping calmly. They’d wake up and sing out “Look out”, or “Screw him”, or anything like that. That was the toll of doing 39 operations had taken on that part. Just to complete the night aspect of it.

25:00 Because then we could penetrate in daylight, without opposition from fighters, there were no more night operations done by my squadron. So even though I was then qualified to fly a night operation, I didn't do any. But subsequently we did, oh, half a dozen seven daylight operations. And for

25:30 ones conscience, these days, they were almost exclusively again, oil plants. Now oil plants, to my mind, were better targets than the indiscriminating bombing we did over the Dessau at night. Small targets, we had to be extremely accurate, which we were. And the end result, of course was

26:00 that the German tanks and the German aircraft, and all German movement was then practically eliminated, because they had no fuel. These fuel plants were in the dreaded Ruhr, so that there was plenty of anti-aircraft fire against us. Large lumps, and my crew were always onto me to go where they thought it was thinner. So I did, just for their morale's sake. But whether it was any thinner

26:30 anywhere else or not. Oh, if you got up or you could see that they were firing their stuff to a pattern, and you could sneak around the edge of it where it was lighter. So we did that. On, yes, it was my last trip, I was flying an aircraft which was the famous H. Howe,

27:00 which had had a little bit of engine trouble in the past. And on the way back from Heligoland, which is a little island in the mouth. The idea was to prevent anybody ever using Heligoland as a defended fortress again. That engined failed, and I stopped it, and did all the necessary things to reduce it's drag, and flew home

27:30 on the three engines. Landed very nicely without a bump, much to everybody's astonishment. And wrote off this aircraft in the book as "unserviceable", or "unsafe". In no time I was scheduled to fly that aircraft again. And I said, "No way". "What have you done to it?" "Oh, we did this test, on the

28:00 Magnetos", "it's firing quite alright". I said, "Well that only means that you haven't found the trouble". "I won't take it, as is my right". "I'll write it off as unserviceable again". And we were arguing, and they must have rung the flight office, because another Australian came down and said, "Let me test those magnetos".

28:30 So he did the magneto test, the same as I'd done. Found it was alright, and said, "Yes, I'll take it". And he signed it off. So I thought, "Well, rather you than me". We were nicely in bed next morning, and we were woken up by the sounds of machine gun bullets exploding. We jumped out, we put our helmets on and our pyjamas

29:00 our jacket on. We went out to see what on earth was going on. And there was H. Howe burning. We could just see it about 400 yards away outside the WRAFery. In hindsight, there was the funny side of the WRAF's with very little but nightclothes on, running in all directions, as they were instructed to do. But when they saw me, they said, "We thought you were dead, and that's your aircraft up there". I said, "Yes, but I

29:30 wouldn't take it". I'm satisfied that if that man had flown that operation and brought that aircraft back, I'd have been more or less persecuted for lack of moral fibre. Or lack of bravery is another way of putting it. I still say it was my air force given right, as a skipper, to take it or not take it. I chose not to take it. This man and all his crew were killed

30:00 by one of the bombs exploding. The Wraffery was knocked about. There were people wandering around all day, with whatever they had on when the thing crashed, still on. And should have been me. Now I have subsequently learned that that aircraft had had a history of engine trouble, repeated.

30:30 And this was the first time it had failed on take off. Other times it had been brought back, as I had done, on three engines. So that's the way, the luck of air force life. That was our last daylight. We had done our daylight to Heligoland wasn't such a good target, it was just a sort of a 'get your own back on Germany' sort of thing. And then there was VE Day.

31:00 That was the 8th of May. I didn't have anything to drink to celebrate VE day, because I was flying again. Now this is a different aspect of my flying. It was a thing called Operation Manor. Instead of bombs, our bomb bay was stuffed with food parcels. And we

31:30 took that to the Hague racecourse, and opened our bomb bays, and all spread along the Hague racecourse. And all that the official collectors could gather up, was being handed out to the starving population on one side of the aerodrome. Any that went astray, what do you call it, the people that take

32:00 advantage of it, were selling it. The black marketers were selling it out the other side, also to the starving population. Well it got there to feed them. I said, "This is a bad thing", "We should be aiming better". As well as feeding them, even though it was after the war, some shots were fired at us, because we flew in quite low, and enjoyed the flight, but they

32:30 didn't go anywhere near us.

What do you mean, "some shots were fired"?

There were small calibre anti-aircraft fire coming at us. We were flying at about 500 feet, looking at the

countryside and enjoying the sites. And some small pockets of Germans obviously didn't know, or didn't accept that the war was over. And they fired at us while we were within range, but they didn't go near us, and we didn't fire back at them.

How long after

33:00 **VE Day was this?**

It was on VE Day.

On VE Day itself.

The very day. Yeah, well we knew it was going to happen. So that's why I didn't attend the celebrations. I didn't go AWOL [Absent Without Leave] and go to London to the screaming crowds. I just sat there and took that away. I didn't have a drink as long as I knew I was flying, I didn't have a drink within 24 hours of flying, the whole time I was on flying.

I trust you were expecting resistance, when

33:30 **you did this flight on VE Day?**

The Hague was not far in, and I thought they might have known. They said there might be one or two that don't know, or just devils having a last shot or something. But I think they were people who didn't know and happened been told, or something like that. And then the other marvellous thing we did, was a thing called Operation Exodus.

34:00 Operation Exodus, which was flying released prisoners of war back from France, to home and Britain. And we were quickly chucked a few bags in, and Mae West's for them to put on. Nothing else. It must have been miserable in the back of the Lancaster, because it wasn't built for carrying people.

34:30 And the first time I went over to get any, we had one of our ground crew, happily it was an electrician, came with us. And we were getting near to where we were going to pick them up, and there was smoke coming into the cabin. We did a little bit of a panic around, and I saw an aerodrome, so I circled around and told them what I was doing. And this electrician dismantled the sides of the cabin

35:00 and got the fires and the shorts and fire extinguisher, and disconnected several wires, and waved foam from the fire extinguisher about. And then I said to him, "Can you tell me what's not working?" He said, "Oh no, skip, I've just disconnected any wire that was hot". I said, "Can you say we won't catch fire again". He said, "Oh, no skip". So I turned around and went home. The CO [Commanding Officer] was

35:30 disgusted because he wanted to have the reputation of bringing back big numbers of POW's [Prisoners of War], and here is one aircraft that went out empty, and came back empty. Anyhow they rewired it, and I took the aircraft again, the next day. We picked up 45 British soldiers, who hadn't been home for 11 years.

36:00 They'd finished a seven year tour of duty in India. They got to France. They were thrown in at Dunkirk. They were captured at Dunkirk. And they did another four years as POW's. They all looked healthy, because they were all privates. They'd all been working on farms. They looked particularly well fed. There arms

36:30 were covered with watches, which they had recently bought for a few cigarettes which they'd got since they had been relieved. They got into my aircraft. Some of them with bibles, which they just sat and read, and not looking anywhere. This is the last lap, I'm going to pray. And it was only a 40 minute flight, or less.

37:00 They sat there with bibles. I sent the navigator down to tell everybody if they looked out that side, they could see the white cliffs of Dover. And I was going to do a slow turnaround, so that they could see them. Some of them looked out and cheered, but the majority they'd been away for so long, that nothing was going to cheer them up, but being on English soil. Now to my mind, it was worth going to Britain to deliver

37:30 the food and bring those chaps back to Britain. I went around, I saw some chimneys as I was coming in. And I thought, "Lordy, I don't know where those are". It was pretty foggy over Britain. "And I'll see where the chimneys are in relation to the runway". And I went around again. So I delayed them for another 20 minutes before they got on ground. The next time I used the chimneys and lined up on the runways, and went in safely. An

38:00 interesting thing was that it took us to a standing area. They guided us with a little truck, led us to a standing area. Plonked us down there, and a man came and put a thing against the door. The exit. I thought, "hello, what's this?" They then pumped the aircraft full of, what I think, was DDT [dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethine, an insecticide]. Left a little white coating over everybody and everything. I really honestly believe it was DDT.

38:30 To ensure that we didn't bring anything nasty into the country. Then they opened the doors and they disappeared. Within the whole 45 disappeared. Yeah, you could hear them singing out "Thanks", but they didn't really care. They were home. Their thanks was self evident. They through themselves down and touched the ground. When we looked in the aircraft after they had gone, I suppose there were

39:00 40 cartons of Lucky Strike cigarettes, which they'd left behind in their gratitude. We then got a blast of air through the aircraft, shut the door and flew back to base. And that was called Operation Exodus. One other little thing, touching on what we mentioned before, about racialism. Sierra Leone,

39:30 the gold coast colony in Africa, had given money to buy a couple of aircraft, including one Lancaster, which was flying on our 218 Squadron, which was known as 218 Gold Coast Squadron, in the light of this help. And a lot of our ground crew, were extremely dark people from Sierra Leone. And we found that the camaraderie was so great

40:00 that the blackest one was known as twenty-three, fifty-nine, which was a minute to midnight. And the palest one was known as 20 hundred hours, which was eight o'clock at night. And they answered this, and we just said, "Twenty-three, fifty-nine, is that engine alright?" or, "Have you cleaned my glass?" And twenty-three, fifty-nine would come up and give it another polish, to make sure there was no marks on the perspex, which was a dreadful thing if you were flying, to have a little black spot

40:30 on your windscreen. Because every time, your eyes were constantly going, and every time you got to the little black spot. "Oh yes, that's the black spot". It was a dreadful thing to have a black spot up there. But twenty-three, fifty-nine, was an airframes maintenance chap on the dispersal circle, where we left the aircraft, which I was mainly flying. So I saw a lot of him.

41:00 Because we had money, we two Australians, and I more than the other one, we used to take these people from our ground crew, from that one dispersal unit, into a services club in Bury St Edmunds, and buy them a pie and a couple of light ales, and things like that. And have a lovely little party, and come home on the last bus. I didn't know, calling this chap twenty-three, fifty-nine.

41:30 He was no different to anybody else than anyone else on the squadron at the time. And my life depended on him anyway, so why couldn't I have faith in him and treat him, at least as an equal.

On that note we will just pause and change the tape because we are just about to run out of tape.

Tape 6

00:11 **Movies as well.**

Movies.

Yes.

On squadron. You've reminded me, when I said previously that I didn't go to any movies. I didn't go to any movies. I was off the squadron, but there were movies on the squadron,

00:30 In the squadron theatre. They didn't like me sitting, as an officer, with my sergeant crew in the body of the theatre, until the little piece reserved for officers. And I was constantly being admonished for sitting with them. I was also friendly with a WRAF, who was working on the aircraft. And I'd sit with her,

01:00 and I'd be growled at. And I said, "Alright, do what you like about it", "No, I'll think about it", never said I wouldn't do it. They hated us Australians, the senior English officers, because, well we'd give them a sloppy old salute and say, "G'day", instead of proper English salute and that. They just didn't. But we were considered

01:30 by Harris, the head of bomber command, that the sprinkling of Australians, on English squadrons, with their different approach to everything, was extremely healthy for the morale of both the English crews and the Australian crews. And a sort of shot in the arm for bomber command, with being a little bit tired.

02:00 Wasn't until after the war when I realised that we had been sprinkled through for a very definite purpose, and that was morale.

So what effect did Australians have on morale, in that regard? Why Australians?

Well they liked the casual approach. See, the English would, as you know, recorded as queuing for everything. Their said to be

02:30 not showering regularly. I must admit that my English crew came to like the showers, which is a thing they would have waited till they went home and had a bath, at home, rather than a shower on the aerodrome. I had no home, I used to shower there everyday. So we encouraged them into showering. They liked the fact that I would say, "I'm going to sit with you in the theatre". It made them feel good. Made them feel

03:00 that they were appreciated, compared to the real sniffy English officer, who would hardly give them the time of day. They liked we slummocked about the airfield, and did not salute other aircrew officers.

Even as sergeants we didn't salute aircrew officers. Perhaps the only

03:30 one who ever got a sensible salute from us, was the station commander. And that was his due, in my opinion. They liked the way we didn't go for the annoying little bylaws, which I can't bring any to mind now. But we just didn't obey the things that said you cant walk across that lawn, and it was the shortest way, and it was dry and it was pleasant. Things like that.

04:00 They thought we had a more cavalier atmosphere to operations, and I think we just hit it better than they did. I don't think we were any less scared then the Englishmen were. So that's why I think we were a help.

It's very rare to find an Englishmen complementing Australians, in that regard.

04:30 I don't think they knew they were. I think it was just like somebody setting them a good example, and they just followed it. I don't think they knew they were being. No, my crew were ecstatic at having an Australian skipper. They thought it was marvellous. Now, I don't know why, except that I was very careful to see that they were trained in all

05:00 aspects. I could blindfold them and say, "Go and get me a fire extinguisher", or "Go and get me an oxygen bottle". And blindfolded they could go anywhere, and produce it. And we did this very, very. Oh, I did it too. But we did it very regularly, to see if they could find their way around the aircraft.

05:30 **Now, you were mentioning LMF [Lack of Moral Fibre] before. That's seems to be something that hovers around the word cowardice, isn't it?**

It's a stigma.

Yes. Tell us about that word.

Well it could be an illness. But the air force was aware, that if they let too many people say that they were frightened to go flying, they were opening the door to an enormous loss of

06:00 aircrew, who had cost them a fortune to train. It cost them a fortune to get us to Britain, ready to fly our own aircraft, operationally. And there were cases. I know one member of our club, who was shot down, who parachuted, and brought back a wrecked aircraft, in ten operations, and told he could quit. He'd done his share. But he didn't, he went on and did his 30.

06:30 He would have been excused on the ground that his mental stress was such, that he couldn't go on. They recognised that. They didn't only recognise that a man might have reached the stage where his nerves just wouldn't let him go on flying. So if he went into the medical officer and said, "I can't go on", they labelled him 'lack of moral fibre'. Now this was taken to the extremes that you were then paraded, and the buttons were taken off

07:00 your uniform. All your badges of rank. You reverted to the lowest rank possible, and were hidden away in some station somewhere else. Far away from where you'd been. Lack of moral fibre was a deterrent to people just quitting, because they felt like it. But unfortunately was also a deterrent to those who

07:30 were so mentally sick, that they really shouldn't go on. And the only way you got out of it on those grounds, was if your skipper went into the medical officer and said, "Look, this man is a menace in the aircraft". And then you might have been invalided out. Was a form of shell shock.

Is it often a result of people experiencing a lot of combat operations?

It can

08:00 be the result of, cumulative result of a series of nerve-wracking operations, or a series of frightening ones, where things happened to you. Nothing need happen to you to have an effect on you. I only knew of two cases. One I still see. I think it was genuine, I don't know. I think he was genuine. He was a very nervous bloke, and he still is a nervous bloke today. They should possible never had

08:30 accepted him. But once you're in, you're in.

So what about conscientious objectors?

My attitude to them?

Well your attitude.

I didn't know any. But my attitude. Yeah, I think it was their right to object, if they didn't believe in killing. After

09:00 all, some of the things that happened in cities like Hamburg and Dresden, with thousands of civilian populations killed. I can't blame anybody that didn't want to do that. Today, I wouldn't like to say whether I'd go or not. I don't think I would. I don't think I would be a party to that type of war. But there you are.

You're speaking retrospectively?

Yes.

So you wouldn't do it again, if.

09:30 In hindsight, I don't think I would be a party to the type of war I was in. No.

It's a really fascinating that you say that, because that's obviously been a huge debate since the Second World War has finished, in many historical circles. So, okay, what are you essentially saying about Arthur Harris, known as Bomber Harris, for area bombing?

Bomber Harris.

Area bombing was obviously not new to

10:00 **the Second World War as I understand it. But at the time, what were you thinking?**

There's two aspects. Was it effective? And I believe, in my heart, I believe it was effective. I believe the disruption of the organisation. The damage to the places. If you could get to important factories, that the effect of area bombing was a very

10:30 significant factor. The first three are ones that are hard to evaluate. The upsetting of the organisation, and the civilian reaction. But the last one is more or less evaluated on. Large areas of the Ruhr were put out of action, when the time when they were screaming for arms. So that, and a slightly different attitude to Ruhr, which was their armoury,

11:00 than to the attitude that centres to oil refineries. If they could, at the time of change of shifts, so that twice as many skilled workers were frightened or injured, because the refinery depended on skilled workers, as well as the refinery working. And we were often

11:30 told, "Yes, you'll get there at the change of shift, and you'll frighten the devil". "They won't go back again".

Where were these refineries located?

Little places in the Ruhr, Gelsenkirchen. A little town called Natteln. Another place.

Is it a synthetic oil refinery?

12:00 Yes. Synthetic oil refineries which was about all they had. They were right in the heart of the Ruhr. We had to penetrate some of their defences. Oh yes, I remember. After our last operation, which was the one where I wouldn't take the aircraft, we were detailed

12:30 for other operations, and we were briefed, and we sat in the aircraft and got all excited, and all geed up to do it. And when they'd say, "Oh, we're sorry", "The army have overrun that place, you don't have to go". And this happened to us at least four times. It had a nervous effect. You don't tell me that your stomach didn't get tight, and the adrenalin was flowing, and you are all ready to go, and you just waiting for the green flare. And it didn't come,

13:00 because they were operations mainly in support of the advancing forces of the British army. And they advanced too quickly.

The synthetic oil refinery operations?

No, they weren't part of that. They weren't synthetic oil factories, they were pockets of resistance in front of the army, which they overran before they could get us to them. Again, I don't think that's wrong use of

13:30 wartime weapons. If we have to have them. Don't ask me whether I think war's justified. I don't anymore, but.

Now, I understand that the thousand planned bombing raid on Dresden. I've read accounts about that. What interests me is that certain pilots, there were a number of pilots, from what I understand. I don't know how many, who knew full well what they were doing when it came to

14:00 **area bombing, and things like that, over major cities. And some of them had dropped their load before the actual area, where they were set to drop their bombs. Have you heard anything about that, you can tell us?**

I have heard about that, but at the time, if you would like to walk with me around Saint Paul's Cathedral. There was this marvellous cathedral, in a bare area. Around it, it had been knocked down,

14:30 for something like a quarter of a mile in each direction. Flattened. If you'd like to walk with me, as I did along the Thames side, where Eastenders, if you every saw it on television. Where they lived. And this was residential people serving the dock areas I walked around. I did not go to Coventry. My toddles

15:00 took me to Portsmouth. And I didn't like to stay in Portsmouth overnight. I was hitchhiking around, and I just got a bus out again. Parts of that had been decimated. It's hard. There's two sides to it.

Oh sure.

Retaliation. And to young people of the time, no, I thought it was just eye for an eye.

15:30 At that time.

That's what you felt at the time as well?

I felt it was eye for an eye. But I would rather have been doing the synthetic places, where you weren't just bombing residential areas.

Were you involved in any operations, where there was a bombing of residential areas?

Oh yes. The night time trip I did as a second pilot to Dessau, was purely a residential city.

16:00 It's about 40 miles south west of Berlin. It was a long penetration into Germany. And it was a very populous residential city. In fact, as I said, lots of people from Berlin had fled to there, because it had never had a raid before. It was the first attack on Dessau.

16:30 **So, it was for a psychological purpose. Was there any infrastructure, or military.**

Yes, I think they were after German administrators and important officers, and officers of military police, and all that sort of thing. And relocated from damaged Berlin to, what looked to be a safe Dessau.

17:00 **What about at the latter stages of the war? '44, '45, when everybody knew Germany would be defeated, especially after Normandy and all that. How did you see it at the time, doing area bombing raids, such as Dresden?**

We were little aware of the politics between [Winston] Churchill [Prime Minister of England], [Josef] Stalin [former leader of the Soviet Union]

17:30 and Roosevelt [President of United States]. We were aware that the armies were advancing at different speeds. We thought that bombing areas that were holding up the advances of armies, was justified. And we thought that Dessau was one of those places where the opposition was being, from which the opposition was being controlled. So that

18:00 that was like a nerve centre, and it was quite alright.

That's at the time, of course.

At the time, yes.

Retrospectively, how do you see it?

Oh when I read about Dresden and mans inhumanity to man. And how it became that huge flaming fire.

18:30 What's the word?

Firestorm.

Firestorm. And people disintegrating on the footpath. No, it's horrid to think about that we could do it. The British could do it. But we did it. So it was a part of the give and take of war.

I want to also ask you about your operations in

19:00 **more detail. The night sorties, bombing sorties. You also did bomb in the night-time, synthetic oil factories?**

No. The only night-time operation I did, was to Dessau, which was an area bombing of a residential town. So I was part of the worst aspect of it that night. Even though I was only sitting there watching what was going on.

What

19:30 **runs through your mind, in the lead up to the raid? When you are coming into enemy territory? Or the target area, so to speak? Within range of that. What goes through your mind? Can you walk us through it?**

One, I'm not a really competent person, and I wasn't in charge of the aircraft. But survival. Trying

20:00 to be where there seemed to be the least anti aircraft fire bursting. Getting to the target itself, which was marked by different coloured flares. The bravery of the man, somewhere down below,

20:30 who was saying to us, "The greens are short, overshoot the greens". And there was this man, a master bomber, down near the target, under our own bombs, telling us not to bomb short, but to bomb long. The period of fear, after you'd dropped you bombs, and you had to fly straight level. The perfect target

21:00 for anybody for, I forget how long now, but until your flare went off. Might have been 20 seconds. It seemed like years before you were free to do anything to control your own destiny. And then the need to get out of that area, in the shortest time possible. Find a starter point that you knew, and then settle on the course that you were supposed to be on. I'm saying that

21:30 as you came away from the bombing area, most of us had learned the star that was in the most nearest correct place, and our only aim was to point at that star, rather than worry about looking inside at your instruments. And then when you got there, you could settle down on the course that the navigator wanted. I'm not enough in-depth experienced. Not a time

22:00 when I was controlling the aircraft. The fear that went through everybody, when the gunner said, "Would you do a little bit of a corkscrew skipper, so I can see?" You didn't know whether it was precautionary, or whether he really had somebody down there. And until he said, "Okay skip", you didn't know. It puts you on the alert. Bear in mind that your eyes

22:30 were going all the time, from side to side. Peripherally taking in the instruments were alright. Searching all the time for something that shouldn't be in your windscreen. Looking out to see that you weren't under your own aircraft, when they were letting their bombs go. It was one of the things to watch up and make sure that you weren't under there. And the bomb aimer would say; and this happened in daylight

23:00 too, to the bomb aimer, and say, "Left, left". I'd say, " Blow you. There's an aircraft right above us, I'm going a little bit to the right, and let those bombs go left". That sort of thing. Daylight; you huddled along somebody that indicated that he was keyed up to a specialist accurate bombing radar, and

23:30 when he opened his bomb doors, you opened yours. And when he let his bombs go, we pushed ours. Now we had qualified for that, but they had plenty of people to do that, so we didn't ever. Well we never became a GH leader, as it was called. But that was extremely accurate, and that's what we used on small factories, like the refineries. And that's why we know that if everything was set properly, and the people that were

24:00 leading us reacted properly, we would hit them. By daylight, we were probably about 200 to 250 aircraft, a little gaggle, all hanging together, with the mustangs up the top, which made easier for them to look after. And we were never molested by an enemy aircraft, because they didn't have any fuel.

And what stage of the war would this have been? '44, '45?

'45. I was only on

24:30 squadron from January '45, and doing familiarisation, about two operations a month, until the end of April. April the 24th. The eve of Anzac day, was the day that aircraft that I should have been in crashed.

What sort of enemy aircraft. I don't know

25:00 **the Germans had a severe shortage of fuel. What sort of enemy aircraft did you ever see though?**

No we didn't. We only saw the vapour trails, up high above us, mixing up with our Mustangs, who would be steady. And then you'd see them all mixed up, and then they'd be back steady again. There were, at the time, one or two Messerschmitt 262's, which were a very

25:30 advanced jet aircraft, which if they had got into the bombing stream, could have done extreme damage. But they never did.

There was a famous German pilot, Adolph Gallen.

Oh, cut it out. He was in the Spanish war, and earlier wasn't he? In the very early part. Nothing to do with me. I'm sorry. I can't cope. He was years before I came into it.

26:00 Years.

And how did a briefing work before a raid?

You were fast asleep, you hoped. And somebody shook you, and stuck a book and a pencil in your face and said, "Sign this". And you'd sit up and sign it, and then the man would go away

26:30 satisfied that he'd woken you up to get your crew out of bed, to go there. The thing was to dress. It depends on whether you're mouth, you're cheeks were prickly or not, whether you shaved or not, because you were going to wear an oxygen mask over your face for long hours. It got very uncomfortable if you had a prickly face. Go over where we were entitled to bacon and eggs for breakfast. And then

27:00 every calling went to , for a short time, to their own briefing room. Navigators to navigators briefing room to get the right maps and charts. Bomb aimers to learn the bomb settings, and the height you were going to bomb from. The gunners to know whether they were, putting what their guns were loaded with, and that sort of thing. I think we just did some general

27:30 sort of thing, until the main briefing, when we all got together in this huge room, in crews and a table. All smoking my American cigarettes. And on the map of, which they pulled back the curtain, and there was a map of the courses we were going to take into Germany, which it was the short one was alright. If it was long penetrations you thought, “Glory be look at that.

28:00 Isn’t that horrid”. We were given an appreciation of where we thought the resistance would come from. What the weather would be like. We had details. We were also given, interestingly enough, addresses of people that might still be there, and would look after us, if we were shot down. We didn’t write them down, we had to remember them. We had it split up among the crew that we’d

28:30 all remember one or two, and not overburden. But if we were together we knew an address. If we weren’t together, we didn’t know it of course. But that was all part of the deal. I think that really that we were all ready to go. We knew it all by the time the briefing came, except the intimate details

29:00 of what flare to send off if you were troubled, or anything else. You had to know to send off red, green, if you were challenged, and when you switched to various different radars, and what window to throw out. Window being our aluminium strips that would deceptively peered on the German radar. And then there was all the lovely business of going and

29:30 getting your parachutes, and being driven out to the aircraft. And having a last pee, so that you didn’t get taken short, and sitting there making sure that you went.

Now, can I ask you also. What does a, I forgot to ask you before, what does a synthetic oil factory look like? Is it above ground or below ground?

You can see lots of them out at Altona here. They just looked just like that. Huge, much like a

30:00 ship on land, with all their pipes, and their little flares going. Just like we were here. Except that they were making them from, in many cases, sugar beet and alcohol. Alcohol from vegetables, and things like that. But they were still burning off rubbish, and looking like Altona. You couldn’t see much from twenty thousand feet you know. We were very high. You

30:30 work that out. It’s four miles up. Four miles up in the air. You didn’t see much up there.

What about the German flak? They did have a gun that could reach the, something like 25,000 feet?

Yes. In the main, because we were in a group, they tried to explode their flak at the height and the speed they hoped, and

31:00 allowing the speed, than we were, it was more or less aiming for the bomber stream, as a mass. And if we thought. It depends on where you were. If you were first, you hoped you go through. And if you were later on, you could sometimes see that they were leaning a little bit that way, to the starboard. Well we try to sneak pass on the quiet, on the left. Go over it. You could always

31:30 get up another 2,000 feet above the main stream, if it was lighter there. But you couldn’t do much about it. If it went off, it went off. But, yes, we did try and go through the least obvious part of it. Yes, they were very active. They put up quite a lot of flak, because

32:00 there wasn’t many people interfering with them. If they were sighted out to the side of an oil refinery, our bombs didn’t go near them, so they were able to go on protecting them. Nobody went over and shot them up, or anything, because you couldn’t find them if you went over. Just a little target in the middle of Germany. So they were still there. They had the bombs, and they didn’t need the petrol. It was quite effective.

32:30 **What’s it like to go through flak though? Is it like the movies where you get the black puffs?**

Yes. Yes, that’s quite a good illustration. You can often see a bit of fire and flame in the middle of it. But it’s just like. The clouds of smoke are the safe parts of course, because they have gone off. If you can rush through a packet of, a group of smoke. That’s been, that’s safe. It’s where there isn’t any that’s dangerous, and it’s

33:00 just still coming up.

And what about shrapnel. Would the plane be damaged?

We had damage at times. There was one time when, because the navigator was a little bit airsick, we went a little bit on the wrong course. When two streams of bombers were separating to go to different targets, and I went with the wrong one. And when I asked the flight engineer, I didn’t have enough petrol to go on this one,

33:30 so I had to go, and I was scheduled to go on that one. So I had to cross over. And they got very close to us that time. And we had a little bit of shrapnel damage that had to be repaired. There was a little bit of what you’d call plate work being riveted onto the holes, but none went near anything vital. Including ourselves. No, this was one of the better parts of being late into the war.

34:00 **Oh, you mean that you didn't face the attrition?**

No we didn't face what the others had. We had just shortly after it.

What about tracers? Tracer bullets and anti-aircraft machine gun fire. Would that ever reach that high?

Oh, no, no. That wouldn't get up to 10,000 feet. The light aircraft. No, only big heavy flak got up to where we were.

34:30 **I'm not sure about the movies you've seen, based on the bomber command experience. The Memphis Belle?**

It was American.

That's American. Have you done any coordinated operations with the US air force?

We had lots of our

35:00 overhead escort, were American flying Mustangs. As well as British. And we used to meet with them and yes, we used to go flying with them. And they'd come up and say "Hello playmate". And we'd say "Hello playmate, back to you". "Hello, little playmate". And he'd say, "Are you ready?" And we'd fly along a railway line and did simulate attacks on us. And we'd do things called corkscrews, and evasive action, and then

35:30 we'd meet afterwards, and he'd evaluate the things I'd done to evade his fire. And the number of times he thought that we'd got into a position to be able to fire effectively at him. But I never saw anything like that happen. But we still did our exercises with them.

What were they like to work with

36:00 **though, generally?**

It was lovely to see them. And when we were playing. Our call signs were rightly, we were playmate. So that that was the sort of thing. It wasn't fair dinkum. He'd just make a mock attack, and we'd do a great screaming, turning dive, away from him. And then up again. And he'd tell me whether it had been effective to shake him off or not.

36:30 But it didn't seem if it was warranted in the lack of interference we had from enemy.

With the war ending, what was the disposition of your crew? You know, you said that you'd get tense on missions and all that. You knew that the war was coming to and end. What was going through

37:00 **your minds, and all that?**

I think they were sorry that they were going to see the last of me. The wireless operator and I were suddenly paraded and told, "Yes gentlemen, you have been a big help to us". "We're sorry to see you go". "We're glad the war's over, but there's the bus to take you up to Gamston". "And we'll have a bit of discipline on the squadron now you've gone".

37:30 That was the CO's remarks. The crew; I continued to see them slightly, but not as much, because they were not due for discharge for some time. And they just went to other general duties in the RAF [Royal Air Force], and I lost touch with them. Then I joined the

38:00 group who had time to fill in. And I did that mainly by wandering through the English countryside, staying at little backpacking places, and wandering around. I did a trip all through Cornwall. Then I had to come back to report for something, and they said, "Go away". I thought I was going home

38:30 that time. Than I met a county engineer, who was doing some sewerage works, and I was watching him. And he said, "You know something about this don't you?" I said, "I don't know how those blokes down the hole know that they are going to join up with those blokes down that hole a quarter of a mile away". And he wanted me to drive around with him, which I did, for three days. He turned up with the lunch cut for me and a lunch cut for him, and

39:00 he went out and did his work. And he said, "Do you want a job?" And I said, "Oh, no, I don't know when I'll be called away". "I might just learn it, and I'll be going home". But it would have been very educational if I had worked with him, because it was underground was a field I knew nothing about, underground surveying. Nevertheless he stopped and showed me any interesting church in the district, and made my little drive. Three days I was with him. That was lovely. And that was the sort of thing I did in the country to pass

39:30 the time. Then I went and stayed with my stepsister and walked around. I walked the thing called The Pilgrims Way, which the pilgrims of Chaucer's time had walked from Winchelsea to Canterbury. And at times that was green paddock. At times it was a trodden pathway, with

40:00 trodden down pathway, it seemed to be. With hedgerows and little cliffs on each side. But at times there was the main road. And I did that by staying at my sisters and catching a bus out to where I stopped. I'd

walk all day, probably no lunch, or if I found a pub I'd have a piece of cheese and a glass of beer. And catch the bus back to my stepsisters, and start again.

40:30 And eventually I got to Canterbury, which was, I thought that was a nice thing to do. And I my wife and I did a little bit of it. We went back on holidays. We went around to all the aerodromes I was on, except one, which I didn't find.

It's probably a good point to pause and change tape.

Tape 7

00:32 **OK, I'm going to ask you a range of questions now, sort of spanning right over your history. So don't get too disturbed if we jump out time a bit.**

Right, Okay.

I just wanted to ask you when you mentioned about being in New York, on the blacked out buses. Do you have any idea why it was so secret?

Yes, because

01:00 they thought that people were sending details of departures from those ports to the submarine groups that were operating off the coast. Because they didn't have enough sense to turn down the lights on the entire American seaboard, and so that every vessel leaving the coast, was silhouetted against the American lights, for the submarines to make targets. So they tried to keep all departures secret.

01:30 And I'd say they, this, in our instance, was an abject failure. Because of the number of people who waved us goodbye from just the other side of the dock. Much as the same has happened at Woolloomooloo in Sydney. We had people on the park opposite where we'd sail from, waving us goodbye.

02:00 **I realise that they would want to keep the departures secret, but why would they black out the windows of the bus?**

So they couldn't tell the type of people that were being carted through the city. The category of what we were in. So that, I mean, our Australian uniform was pretty distinctive, and if somebody said, "Oh, yes, that's Australian aircrew going

02:30 towards the docks. There's a sailing soon". They would have known.

We spoke a bit about LMF. Did you actually see any examples of blokes who weren't fit to fly?

There is a gentlemen, and I'll use the word in all it's true meaning. A member of my service association,

03:00 whom I know was stripped of all his rank, and insignia, because he claimed, or said. I didn't know him at the time. But he just couldn't go on. Knowing him know, I think, that mentally he might have found the strain just too much to bare. I would never try to hide the fact that it was a strain. Don't let anybody tell you they weren't frightened,

03:30 They weren't nervous. They weren't as nearly as good unless you've got all screwed up. But some of us couldn't stand it, and he was one. Yes, trained with him. He didn't show then. But, there you are. I do know one. The rest were secreted away. They didn't tell you. They didn't let you know. There was a ceremony where the badges

04:00 and things were stripped off, but after that the person just disappeared. He wasn't subject to anybody that knew him.

Was this a public ceremony?

It was a parade, of anybody that was available on the squadron. And then he was marched across and they'd take them off him, and away he went. And then he was posted immediately.

Did you every see any acts of cowardice?

04:30 That's almost libellous.

You don't have to mention names.

I will. On our course at, the closest I can pinpoint, on our course at Somers, was a

05:00 Parliamentarian called Felstein, who went all the through the preparations at Point Cook. We thought that he wouldn't last the course, and I don't think, he pulled out before we went to flying training. Now I think that man just quit in the front

05:30 of face of flying. I don't blame them. I don't blame them for feeling that way.

So he just refused to fly?

He didn't go on as a politician either, I might say. So that really he might have been honest to himself. That's the nearest I ever saw. In the air;

06:00 no, nothing at all ever.

We talked about some of the morality of area bombing. You said that given the choice you wouldn't do the same again. Can I ask you why?

06:30 Yes, because I did enlarge on the fact that I thought an eye for an eye was a fair thing to do. But only if the eye that you were taking back, was directly able to be demonstrated as directly part of winning the war, or damaging, reducing the enemies,

07:00 significantly the enemies war record. To just go over a place and swamp it, while it might have sounded alright then, to me now, is unfair attacking on women and children and hospitals and schools, and everything else that isn't directly war effort. If you could show me a purely military town, I might accept

07:30 that as just a possible target. But one that involves non competences, not right.

Did it disturb you at the time?

No. No. Because I say I'd seen what they'd done to Britain. And it just seemed. I saw what the V1's

08:00 did to London. Vast areas cleared, just like that. No, it seemed to be a proper retaliation at the time.

Do you think of it as a 'just' war?

I think of what Europe might have been like if Hitler

08:30 had prevailed, and then it was warranted if you weren't prepared to accept subjugation, it was warranted. Justified then only to people who were not willing to be taken. As France was taken, and turned into

09:00 a vassal state. Denmark was treated like slaves. The Dutch weren't so badly treated because of their bit Antwerp port and things that like. And they had to have food production anyway from those countries. No, the countries they overran. Puppet state, Vichy France, and that sort of thing.

09:30 They were no way for people to live. So that justified, if not just.

You're holding back something. What do you think of morality of war in general then? You said, "Don't get me started".

Then, I thought it was justified, obviously. Because of the need to fight

10:00 for the, bearing in mind that we are all creations of propaganda, but because of the need to preserve the war against what Hitler wanted to do. Uncle Joe Stalin was the great Uncle Joe, when it suited us. So we can be propagandised into varying

10:30 degrees of hate against somebody, or fear of somebody. But I didn't really. I was never frightened of Russia. Maybe I should have been. But I wasn't. I wouldn't of thought a war against them was justified. The way Uncle Joe was presented to us then. And his country might have been alright, but some of the things that Stalin did was. Now we know, we don't know.

11:00 You're only told fifty years afterwards, aren't you?

What do you remember of the propaganda at the time?

That the Russians were going to help us to win the war. They were fighting to create a situation on the eastern front, that

11:30 Britain could take. Britain and America could take advantage of, on the western front. The Russians were really and truly, and holy, on our side. You ask me what I was led to believe then. I now know that the Russians were holy and completely and really and truly on the Russian side. And they were trying to manipulate. And the end result was that they controlled as much of Europe, as bad a

12:00 way as Hitler had done beforehand. I didn't know that.

At the time, did you know of anything of the Holocaust in Germany?

I knew that at some prisoner of war camps

12:30 British, and allied prisoners of war, were poorly treated. Poorly. I had no idea that this mass of Jews were subject to the dreadful death, extermination, as indignantly as they were exposed to. I had no idea, the same as the rest of the world

13:00 until those two camps were overrun, and the news came back. Pictures and things like that. So long ago I can hardly remember the name of the two camps that were first overrun. I do know them but.

Belsen and Dachau I think.

Belsen and Dachau. That's right. No, knew nothing about it.

13:30 **You mentioned before about Saint Paul's Cathedral. Can you describe for me what London was like at that time. You obviously went for a few jaunts there?**

Weeds. First thing that comes to mind. The place had been knocked down so long before I got there, that there were weeds growing in the

14:00 bomb gaps. There was earth coming up, and wild plants were growing in the heart of London. That's how long it had been there before I got there. So I was there to avenge an injury that was done 18 months or two years earlier. The way to avenge an injury is somehow how I felt. Vast area was flattened around Saint

14:30 Paul's. And then you got to the streets where it was like a missing tooth. A black gap. And that's where weeds and things were growing. Nothing had been done to repair it, because it wasn't economical. Go down to the docklands. Vast areas of, I've got to be careful here, I might offend you. Vast areas of

15:00 densest density had been flattened. And this meant large numbers of people were rendered homeless or killed, by indiscriminate aerial bombing, aimed because the Thames made such a silvery target at night. And that's why they were on to those maximum

15:30 density residential, poor people. I wondered how Saint Paul's survived. We know that there was an unexploded bomb there, which they eventually dismantled. Wonder why? Wonder why British bombers went to Cologne, and the theatre, the

16:00 Cathedral was virtually untouched? Why? Could have been that they were one of the most solid building. Could just of been, but I don't think that. I think that's my answer about the area around Saint Paul's. Just indiscriminately cleared.

Why did you think that it might offend me?

16:30 I think it was because they came up the Thames estuary. They followed the Thames. They got to an arming point at the bend of the Isle of the Dogs. They let their things go, and that's where it fell. Navigation at the time when the blitz was on London. Radar hadn't developed to the stage that we had it where we could fly down one ray of radar until another blippy one

17:00 hit us, and we knew exactly where we were. They were purely on eyesight, identification of things. And nothing stands out like a river. And I think it's just that it was a convenient aiming point for them. And that's why it was so concentrated where it was.

17:30 **What was your impression of the London people?**

At Orpington, where my sister was, there was trainloads of people who were exodus from London, every evening, to sleep in the Chislehurst caves, for safety. It was a long train journey of possible half an hour.

18:00 When you got into the underground, there were people sleeping in the underground, and you could hardly walk along the platform to get onto your train. When you came up, and whether those people were homeless, and I choose to think they were. But some of them were obviously. There would be a percentage obviously, doing it because it was free

18:30 lodging. They didn't' have to pay any rent or anything. When you got upstairs you found that they were going about their normal business in a very cheery fashion. The shopkeepers would greet you. There was a publican near the Strand, that we called into occasionally. And he'd always offer us a pinch of snuff. I took it to make him happy, I don't know that I liked it, but

19:00 he knew our little group, and he'd say, "Hello Reg", when I walked in, once every two months maybe. And he'd still know me. He'd say, "Come over and get yourself a drink" and after that you're paying for yourself, but. They were nice. As I said, the suburban shopkeepers were wonderful. Because we were in the Gold Coast squadron, they sent us, each crew got a box of marvellous fruit

19:30 about once a month. And we were particularly well fed in the operational aircrew area. And we'd eat a piece a fruit a piece, and then we'd pull up at a school and call a teacher over, and give him of what was left of the box to distribute amongst his children. Now, we'd often get little messages from parents saying thank you. That was good. The people I knew most were my sister who,

20:00 with a husband away, and a brother in law away flying, and that sort of thing, were weathering the storm wonderfully. She went in daily to work in a bank. Everybody I met made Australians. And mind you, they knew we were Australians. We had Australia written quite easily legible on our shoulders, were very, very good to us.

20:30 **Do you think this was because they were glad to have somebody else join in their fight?**

No, I don't think that's true at all. I think they were just making strangers, who were part of it, very welcome. Not because we were helping, but because we were part of it, I suppose. But they were making strangers welcome. And it wouldn't happen now.

21:00 We go over there now, and people won't talk to you in the train. Well now, you'd no sooner sit down and there was a, "Pretty heavy tonight, isn't it?" Things like that. They were much more communicative to us, than they were to my wife and I, as tourists.

What was it like when you went back the second time?

21:30 I'm smiling because it's tantamount to inviting a racist remark. Everything is run by Pakis [Pakistanis]. I can't help but say that, because that was the impression I got. But I'm not saying whether that's good or bad.

It's quite a different country now.

People were discommunicative. Unless you knew them they didn't welcome you. Strangers

22:00 didn't welcome you. No. You couldn't go up to a stranger and say, "G'day mate". They'd just ignore you and think, "What right do you have to invade my territory". So that there was a camaraderie among the English people, and their visiting foreign people, that couldn't happen in peacetime.

22:30 **Did you have, when you were flying missions, did you have any lucky charms or special rituals that you did?**

Well. The ritual of the last minute pee. But certainly not against the wheel of the aircraft. Over beside the little latrine that we had. So that you lasted as long as you possible could. I tried always to wear a green silk scarf that, I think it was my stepsister that gave it to me

23:00 when I first got to Britain, because we bought some things to send home. And we bought a little present for each other, and that sort of thing. So I tried to wear that, but I didn't worry if I didn't have it with me. I tried to wear it also, because it was ultra-comfortable around all the clobber you had around your neck, so it was a double purpose thing. No, no rabbit's foot. I don't think any of my crew had any foibles at all.

23:30 **We touched on this a little bit. But can you tell us a bit about training for escaping, when over in enemy territory?**

24:00 It fell into two facets. Sometimes, twice that I can think of, and it was at operational training unit, we were locked in a vast hall with armed sentry's walking around there all the time, and people who had escaped from a: Germany, and b: occupied France, came and talked to us

24:30 about the various people that might help us. We were given addresses to remember then, of clergymen, and brothels, where we could expect help. We split these names up among the crew, and we tested each other for days afterwards, to see if we could remember

25:00 them. And we kept doing it until they were just second nature to us. We were told and given samples of the various things. Like the top button on your jacket if you unscrewed it and put it upside down, it was a compass. There was a little point in it, and there was a hole in it, and that just sat in the compass there to spin around. Essential for aircrew, who wore

25:30 long flying boots, was hidden that boot was a little razor blade, where you cut your flying boot off and you finished up with a pair of ordinary looking shoes, instead of flying boots. And the little blade could also be a compass, if you were steady enough to balance it on the little point that was on the back of it. And it would come round and point to north or south. We were taught to

26:00 take with us, if we possibly could, silk maps of the escape routes, that were available to us, where we were going. So they varied each day. We were told, and tried to remember the places in the Swiss and Spanish border that were least guarded.

26:30 And that's about. Well I can't remember now, but that's the type of thing they talked about. And then, on the briefing, immediately pre-operation, we were also given one address each of people that might help us if we went down on the

27:00 proposed routes in and out. That might help us. And how to approach them. Don't let anybody know, and don't be a burden, and preferably to live out, and not with them. Let them help you by putting you under a cow barn or something like that. So that they were very tightly secure lectures. Both

27:30 in OTE [operational test and evaluation] and also, of course, the briefing was locked in, and people parading around us, guarding us.

Did you have any special rituals when a fellow got lost?

Probably the only thing

28:00 that we all tried to do, and I think we did it any time we got to an aircraft, was we all looked at each other and said, “One, two, three, lets go hey”. And that was probably the only thing we tried to do to gee us up a little bit. But no, we didn’t have any ritual. There was no kissing at the blarney stone or anything. Just “Let’s go eh”, which we thought was very American.

28:30 Singing off at the yanks.

No, I meant if one of the chaps didn’t come back, was there, did you have a special ceremony?

No. No. What happened was, their gear was cleared out of the hut and they’d gone. If it was very, two or three in a row, the CO

29:00 might put on a mess party. Both in the sergeants and the officer’s messes. And there would be no flying the next day, and quite a wild party. That’s the sort of thing where you’d put you’re footsteps on the roof of the mess or something. No, that happened once to me. Two losses, two days apart, and we had a party.

29:30 But that was the only ritual I know. They were quietly removed.

Did people get very emotional?

Nope. Hence the expression ‘Oh, he’s gone for a burton’, or ‘He’s had it’. And that was all. You couldn’t. No, no. I don’t think that. We were close, but comrades change, the leaders change.

30:00 Your best mate changes from station to station as replaced with someone else if you’re gregarious. No, I don’t think so.

You mentioned before about you had a small fire on board. Did

30:30 **you ever have any other fires on board the ship?**

We didn’t, no. That was the only one.

The plane I meant, not the ship.

The only time. It was frightening enough. Smoke coming out of the side of the aircraft. You don’t know what it is until. We were so lucky. If we’d been on our own, we couldn’t have got the fire extinguisher into it. But this man had his screwdrivers with him and he had the panel off, and he was spraying it as quickly as anybody called handle a fire extinguisher. It was the best time

31:00 to do it. Luck. Luck, pure luck. Because you could have been flying that aircraft anywhere, without him.

We touched on the padres before, but we didn’t really get into it, because it wasn’t really the right time. Perhaps you can tell us now what the padres were like?

I knew two padres well.

31:30 And oddly enough one was connected with my association, which we formed the ‘odd bods’ association. He was David Byer, who was the padre who greeted each and every one of us and made us feel at home when we got to this strange country, Britain, in the hotels at Brighton. And he talked to all, and had us around to the office, and had a little yarn to us, and

32:00 made us so at home. And said, “If there’s anything you want”. And people did go around and talk to him. And lots, I’m not speaking necessarily for myself now. The number of people that went around to see Dave for consolation, who were perhaps homesick. Who were perhaps religious sick. And Dave Byer, he

32:30 earned himself a place in the eyes of everybody I know, as a grand man. The other one was a padre Russell, who went over on the boat with us, a Presbyterian. Dave was Church of England. And whether he adopted those, I think there were 300 Australians went over on the boat, as special.

33:00 Padre Russell was a fine gentlemen. He used to write to my mother. Now I don’t know how many mothers he wrote to, but anytime he saw me he’d pen a short note to my mother saying, “I saw Reg the other day, he looked well, and he told me that, and he’s getting on and so forth”

33:30 And Mum used to write. My mum was a voluminous writer, and she’d write him huge letters, which I’m sure he didn’t read, but I’m sure he appreciated getting them. And he’d ring me up and say, “Oh I heard from your mother the other day.” “She’s alright”. Three years after the war there was a train strike, and I was walking down Victoria Parade, near the end of Smith Street, because I was trying to catch a green bus home to Heidelberg.

34:00 And a car pulled into the edge and a man stuck his head out, and he said, “G’day Johnson, are you alright?” “How are you going, have you got a job, are you gainfully employed?” And that, three years later, after the war was, without any contact at all. He was the one who arranged for all Australian troops to get, no, to be able to buy, a quota of American cigarettes, once every two

34:30 months. Now in Britain you either got woodbines or captains; neither of which. And I wanted pipe tobacco, and you were lucky to get nice pipe tobacco, unless you were cadging some from a friendly

tobacconist, and that did happen. But I used to get big bowls of, can't remember the name of it now. No, it might have been Erin Moore even then. And everybody got two or three cartons of cigarettes. I used to get the cartons of cigarettes and put

35:00 them on the table. You've opened a can of worms. In hindsight, of course, he shouldn't have been buying us tobacco at all. But he did, and it was greatly appreciated to fill my pipe with nice stuff. My Scottish bomb aimer was a mid-upper gunner. Was an older chap. He was 30. He'd been a

35:30 dockside policeman. He was married. He had two children. And every cent he got in his pay, he allotted to his wife, with the acceptance of perhaps a couple or two shillings, which would have bought him enough of these horrible little woodbine cigarettes to last him a fortnight, and then he wouldn't go out. One night I said to him, "Jock, we're going into the pub; are you coming?" He said, "No lad, no money". I said, "come in, I'll buy you a beer".

36:00 He was on nothing a week pay. I mean it all went to his wife, plus his allotment. The other English people were on such a small pay, that any cigarettes I put on the table were a: smoked at the briefing, or the packets walked away with them afterwards. I never saw the carton again. Because I was on an

36:30 English squadron, I had to be enjoying the best of conditions of either RAF or RAAF, that applied. So that I got the highest salary. I got flying allowance. I got a hardship allowance, because I only had half a batwoman. English officers are entitled to a batwoman to look after him. And if he doesn't have one, he gets a hardship allowance. And because I

37:00 only had a half one to. She cleaned my shoes, and she ironed my collars, and she made the bed, and she brought me a cup of tea in the morning, and that sort of thing. It was nothing more than a business arrangement between her and him and me. And we allotted her, if I had a lot of washing to do, she'd do it. And if he had washing to do, she'd do it, and save his. Yes, I think we probably had one between four of us, but

37:30 they called it one between two. I'm leading up to the fact that those, Jock wouldn't come out with us for a drink because he had no money. Well I'd say, "Well you don't like, you take this couple of quid, and you buy a couple of rounds, and pretend it's your money". "Och aye skip, oh, no". He'd come in then and enjoy himself, but he wouldn't be part, and I've held him as being part of the crew, as much as anything that was worth

38:00 my money to get him to come in with us. The English men were poorly paid in comparison to Australian, a: firstly flight sergeants, and then b: as a pilot officer, and then flying officer. Their pay was very poor. And I got there from what question? What question led me to this point?

The padres. I just asked you about the padres.

The cigarettes coming.

38:30 Yes so that just having cigarettes that I could buy in a vast quantity to make a available to the crew, was appreciated by them, because they had no money.

Were you a smoker before the war?

Nope. Nope.

Did you take up smoking to help with the nerves?

No, because you looked like a grand airman with

39:00 a pipe in your mouth. It was part of the act. I really think that's why.

How long did you smoke for?

When I had my first prostrate trouble, which was about 12 years ago. And I thought, "Fancy going into hospital and wanting a cigarette", which would undermine your health when you'd undergone an operation. I just quit cold.

39:30 **Did you smoke pipes the whole time?**

Mainly. A little while was cigarettes, but mainly pipes. It was easy to give up. I just burnt it in the incinerator. That was it.

What about drinking? You were in the Rechabites in your youth. When did you start?

Yes. I can remember the very day, when we rode a bike up to the Dandenongs, and we had one and

40:00 nine-pence between three of us. And I think we bought two shandy's, and had a quarter of a shandy. Or might have been four of us. A quarter of a shandy each. And that was the first drink I ever had. I never abused it. I might of when I first came back to Australia, for a couple of months when I started work, because it was very hard settling down into work. Those two months I might have overdone it, but the rest of the time I've had it

40:30 under reasonable control. Now we have an egg cup full of sherry twice a fortnight.

Very nice. Alright we might pause there.

Tape 8

00:31 **I want to move onto your postwar life, and get you to tell us about returning home. But before we do, is there anything we've missed out about your service?**

No. I think I've covered well all the parts that I know well.

OK. Well look, tell us then about returning to Australia.

We were put on this lovely vessel, the Sterling Castle,

01:00 which had a concrete repair in the bow, where it had run into something, and they'd filled it up with concrete. But conditions on that we were two to a cabin, which had carried two. We were waited on at a table by the best of waiters. The food was practicing to serve civilians. And the journey home was bliss.

01:30 We put in at Algiers, to put a person ashore with appendicitis. In the Suez Canal, we sat for a couple of nights, waiting for people to go by. We didn't get ashore there. We didn't get ashore till we got to Perth. And when we landed in Perth, all the people were talking with

02:00 funny accents. We'd been over there so long that we didn't know we'd acquired a leavening of British vowels, or British consonants. We had a day wondering around Perth. The next part of Australia we saw was the islands off Wilson's Promontory. And then we entered Woolloomooloo, where we were greeted by

02:30 crowds of, some of who knew their people were aboard our vessel, and were looking for them in this huge crowd that were hanging onto the sides. We were just offloaded onto a train to Melbourne. As an officer I had a big trunk and a big kit bag, which I didn't see. It was just delivered to my home in Hampton, oh, about a week after I got

03:00 home. We were taken to the exhibition, and they wanted us to go one at a time over a big dais. And they called out to all the hall, "Here's Reggie Johnson". And it was taking them so long, we just burst the barriers. Did away with it. Rushed through to where our family and friends were waiting for us. So that sabotaged the official

03:30 welcome home. We had presents for everybody, which we'd brought around. I think that homecoming was. I only had a mother and two sisters and a few cousins down to greet me. Nobody I knew at home in the, sweetheart longing for me or anything.

04:00 I settled down fairly quickly to a quiet life. I went in and made my mark at the office, and was told that "Yes, they rather I was discharged before I could start". They didn't want me getting pay from them and pay from the air force. And "yes, I could come back and take up the conditions I'd just left", which was very good.

04:30 That was all they did though. They didn't look after me as an ex-servicemen. As we'd thought we might have received promotion a little bit more than others, but our service was never considered for promotion in the lands department. Not that that mattered. I used to go into town once a week and meet some of the blokes, and have a few beers and come

05:00 home again. But that was quiet enough. Then I borrowed a car and drove my mother up to Ararat, where we went around the families there with her, because she was proud of her little boy. And she and I went around. She had ten brothers and sisters still living in Ararat at the time. And we visited all of them, and came back again. That was probably the greatest

05:30 thing I ever did for her, apart from coming home.

Your mother must have been enormously pleased to see you.

Oh, well, I don't think she stopped for three days. Then I took her to a film in Hampton called, 'Stairway to the Stars', which was about a flying personnel. And I thought it was a little bit overdone, but I took her

06:00 to show her, and she sobbed so much, all through it. She was shaking the whole row of seats. Oh, she was like that for some time. Breaking into sobs very easily. But I didn't want anybody to know that was my mother that was crying out loud, shaking the seat with her sobs. I'm joking of course, I didn't mind. That's a memory I have of her, and her joy of seeing me home, yes.

Did you

06:30 **find it difficult to adjust to civilian life?**

Yes, I was single. I went back to work. I had to learn a lot of my trade over again. Unfortunately there were four of us, in an office of 20, who started at much the same time. And we tend to lead each other into

07:00 devilment. Because we thought devilment was expected of us. And we'd come back late from lunch. We'd come back sober, but we'd be late back from lunch. We'd knock off early if we felt like it. We'd go down to the MCG [Melbourne Cricket Ground], if there was a cricket match there in the afternoon. Yes, we played up a little bit. But the boss was an ex-servicemen from World War I, and he was extremely talented, until one day he said, "Well I think you blokes

07:30 have had enough", "It's time you started to do your share". They split us up and put us in different branches, and it was all right after that. Yeah, I suppose I was four months in there, before I could make myself sit at a desk, and work at, at that stage, pretty boring sort of work. It didn't stay boring, but then it was.

08:00 So then I settled on down, and I extended my prowess in all sorts of ways in the lands department. I then branched out into some forms of cartography, and interpreting aerial photographs, and turning it into topographical maps. Then I got bigger and bigger sections to look after, with lots of people

08:30 locked up in photogrammetric machines. In a photogrammetric machine, you are behind a curtain, because you are working on aerial photographs with lights on them, and you have to be in darkness. And if they went to sleep, they had a little repeater outside, which traced what they were doing. And when the repeater stopped, you knew they were asleep. That was good work. That was interesting work. That was country that I knew, being turned into maps. And I'd go to them

09:00 and encourage them to. I'd say, "Do you know the sort of country that you're looking at?" And asked them if they'd ever been there, and if they knew what they were putting on maps, and made them think more about not just drawing, but what they were drawing. And this made their brainwork interesting. Until eventually I became, firstly, chief cartographer in the lands department, and then chief draftsmen

09:30 in Victoria, which was a quite a high position, with a good salary, and various offices, and duties that were embellished in the Lands Act, and the parliamentary duties. And all this time there was a marriage went on, and one daughter. And we were both right into

10:00 playing tennis, and I'd evolved to. Oh, I've run free, but don't. I've evolved into tennis management, and I built the Rosanna Tennis Club up from one and a half broken down courts. And you can go down and see it today, and it's five beautiful courts, and a clubhouse I was President or Secretary, for something like 15 years. And

10:30 their mainstay. And one day I was doing a little bit of angling, and I realised that whilst I was enjoying some lovely countryside, as I had done in Britain, I wasn't learning anything about the countryside. And I started to try and learn what the plants and trees and bushes were, and birds. And by the time I'd finished with that, I wanted to do something to

11:00 protect the bushes and birds. And coming back to the air force. I'm not sure this wasn't a built in reaction to try to even up for the some of the damage I'd done to some countryside. Because I had damaged. I'm not sure about that. But I became, and I joined the group called the Bird Observers Club, first of all. And

11:30 that got me interested in birds. And I was the first executive officer of a thing called the Conservation Council of Victoria, which I helped to form, and Sir Henry Bolt, in 1969, the same. I became quite both

12:00 an activist, in that I went to demonstrations. I waved flags and banners. I shouted outside minister's officers. At the same time I put on a collar and tie, and a suit, and I went and talked to the minister across the table, and said, "Don't take any notice of those ratbags outside", which I was one of them I said. "But here are the facts". And I found that, yes, I did have an ability to talk to the ministers about what they wanted

12:30 to hear and what they could do for me, which is crawling to a certain extent. It got to the stage where I was invited to parliament house to talk on environmental matters, so that they could improve the environmental environment in the house. I got to the stage where I was talking to groups all over Victoria, and to a lesser extent, all over Australia, on what they

13:00 could be doing. And then the thing went full circle, because I found I was then leading people around, telling them what the plants were, and what the birds where. And my wife was deep into both of those, and we were a wonderful team, leading people around the bush. Then it got to the stage when I had to start saying, "No", before they drove me into the ground with overwork. Because this was all love job, and instead of being on

13:30 an enormous salary in the lands department, I was on a mere pittance from the Conservation Council of Victoria. This led me to being onto several government advisory committees. And the greatest one was on the welfare of rivers, and what was being done to them. And it's gone from where I left off, it's gone full circle, till we have this man

14:00 in Gippsland, fighting for the snowy. His work is a follow up of what a group I did, the group I was with

did. It was called the State Rivers and Waters Supply Standing Consultative Committee on River Improvement. You can't get a bigger mouthful than that state. Rivers and Water Supply Standing Consultative Committee on River Improvement. We were consultive to the minister. The end result was that it got every

14:30 river had environmental advisors attached to their managing body. And we sort of bowed out. And then I was on one of the first taskforces to saving water. I was one of the ones who forced them to adopt a double-flush toilets, because they said, "Oh we can't do that, the plumbers

15:00 don't like it". And I said, "You don't mean that you cowered out to the plumbers". "We're here to take..". I mean, you just, "you can't mean it". And they'd come around and say, "No, we don't really mean that". And they brought that in. I was on this same taskforce, where I held out for three years for the user pays for the water they use. I was there for a long time before they'd think of using

15:30 grey water. So that taskforce really shamed the board of works. Shamed is a good word in that case. The board of works into adopting these measures. It shamed the board of works into standing up to the plumbers. They didn't want to change the toilet manufacturers. It shamed them into it.

16:00 Which in turn led me to another ministerial taskforce, which sent me around with a group of people who'd do away with the NGO's, Non Government Bodies, that were running water supply, and managing rivers, and little reserves. And we were able to demonstrate that there were some marvellous people, but their work wasn't coordinated. And it wasn't

16:30 always to the best interest to what they were looking after. And as a result it earned me a lot of hate. Many of these non-government bodies were just wiped off the slate, which was a great saving, because lots of them weren't answerable to anybody. They just went and did their own thing to suit their own local interests. By which time I'd given up tennis, because I didn't have enough time.

17:00 She still plays twice a week. My wife plays twice a week at 82, which is exceptionally good. Social tennis. But I'd go down and watch them, and their pretty good at it. I had to give up, because I'd hurt my back, and I couldn't serve anymore. About 15 years ago. After which I've been swimming every day ever since. One other major contribution I've made at community,

17:30 was to serve on an ethics committee with Latrobe University, where my role was to see that their researchers and experimenters, the role I gave myself, did the right thing by animals. And they only harmed animals when they where going to learn something. When they knew they were going to learn something that advantaged the animal, or advantaged

18:00 mankind. When I went onto that committee they okaying any research, which would end up in a paper, whether the printed-paper was worthwhile or not. And again I played the devils advocate for 13 years. And at the end of the time when I turned 80, I thought I'd better give it up. That ethics committee was a model throughout Australia

18:30 for the depth of stuff, depth of information they made the experimenters provide, to justify what they were going to do. And the two principles were: does it benefit the birds, does it benefit mankind. And I put up a lot, no, I put up with, yes, I had limits, but I put up with a lot. They did with animals

19:00 if they could show some direct benefit. I would not accept, "We may learn something, which may lead us to another field, which maybe helpful". I wouldn't have anything like that. Of course the ethics committee was long after I was awarded the Order of Australia medal, which was for. I was leading people

19:30 people from American around our birds. Sometimes the Americans paid me. Normally I did it voluntarily. I was leading groups from all over. Visiting groups from all over Australia. I was leading and organising the Bird Preservers Club camps and outings, to every corner of Australia. It's been a wonderful thing since we became poor. When we were rich we didn't appreciate it. We were rich, there's no question. We just gave it up.

20:00 **Can I ask you about the Oddbods?**

Right. I have mentioned previously in this talking that I was a member with eight or nine other people. Which we called ourselves the Ta Ta club. And we found that nine

20:30 of us, or eight of us, survived the war. And when we looked around, three of us had been on English squadrons. And the others kept talking about squadron reunions. And we smelled around, and we found Dave Byer, the padre. And we found two other extremely good workers, were battling to start an association

21:00 for people who didn't have any squadron they could go to. And they'd already chosen the name Oddbods, because the air force headquarters in the Holborn in London, referred to the Australian air force, as the Australian squadrons, which were 460, or number 460, and the Oddbods. And we were the

21:30 Oddbods, who were distributed through the English squadrons. And we had nobody in Australia with whom we could have reunions. So they said we will have the reunions for those who've got no one to reunionise with. Today, that group is the biggest group that marches on Anzac day.

22:00 We have a, sort of a committee, that helps some of the wives who were left a little bit poorly for a short time. We have maintained a pilgrimage to the shrine, every VE day since 1953, or something. We have our reunion

22:30 after the Anzac march, because people come from interstate, because they have no reunion. All in all there are about six people from my squadron in the Oddbods, none of whom I knew when I was on it. In other words they are from two or three years previously. So I now know them, from going to reunions

23:00 and socials, and things like that. I now know them as well as I ever would have known anybody in the air force. And to me the Oddbods is one of the, yes, it's got a community interest. We help people in. We send money each year to charitable missions in India. I say we help widows who need it for a little while. We haven't got that many finances that we can help

23:30 them for the long term. It has been quite a ground where I can go and meet ex-airmen, who knew what I was talking about, because they had met with English people. Other than ex-airmen who only knew other Australians in the Australian squadrons. Even the

24:00 Australian squadrons of course, never got up to 100 percent Australian, because there wasn't enough of them.

You've had a pretty full life after the war. Do you think that the war gave you something?

I've often wondered. No. I think it was a growth.

24:30 A natural growth, from my total commitment to tennis, when we had our young daughter, who we wanted to do the best we possibly could for. When she was fourteen, I started with two others the Heidelberg District Junior Tennis Association,

25:00 which in six years, grew to be the biggest junior tennis association in the southern hemisphere. We built it up from ten players. Five boys and five girls to 110 sections, with each sections would have had ten teams, ten eighties. I can't do it. Well it's 80,000 youngsters or something, playing tennis every Saturday morning.

25:30 Or is it 8,000? Did I add an extra naught? I think I added a zero. Every Saturday morning you could see children going to this competition, which the three of us organised. We organised it for many, many years. And the oldest one had a heart attack, and there were others who took his place. And I just quietly moved out the back door. You can't see the acknowledgement

26:00 on the mantelpiece, of recognition of what I did for them. I think that the angling part of it came from just a desire to sit in the country and do nothing. And then the unwillingness to do nothing led me into trying to learn about birds. And having learnt to teach and so on. I think it just grew on me.

26:30 I do think that the damage I helped to do to the German countryside may have encouraged me to make some amends, but it was only a very minor thing.

Did you take something away from the war though? Did you learn something, or did it help you grow as a person in any way?

Well I've touched on what I

27:00 call man's inhumanity to man, whether it's right or wrong, and what a difficult question that is. It gave me much more maturity than I would have had, because I think that had it stayed on in the public service, I'd have had tunnel vision, for the work I was doing, and the home

27:30 I was making. Now I think the war broadened me into looking much further into what was going on. Between us we do a lot of, we'll call it social work. It isn't. It's helping people we know who are poorly adjusted. But it's not organised. It's just how we adopt them. I think it's led us into that, to a certain extent,

28:00 in that I've looked further afield than our own little niche. I think I come with the greatest satisfaction I've got, has been through leading people through the bush, showing them birds, knowing that some of them were mentally ill. Some of them were dying for something to do, and leading them into new fields. It broadened me immensely.

28:30 **Did you ever have nightmares, or were you ever disturbed by the war?**

No. It didn't ever get trying enough, or go on long enough. I'm quite sure that had I stayed on operations for, say, another two months, I'd have disturbed sleep. But I'm quite sure of that, because that's the

29:00 type I was, because I was serious about it all. It would have worked away at me, if I hadn't done the best I could. And that would have kept me awake, but I wasn't at it for long enough. No.

Did you tell your family or your children about the war?

Oh, yes. I've talked to Anne. Oh what is this? I'm sorry, I've put this together for my grandchildren, and

I think I dedicated it. I don't know if I did. I hope I did now I've said it.

29:30 "These reminiscences must be firstly dedicated to my wife Kathleen, who has encouraged me, and enabled me to do what I have done. And left alone so often so I have followed my interests at innumerable meetings, and state-wide absences." No, I didn't. No, I didn't. I felt sure I'd left, I'd said I'd written it for my great-grandchildren. I haven't got any yet.

30:00 Nope. No, well I did it. When I gave them their beautiful copies. I only did 25 of each. And I did them one each. I said, "This is for you to know some of the things that went on". "I hope you look at them down the years". And they both said,

30:30 "Yes, Reg", as they call me. And I see they both have them stored well in their own little libraries, in their own home, on the other side of McCloud now. So they do appreciate what I wrote down, as a reminder for them.

Right, you've obviously spoken to them about the war, and you've written a couple of books. Is there anything that you haven't mentioned to anybody

31:00 **ever before, for the record, you'd like to now tell us?**

No, I don't think there is anything intimately personal that I haven't mentioned.

31:30 No. The things I haven't mentioned are condemnation of authority. I'm well aware because of both being

32:00 one of them, and trying to influence them, of the inability to talk to politicians on an even field, because they take so long to get them to appreciate what your size is. For that reason, I've been much more successful in my local

32:30 council administration and councillors, because when I very first, when I first got interested, I would say to a councillor, "Oh Mr Potage, I want you to come down and walk along the Yarra with me, on Saturday morning". He said, "What for?". I'd say, "Because you've no idea what's there". And you can't do that with a politician, but every councillor I ever asked, would come and look at a problem with me. And look at what was surrounding,

33:00 and was willing to learn, and talk to me on my grounds, whether they did what I wanted or not. That was not my object. My object was for them to know what they were doing. And if I could show them that they were doing something wrong, and they'd say, "Well we've balanced it all up, and we're still going to do it", that was alright. I've made friends with lots of politicians and councillors, without ever being on council.

33:30 Yes, I've been the guest of politicians at all levels. I've talked to the senate, at their request. I totally, what would you call it, off the cuff, like we're doing now. Somebody taking it down. But just to try and let them see the other side of things. Yes, that's what the Order of Australia was all about, talking to people.

34:00 **Right. Well I'll keep asking questions now. Did you feel a part of the Anzac tradition?**

Oh, well, my father was there, and I've always felt that no matter how ill advised, and impossible, and poorly conducted, and should never have been done in the first place, that it was a marvellous

34:30 thing to do. I've read the history, as one of the marches my father did in nights up, to take up an advanced post, and it just, you can't imagine people doing it under the conditions where, unless you ate your food quickly. This is a brief example, the flies ate it. I can't, you can't imagine men being brave in those circumstances. When I think that Anzac Cove was

35:00 such a small part of Anzac and Gallipoli, I just wonder how we've managed to highlight it, and get it to be pure Australian. Because we were the most, there were others. You wouldn't think there was anybody else there, but three or four Australian diggers. And that's not so. We were just a cog in the wheel. But the things those men did. I've read the authoritative history by

35:30 Bean and that. I've already, I've got a book in the house somewhere right now, that somebody gave me to read while I was in hospital last week, which reintroduced me to the horrors of Anzac. And the best start of it they ever did, was the withdrawal, which was perfect. If they'd learnt enough about the withdrawal from the. I think nowadays I think we could have just concentrated our attack

36:00 on the little bit behind Anzac Cove, and broken the neck of it. Split them into two. But no, we advanced on a wide front. If we'd driven a wedge in there, we might have won it in the first fortnight. That's what I've learnt about warfare. Of course the Australian, no, the British officers. You can learn from the Boer War. They went in for trench warfare, which was mismanagement,

36:30 no matter how you put it. Hitler had the idea, with his fast moving Blitzkrieg. Drive in amongst them. Split a wedge down them, and spread it out wide. Not push by the fronts.

We were talking before about how you felt quite English, and Australia was very much part of the British Empire, before the war.

37:00 **You were away and you were in England. The motherland so to speak, for quite a long time. How had Australia changed, or did it change in the time you were away? Did it change after the war?**

37:30 No country could have stood still, in the light of the things I've lived through. I mentioned before, whenever a string and canvas aircraft landed at the Ararat racecourse, we walked down to pat it. If we'd had five bob, we'd have paid to fly in it. Very seldom did I have five bob. Now they've put a man on the moon.

38:00 When I joined the air force, and flew at Point Cook, you could barely talk to anybody on the ground. By the time the war finished, we could push a button and we could automatically talk to all of Britain within 40 miles of us, by saying, "Hello Duckie,

38:30 this is Nemo". "I'm here, and I need help". And various aerodromes would respond, as if it was next door. I could push another button and I could talk to a WRAF lady on the radio, which was my home station, again within about 20 miles. As if she was next door. Now we can talk to the man on the moon.

39:00 Now, we can sit here in our lounge and watch Wimbledon being played tennis, live if they choose to do it for us. We can watch the cricket all over the world, or the tennis all over the world.

Well, apart from the technological changes.

Sorry, I haven't finished.

Okay.

In my trade, when I started to work, we did all our marks by hand. Our work was put on a huge stone,

39:30 three foot, by three foot. And every print the stone went was washed with grease that repelled water. And what the part that didn't have water, picked up the ink. And the ink went down with a great flop. And because everything moved, the paper moved, and expanded and contracted,

40:00 you couldn't make one colour fit another. The work I did went from primitive caveman stuff, to computerised. Australia has advanced enormously. The people have been forced to change, to keep in touch with.

40:30 Australians are intrinsically 'mates', helping each other, talking to each other, more than the English ever did. That was a lecture.

Well, that's excellent, and that's the end of the tape, so I would like to thank you very much for all that you've given us.

Look at it, it's five to five

41:00 too. I've got to thank you two very much, because I'm interested in archives. I'm interested in the fact that so much is not known. This is probably why I did this, for the grandchildren, and so there were copies in the two, wherever I had to send them and that. I haven't found this any burden, and I hope that some day, somewhere, somebody will learn from it.

41:30 **I hope they do. Thank you.**